

English Language Students And Their Coping Styles During Lockdown As A Result Of The Novel Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The author examined the effective and ineffective coping mechanisms of English language undergraduate students during the total lockdown in Nigeria as a result of the Corona Virus (COVID-19) global pandemic. The participants in the study were twenty undergraduate students of English language in a state university. The students were interviewed on telephone on their coping styles during lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Their responses were recorded on the phone, transcribed, and thematically analysed using qualitative methods. Results show that they used such effective coping mechanisms as having a positive attitude towards the lockdown, and therefore used the opportunity for reading novels, writing poems, playing and dancing music at home, and painting/drawing. Other effective coping activities reported were: Having quiet moments for meditation and prayers, home physical exercises and aerobic, sleeping/resting, watching television and movies, gardening/farming, family bonding/reunion, and expected/desired pregnancy. Some of them also reported some ineffective ways of coping, such as denial of reality of COVID-19, feeling anxious, boredom/loneliness, weight gained, substance abuse/use, domestic violence, unwanted pregnancy, longing for intimate sexual partner, being angry with the governments because of food-shortage/starvation, and obsessive-compulsive behaviour. The author concludes that the effective coping mechanisms would enhance their proficiency in English language, and should be encouraged; while the ineffective ways of coping would definitely be detrimental to their future professions and life in general, and should be discouraged.

Key words: *English language students, Lockdown, COVID-19, Coping strategies, Nigeria.*

Introduction

The corona virus (COVID-19) which started in China in December 2019 quickly spread over the whole world within a few months, infecting and killing thousands of people in many parts of the

world (Africa CDC, April 13, 2020; Nigerian Centre for Disease Control/NCDC, 2020). In order to control the spread of the deadly virus, most countries of the world embarked on total lockdown. In Nigeria, the total lockdown

was enforced on 30th March 2020. Like in most countries of the world, all schools, churches, mosques, airlines, businesses (except for food and vegetable sellers) were closed. There were no inter-country, inter-state, or inter-town movements. In many cases, people were not even allowed to come out of their homes or flats (except for those on essential duties like nurses, medical doctors, and police). People were compelled to stay at home for months, depending on when the country declared its own total lockdown. This unexpected lockdown was never experienced before by most living citizens of the world.

Students in secondary and tertiary institutions, who were mostly teenagers or young adults, must have experienced the lockdown in a special way. For young people who are full of life and energy, and some with mood swings, all of a sudden to sit at home without knowing when the lockdown will end, can be devastating. This made the author to investigate the coping strategies of English language students during the lockdown. The author, being a lecturer of English language in a university, had telephone contacts of some of her students; thus she decided to limit her investigation to English language students.

The aim of the study therefore was to investigate the experiences of English language students during the COVID-19 total lockdown in Nigeria and their coping mechanisms.

Lahey (2009: 456-459) grouped coping with stress into two: Effective coping and Ineffective coping. Under effective coping are removing or reducing the source of stress, cognitive or attitude change, and managing stress reactions. While ineffective coping strategies are

withdrawal from the society or environment (social isolation), aggression (like domestic violence), self-medication (like using drugs to forget the stressful situation), and defense mechanisms like denial of reality (as suggested by Freud, 1949). Lahey's view on coping with stress is the theoretical framework adopted for this work.

Literature review shows that many authors from different parts of the world have reported the experiences of university students and the general public during lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the authors reported that their respondents felt more worried, depressed, were preoccupied with the idea of contracting the virus, had sleep disturbances, and felt their existence was being threatened (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2020). Spanish Arts, Humanities, and Social Science students also expressed higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress more than Engineering and Architecture students (Odriozola-Gonzalez, Plachuelo-Gomez, Iruiria, & de Luis-Garcia (2020). See also similar report about Veterinary students in England Yiannouli, 2020). In the U.S., Schildkraut, Nickerson and Ristoff (2020) reported of fear and anxiety among students. Similar to reports from other authors, Mucci, Mucci, Diolaiuti (2020) reported feeling of uncertainty, fear, despair, stress, sleep disturbances, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among their participants in Italy. Also, in Italy, Galle, Sabella, Da Molin, De Giglio, et al. (2020) reported complaints of decreased physical activities among Life Science Degree Students; and Cellini, Canale, and Mioni (2020) reported of sleep difficulties (lower sleep quality), depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms

among their participants. None of the above studies were conducted in Nigeria, and none of them focused on English language students.

The author therefore set out for the study with the following two objectives:

1. To find out the effective ways the English language students are using to cope with the unusual mandatory lockdown.
2. To find out the ineffective ways the English language students are using to cope with the unusual mandatory lockdown.

Method

This study used the qualitative research method where 20 key informants (English language students) are interviewed through telephone call and their responses analysed using thematic method of data analysis (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delpont, 2002).

The participants (key informants) interviewed were 20 English language students of a State University in Nigeria. There was no distance learning or online education system in the university. Because of the lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the students had to be interviewed on telephone. The interview took place between 29th and 30th April 2020 (that is, one month after the total lockdown was enforced in Nigeria). The author, using the Departmental record selected 5 students at each undergraduate level (100-400 levels) and contacted them. The method of selection was simple random sampling.

The researcher first of all called each student using a cell-phone (handset), explained the nature and purpose of the

research to him/her, assured him/her of confidentiality and anonymity, and sought oral consent from him/her to participate in the study. Any student who did not agree to participate in the study would have been left out, but all of them agreed to participate.

A topic guide which has the following question was used for the interview: "How are you coping with the total lockdown due to the corona virus pandemic?" Their responses were recorded on the phone. The recorded responses were transcribed and thematically analysed, to find out their effective, as well as, ineffective ways of coping with the situation.

Result

The following themes emerged as a result of the thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews responses:

a) Effective coping mechanisms:

1. Change of perception and attitude towards the lockdown. Many of the students saw the lockdown as a necessity to save their lives and that of others. One of the students said "Doc, it is better for us to sit at home and be alive than to go to school and die".
2. Opportunity for reading novels: Some of the students used the period to read novels which they did not have time to read before because the hectic nature of their university activities. One student said "I have even

- finished reading one novel I have been wishing to read”.
3. Writing poems: One boy said “I am good in writing poems, so I have written some during this lockdown”.
 4. Playing and dancing music at home. One student said “I have been playing and dancing rock music everyday”.
 5. Painting/drawing: Two students said they are good in painting and drawing; so they are keeping themselves busy with paintings and drawings.
 6. Having quiet moments for meditation and prayers. One girl said “It has been a good opportunity for me to have quiet moments and pray to my God”.
 7. Home physical exercises and aerobic. Another girl said “I am enjoying having time for my physical exercises at home and aerobic. I also at times walk around our compound”.
 8. Sleeping and resting: One girl said: “I sleep, sleep and sleep. I have not had such a rest in a long time. The last time I had siesta was in my boarding (secondary) school”.
 9. Watching Television and movies: Many students said they often watch TV and movies. One student said, “I am enjoying my *African Magic* day and night”.
 10. Gardening/farming: Some students said that this is farming season, so they are helping their parents in farming/gardening. “We cultivate cassava” a student said.
 11. Family bonding/reunion: One girl said “This is the first time all my brothers and sisters are staying at home chatting and playing with each other. We get to know each other better”.
 12. Expected/desired pregnancy: One lady said “I have been married and living in the same house with my husband for four years and I am a day-student, but I could not conceive a child. Now, during this lockdown, I don’t know how it happened. I am pregnant”.
- b) *Ineffective coping mechanisms:*
Some students however reported the following ineffective ways of coping with the lockdown:
1. Denial of reality: Some boys do not believe that the corona virus is a reality. One boy said: “It is all about politics! They (the government) are all deceiving us! They want to make money with this issue. It is not real”.

2. Feeling anxious: One girl said, "I am always feeling anxious and suspicious of everybody because I do not know who is carrying this virus and who is not. I can't even sleep well again".
3. Boredom: Some students experienced the period as very boring. One student said "The thing (lockdown) is just boring me".
4. Weight gained: One girl said "I eat and eat and eat. I have even gained a lot of weight".
5. Substance abuse/use: One boy said "I am now smoking and drinking (alcohol) more than before".
6. Domestic violence: Some ladies said: "It is like we are quarrelling everyday at home. I want this thing (lockdown) to end so that we go our different ways again".
7. Unwanted pregnancy: One lady said "I already have three children and I did not want more. But now the lockdown has made me to be pregnant again".
8. Longing for intimate sexual partner: One boy said, "My girlfriend is living in another State and I cannot meet her (for sex) due to the lockdown. This thing (lockdown) should stop so that I go and meet her."
9. Angry with the governments because of food shortage/starvation: Some students are angry with the governments for forcing their parents who are business men/women to sit at home and do nothing; while they (the governments) did not provide enough palliatives to cushion the effect of the lockdown. One student said: "Look at America and other countries; they provide enough food and drinks to people every day. They bring them to their door-steps. Watch your TV and see what I am saying."
10. Obsessive-compulsive behaviour: One girl said, "I am always washing my hands for fear of contacting the virus. I wash my hands almost every five minutes, even though I am at home. I cannot stop doing it. It's too bad."

Discussion

As English language students, it is a desired finding to see that the participants in this study used such effective coping mechanisms (Lahey, 2009) as having a positive attitude towards the lockdown, and therefore used the opportunity for reading novels, writing poems, playing and dancing music at home, and painting/drawing. These activities would enhance their proficiency in English language. None of the literature reviewed reported of any effective coping activity among students.

Other effective coping activities engaged by participants in this study are: having quiet moments for meditation and prayers, home physical exercises and aerobic, sleeping/resting, watching Television and movies, gardening/farming, family bonding/reunion, and expected/desired pregnancy. These are desirable coping style which may not be unique to English language students. Again, none of the literature reviewed mentioned any of the coping mechanisms.

Besides the above-mentioned effective coping mechanisms used by the English language students who participated in this study, some of them also reported some ineffective ways of coping (Lahey, 2009), such as denial of reality of COVID-19, feeling anxious, boredom/loneliness, weight gained, substance use/abuse, domestic violence, unwanted pregnancy, longing for intimate sexual partner, being angry with the governments because of food shortage/starvation, and obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Freud (1949) referred to denial of reality as a form of defense mechanism with which the Ego protects itself from a form perceived threat. Current literature search also shows that many authors have also reported similar ineffective coping mechanisms among their participants. Some of them reported that their respondents felt more worried, depressed, were preoccupied with the idea of contracting the virus, had sleep disturbances, and felt their existence was being threatened (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2020). Spanish Arts, Humanities, and Social Science students also expressed higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress more than Engineering and Architecture students (Odriozola-Gonzalez, Plachuelo-Gomez,

Irurtia, & de Luis-Garcia, 2020; Yiannouli, 2020). In the U.S., Schildkraut, Nickerson and Ristoff (2020) also reported of fear and anxiety among students. Mucci, Mucci, and Diolaiuti (2020) reported feeling of uncertainty, fear, despair, stress, sleep disturbances, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among their participants in Italy; Galle, Sabella, Da Molin, De Giglio, et al. (2020) reported complaints of decreased physical activities among Life Science Degree Students; and Cellini, Canale, and Mioni (2020) reported of sleep difficulties (lower sleep quality), depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among their participants. The above ineffective ways of coping with the lockdown are not good for anybody, not to talk of students who are still young and growing. The ineffective ways of coping will definitely be a setback in their future profession and life in general.

Conclusion

It is concluded that English language students who participated in this study used such effective ways of coping with COVID-19 pandemic such as having a positive attitude towards the lockdown, and therefore read novels, wrote poems, played and danced music at home, and painted/drew pictures. These activities must have enhanced their proficiency in English language. The students also reported some ineffective ways of coping such as denial of reality of COVID-19, feeling anxious, boredom/loneliness, weight gained, substance abuse/use, domestic violence, unwanted pregnancy, longing for intimate sexual partner, being angry with the governments because of food shortage/starvation, and obsessive-compulsive behaviour. The ineffective ways of coping will definitely be a setback

in their future profession and life in general.

Recommendation

While we wish that such a total lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic would not repeat itself in our lifetime, it is recommended that English language students (in Nigeria) are made aware of the desired effective ways of coping with such lockdowns in the future. They should also be discouraged from using the ineffective ways as reported by many authors.

Future studies should use English language students from many other universities as participants. That would increase the external validity of the findings. A comparison of the coping styles of English language students and that of other students would be interesting. Also, a study design that triangulates both quantitative and qualitative methods is to be encouraged.

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