
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Physical and Psychological Isolation is Like a Barrier”: An Analysis Based on a Covid English Development Project

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| ABSTRACT

Loneliness and anxiety are one of the well-researched concepts in education. Some educationalists recognise the loneliness and anxiety of students as important issues to consider (Pekrun, 2006; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010). Admittedly, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the development of technology, language classrooms present unprecedented loneliness and anxiety, and potential changes in teaching formats, contents and pedagogy. In response to the negative emotional factor that students could encounter in Covid-19, the article, firstly, takes the context of an online course Development Project (DP) in the UK as an entry point. This is followed by introducing and explaining the teachers' measures to cope with loneliness and anxiety based on the DP, examples include discussion boards, images, FLCAS etc. Finally, an attempt will be made to criticize and analyse some points that the researchers did not consider such as the nature of the course itself and teacher anxiety. To sum up, this article may help to think richly about students' anxiety and loneliness in Covid-19 and relief about them.

| KEYWORDS

Covid-19; loneliness; anxiety; online learning

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

DP is known as *Covid English* and can be signed up via the Google Classroom platform. It exists because of the Covid-19 pandemic and provides students with the opportunity and perspective to get a preview of university learning and deal with the Covid-19 crisis. *Covid English* is a blended course that will begin on 1 August 2023 and will run for six weeks, including five units and a summative assessment. There will be five lecturers and tutors focusing on online lectures and in-person workshops. By taking part, students would gain a range of practical and academic experiences every week, including vaccinations, daily protection, self-testing, post-infection symptoms, and dietary advice. Learners who complete the entire course content and all assessments will earn a certificate to prove their effort in *Covid English*.

This course is primarily designed for students who are enthusiastic about learning Covid-19 related knowledge and are preparing to study at the UK University in September 2023. On the whole, there is no requirement for students to specialise in this course, but it may be particularly suitable for people who are non-native English speaking international students. Students from all sorts of programmes and disciplines are welcome and encouraged to join. Students who are willing to join this course should meet an English level of B1-B2, as the course will cover some relevant vocabulary and functional language at this level. For this course, this article discusses some of the emotional factors that are present, particularly loneliness and anxiety.

2. Discussion of Emotional Factors Based on DP

The development of the Internet and communication technologies offers greater possibilities for learner choice, flexibility, and interaction (Garrison, 2011). However, much attention is drawn to this educational environment affects students' emotions in

learning (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Turkle, 2010). According to viewpoints provided by some scholars, loneliness and anxiety are key variables used to describe the emotion of a student (e.g., Littlejohn et al., 2022; Palgi et al., 2020). Understanding the nature of loneliness and anxiety may help teachers cope with specific events. In the following pages, I will view from the perspective of definition, causes, and measures sequentially discuss details of loneliness and anxiety included in DP.

2.1 Loneliness in the DP

Loneliness is a common but complex psychological condition. Before embarking on the discussion of loneliness in the DP, it is first necessary to sort out the concepts of loneliness. Tillich (1959), one of the definers of loneliness, argues that, unlike solitude which can express the glory of being alone, loneliness expresses the pain of feeling alone. Loneliness is described by Weiss (1973) in two overlapping senses. Firstly, it is an underlying gnawing, chronic feeling. Secondly, it is perceived as an emotion generated in social isolation. The latter is evident in the view of Perlman and Peplau (1981), who argue that loneliness is a complex emotion that occurs as a response to perceived isolated unpleasantness. Another meaningful argument comes from Sweet (2021). He points out, from a gap perspective, that loneliness is the gap between the social connections ones would like to have and those experienced. From the definitions above, it is clear that, while an explanation for the precise term 'loneliness' has proved elusive, there appears to be some agreement that loneliness refers to a negative emotion arising from social isolation that affects people's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, the following paragraphs will expand on the basis of this definition.

As indicated above, a strong link exists between loneliness and social isolation. From this perspective, more granular speculation of the cause of loneliness is given in the following. Firstly, *Covid English* is designed as a blended course, which is "the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary in-person and online approaches and technologies" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 148). In other words, in addition to traditional in-person study, students will rely on the internet for some online learning. Notwithstanding that, there are scholars who state that using the internet brings students closer to their peers (Turkle, 2011); as Ali and Smith (2015) point out, this interpretation ignores that the internet creates social isolation between them. Specifically, in online courses, physical (time and space) and psychological (emotional) isolation are like a barrier (Russell, 2003), which may cause students significant loneliness and *other* emotional pain (Shieh et al., 2008). Secondly, as a not-so-positive emotion, loneliness needs to be placed in a wider context to be understood. The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the largest public health crises of our time (Lades et al., 2020), and it pushed loneliness further into the public conversation (Sweet, 2021). Whereby were postulated for international students attending *Covid English*; they may have just arrived in Edinburgh from their own country or region. When confronted with a new city and a new university where things are different from their own country's lockdown, isolation and quarantine measures, students suffer moments of loneliness, as well as the great risk of being lost or confused in their studies. They are also not assured that they will not contract the deadly virus or contribute to virus development during their partly in-person learning (ibid). Hence, it is not difficult to extrapolate this could lead to students' loneliness.

High-quality curriculum contents are certainly necessary but not sufficient if the damage done to students' learning trajectories by loneliness is to be repaired to the greatest extent possible. Can contribute solutions to the problem from the perspective of a sense of connectedness because developing students' sense of connectedness lowers their loneliness (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). Connectedness can broadly be defined as a virtual community where learners listen to each other respectfully, build on each other's opinions, and provide reasons for unsupported ideas (MacLeod et al., 2019). To help improve students' loneliness and strengthen connectedness, *Covid English* has set up virtual discussion boards for each unit and outside of the unit (see Figure 1). When reflecting, responding, asking questions, and discussing with their peers on the discussion boards (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Ringler et al., 2015), students will feel more supported and connected. In the process of building a virtual community, healthy student-student interaction will be created and help foster a greater sense of community online (Thomas, & Kerrigan, 2020; Woods & Ebersole, 2003). This approach is useful in reducing and counteracting student loneliness in blended courses and keeping attrition rates within a reasonable range.

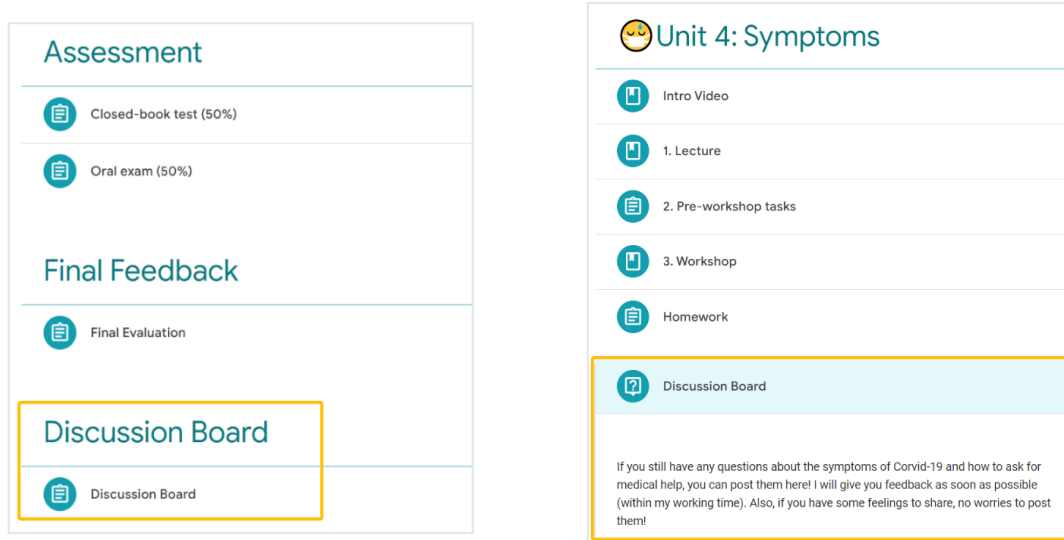


Fig. 1. Screenshot of an example of a discussion board in the DP

Another plausible way to alleviate loneliness is the infusion of images in the course. This measure not only can provide a powerful representation of key content in the course (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021), but there is research that confirms it has a positive effect on students' emotions (Clark & Mayer, 2016). This view has prompted scepticism from some scholars, such as Glaser and Schwan (2015), who warn against the idea, stating that students tend to misjudge how much they have learned if courses include decorative images. Instead, they suggest that the classroom should utilize highly relevant, instructive images. On the learning page of *Covid English*, there are some vivid images. For example, emojis have been added to the title of each unit (see Figure 2). These small digital images or icons can express thoughts or emotions (Crombie, 2020). When students inadvertently see the emoji on the title, some persistent feelings of loneliness may be alleviated.

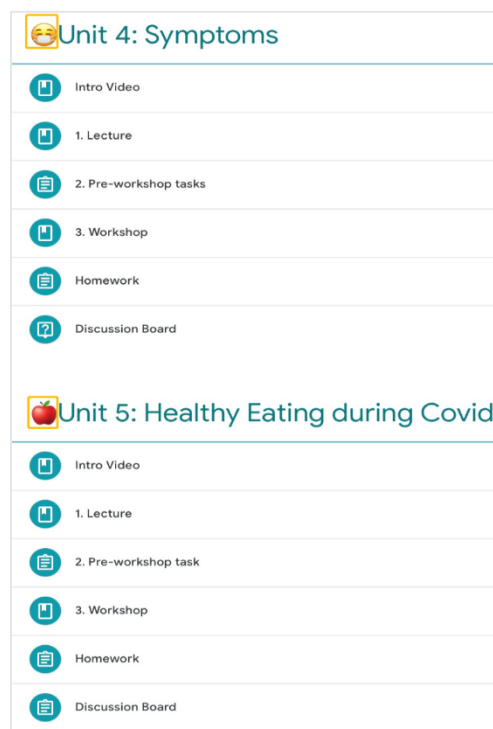


Fig. 2. Screenshot of an example of emojis in the DP

In addition, students on this course will receive an electronic image certificate (see Figure 3) when eligible, meaning they have completed all the learning tasks and assessments are completed. It is cogent evidence of their mastery of the Covid-19 common knowledge and language learning skills and can motivate them to complete their studies without drowning in loneliness (Ennis, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Besides the straightforward content of the certificate, the visual impact and stimulus of the certificate could also influence the student's perception of emotion (Chen et al., 2016; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010) and then relieve their loneliness.



Fig. 3. Screenshot of certificate in the DP

2.2 Anxiety in the DP

The above part has explained loneliness in *Covid English*, while this part will discuss another significant aspect of emotional distress, namely anxiety. There is a considerable body of literature that recognises that anxiety is a complicated psychological phenomenon that cannot be overlooked (e.g., Aida, 1994; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015), and this phenomenon is common in almost all disciplines of learning (Tran, 2012). The term 'anxiety' is used here to refer to the "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with autonomic arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983; as cited in Horwitz et al., 1996, p. 125). In this essay, I will critically examine foreign language anxiety (FLA) and technology anxiety (also referred to as computer anxiety) because they are not just abstract concepts studied by theorists or researchers in laboratory-induced anxiety conditions (Coryell & Clark, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008), they are also a thorny problem that students in *Covid English* courses potentially face.

To date, the topic of anxiety has triggered various opinions among scholars. In 1986, scholars Horwitz et al. conceptualised the theory of FLA and developed an anxiety measure, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). In a subsequent study, some investigations findings reveal a negative impact of FLA on students' academic performance and their behaviour (e.g., Chen & Lin, 2009; MacIntyre & Doucece, 2010; Pappamihel, 2002; Price, 1991; Rodriguez, 1995; Sellers, 2000). To reduce this impact in *Covid English*, one approach is to promise that students' grades will not be published or ranked, so there will probably be less competition and anxiety among students. Also, it will be emphasised that while students will be awarded an electronic certificate if they complete the tasks and assessments diligently, failure to obtain it will not affect their subsequent learning. Thus, there may be no need to be anxious about it. Additionally, *Covid English* includes FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) in the pre-course questionnaire, midterm feedback, and final feedback (see Figure 4). By completing the scales, students' anxiety will be measured, and they will be provided with the opportunity to receive personalised feedback from their teacher (Srichanyachon, 2012), which will facilitate the mitigation of their anxiety. Additionally, assessment, for most students, is one of the key elements resulting in their suffering from FLA (Agarwal et al., 2008; Roelle & Berthold, 2017). Although *Covid English* teams are endeavouring to minimise the anxiety that arises from this, the effect is not remarkable. Perhaps by adding an open-book exam to the assessment, learners would be more free to find material and consolidate their knowledge (Gharib et al., 2012), which would greatly alleviate their test anxiety.

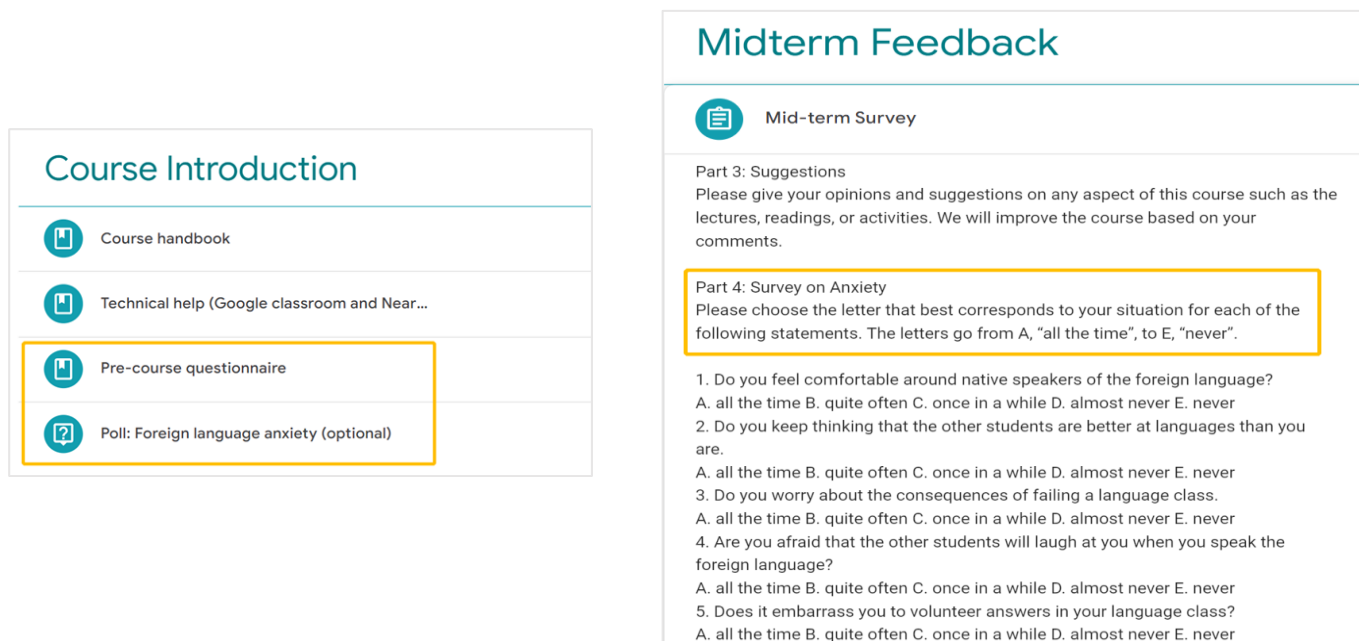


Fig.4. Screenshot of an example of FLA survey in the DP

Furthermore, technology and computers have a huge impact in affecting students' anxiety (Farr & Murray, 2016). Unlike other courses, *Covid English* was scheduled for August, when undergraduate students had not yet started their official journey of the September semester. So they may not be proficient in using the Google classroom platform, which in turn can lead to anxiety about technology. Once the reason for technology anxiety is understood, the answer may also be easier to find, meaning a clear technology help system that can assist students with technology and computer anxiety. Bearing this in mind, *Covid English* has added videos on the use of Google Classroom and Nearpod in the course introduction section (see Figure 5). If students have any problems using the technology, they can get in touch with the course's technical team via email. Hopefully, students' anxiety will be minimised when using these helpful features.

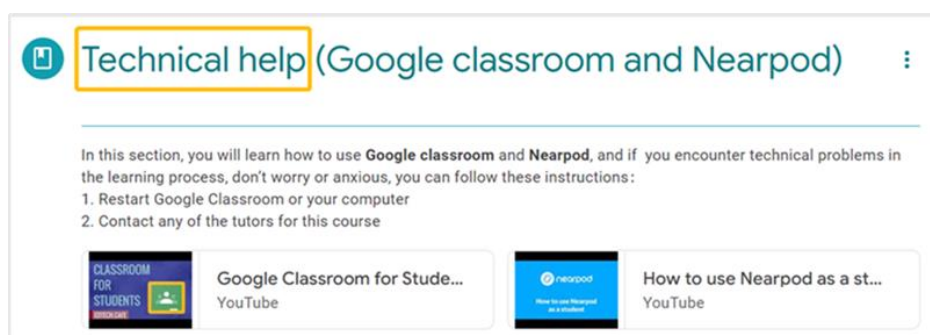


Fig. 5. Screenshot of an example of technical help in the DP

In addition, we recognise that there have been other factors that have been found to contribute to anxiety in previous studies, some of which include language ability (e.g., Sparks et al., 2000), interpersonal relationships (e.g., Tóth, 2007), instructor-learner interactions (e.g., Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1991) amongst others. But wide discussion of these falls beyond the scope of this essay due to space constraints.

3. Analysis of the Limitations of the Emotional Factor in DP

So far, this paper has focused on the definition, reasons, and solutions for loneliness and anxiety. It is now necessary to review the limitations of *Covid English* in dealing with these emotions.

To begin with, notwithstanding the above approaches' exploratory nature, this essay has so far failed to address the fact that the topics of the course all revolve around Covid-19. For example, students may be more frightened of learning about Covid-19 daily protection, which in turn may exacerbate feelings of loneliness or anxiety. After watching a lecture, for security, they may place themselves in a lonely environment without people or be more shy, more hostile, more socially awkward, and have lower self-esteem (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Cacioppo et al., 2006). This would trap the students' emotional distress in a vicious cycle.

Secondly, *Covid English* likely areas for further work are teachers' FLA. It is inescapable that the teachers in this course do not have enough previous teaching experience and medical knowledge base. So they are anxious about teaching the target language, which is accompanied by the rigidity of multimodal languages such as gestures, facial expressions, and body movement (Perniss, 2018)(see Figure 6). As part of a team, work should be done to adjust to your own anxiety situation, e.g., participate in pre-employment training (Tüm, 2014).

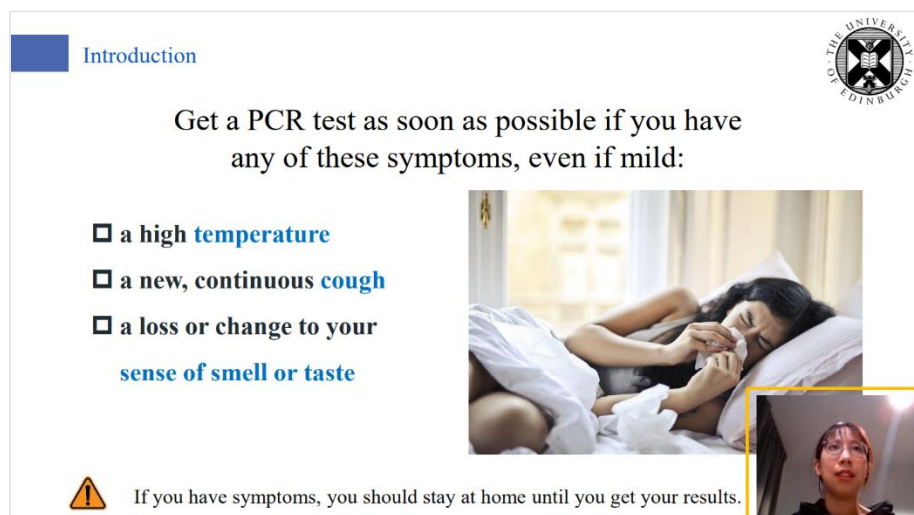


Fig. 6. Screenshot of an example of an anxious teacher in the DP

Overall, although several measures are available to ameliorate students' feelings of loneliness and anxiety, the content of the course itself and the teacher's anxiety determines *Covid English* has some shortcomings.

4. Conclusion

Students' loneliness and anxiety are important elements when discussing blended courses, as documented in some literature. However, this issue is insufficiently attended to in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspired by this, the subject of this article is an analysis of emotional factors based on DP, primarily in the aspect of loneliness and anxiety. Because of the word limit for this essay, it was impossible to show the full extent of emotional distress in DP; however, I hope it covered the basic issues around loneliness and anxiety. But above all, this issue deserves to be focused on and discussed by more language practitioners, educators, and policymakers. As future teachers, we should fully consider the emotional distress of students and take transformative action, especially with new technology. As Laurillard (2013) states: "teaching is a design science ... it is not only trying to understand the world but to make the world a better place" (p. 225).

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