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Who Is Afraid of COVID-19: An Inherited Approach for the Future of EFL

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Abstract

The paper shows a new approach to understanding the professional consciousness of teachers during the pandemic. EFL teachers during the COVID-19 era witnessed a range of contradictions between motives, expectations, attitudes, and the need for professional self-determination and to establish themselves as EFL teachers and the contradiction between the need for self-fulfillment in professional activity and the level of creativity of the person (Harvey & Nilsson, 2022). These contradictions generated a sense of fear that caused a psychological threat to the stability of the EFL teacher, both professionally and personally. I focused on coping as a solution to overcome these contradictions. My proposed approach to coping goes beyond the psychological dimension to integrate other dimensions that are informed by the previous COVID-19 instructional experience.

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1. The epidemic psychology

"Epidemic psychology, indeed, seems to involve at least three types of psycho-social epidemics." The first of these is an epidemic of fear. The second is an epidemic of explanation and moralization, and the third is an epidemic of action, or proposed action." (Strong, 1990:251) The origins of epidemic psychology are strongly related to the explanation of human behavior in moments of panic. Thus, epidemic psychology addresses the duality of stability and instability in human psychology by focusing on "*a thin veneer of rationality covering a mass of darkness.*" (Strong, 1990:255).

Language played an important role in the explanation of the social potential of epidemic psychology. "The plagues of competing moralities and control strategies also have their origins in language" (Strong, 1990:258). Its major role has to

do with social interaction. Thus, no communication could be successful under the dominance of fear. It is through constructive communication strategies that society can get rid of the Hobbesian nightmare, which is the war of all against all. The human genesis of epidemic psychology lies in the omnipresent threat that epidemic diseases can engender in our day-to-day assumptions. This psychological earthquake threatens the stability and social stability of the community. Epidemic psychology can only be conquered if communication takes place to overcome the negative effects of crisis, confinement, and fear. The roots of this proposed pedagogy can be traced to the critical pedagogy proposed by (Freire, 1970).

Holding an understanding of human psychology in times of crisis and confinement in relation to the psychology of learning enables researchers to get a general view of the intricate dynamics of human cognition and action (Coleman and Oliveros, 2020)

2. Changing crises into opportunities for learning

Education as a field is affected in its ins and outs by psychology. Therefore, it is strictly affected by social and environmental changes, which are interrelated with the psychological aspects of the community members. The epidemic period that the world is witnessing represents a crisis period in history. Blaser (2004) hails the role of crises in generating change through the "interaction between ecosystems and human societies" (p. 39).

Felman (1992) suggests that teaching should go beyond the transmission of passive knowledge that is preconceived. The challenges of the normative structures that underlie our beliefs and actions produce pedagogical cognitive dissonance (p. 53). According to Felman, in crisis times, learning takes place through renewing the educational frames instead of revisiting the pre-crisis ones.

Felman (1992) approaches the role of the teacher "on the one hand to access but not foreclose the crisis, and on the other hand to contain it in a way that the class can sustain" (p. 54). The role of the teacher is basic in reintegrating crises in a transformed context that is more meaningful to students. Crises are not transformative if they do not evoke feeling, thought, and action together. Boler (1997) highlights the superiority of praxis over feelings in transformative learning. Freire (1970) highlighted the dualism of both reflection and action in transformational learning. For him, an action without reflection is called "activism," and reflection without action is "verbalism" (p. 60). Johnson and Morris (2010) conceive of the Freirian critical pedagogy as supportive for learning through crisis by "enabling us to both perceive, from historical, cultural, economic, personal, and political perspectives, and to act upon the 'structures of domination'" (p. 83). We can establish a link between the concepts of crisis and critical thinking. Both of them imply change and call for action and praxis.

Pedagogical praxis should construct circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. The crisis in education allows access to marginalized viewpoints, as stated by Hooks (1990). Through voicing the margin, the focus will be on "the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to renew" (p. 146). Hooks (1990) argues that the margin is a "space of radical openness" over the here and now to foster agency. By this token, transformative learning is

seen in the light of interactive associations, which foster the chances of re-installing structures and revisiting conditions that produced the crisis. Teachers should manage the micro-crisis at the individual level. To do so, teaching strategies have a pivotal role in supporting learning from the individual level to the public level. Patton (2008) ascertains that educators should provide students with the opportunity to examine crises by focusing on what is there and what is not there (p. 11).

Teaching and learning opportunities are bound by hope. Freire (2008) describes hope as an existential contract that is imperative in the concrete world and should be anchored in practice. Consequently, teachers should cope with crisis situations to achieve better instructional outcomes.

3. Conceptualizations of Coping

coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, p. 141). Developmental researchers built their conceptualizations on the idea of coping as "regulation under stress" (Compas et al., 2014). Compas et al define coping as "conscious and volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances" (2014, p. 89). Eisenberg et al (1997) view coping as "involving regulatory processes in a subset of contexts—those involving stress" (p. 42). In this paper, my conception of coping is in line with Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck,'s (2016) definition, which is "action regulation under stress" and "how people mobilize, guide, manage, energize, and direct behavior, emotion, and orientation, or how they fail to do so" under stressful conditions. This definition links coping and work on the regulation of basic psychological and physiological processes, including emotion, behavior, and cognition. The relationship between coping and regulation is established in the literature as emotion regulation (ER) (Folkman & Moskowitz 2004). Compas et al. (2014) define coping in relation to self-regulatory processes that take place in stressful conditions. Researchers have established connections between coping and self-regulation. The focus of coping research is to know how attempts to regulate behavior can have a negative effect on emotional reactions under stress.

3.1. Coping Theories

Coping theories have appeared during the 20th century. These theories arose from two traditions: psychodynamic thought and cognitive psychology (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991).

The first tradition is about psychodynamic models of coping. These models focus on ego defenses by highlighting a hierarchy of coping responses. Haan's (1977) model illustrates such a hierarchy of ego functions and their relational effects. The ego processes are coping, defense, and fragmentation. This tripartite model is meant to solve a living problem through consistent connection with the environment and the self. Haan (1993: 260) defined coping as "an attempt to overcome difficulties on equal terms; it is an encounter wherein people reach out and within themselves for resources to come to terms with difficulties". She defined defense as a method of self-protection that involves "unyielding fortification".

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) have proposed a prominent model that links the intricacies of cognition, coping, emotion, and the person-environment. Their model is a two-dimensional one. The first dimension is problem-focused, in which coping focuses on managing the problem causing the stress. While, the second dimension is emotion-focused, in which coping involves regulating emotional responses to stress.

3.2. Coping strategies

In the coping literature, there is a distinction between inter-individual and intra-individual approaches (Endler and Parker, 1999). The inter-individual approach attempts to identify particular individual coping strategies across different stressful situations, while the intra-individual approach attempts to identify specific individual strategies related to stressful situations. This approach assumes that individuals have a "repertoire of coping options available to them from which they can build what they believe to be the most effective strategy, depending on the nature of the situation" (Cox, 1991:20). Coping strategies refer to emotions in interplay between the individual and the environment. Coping is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. These exercises are meant to master any problem within a person's environment. Mastering a problem means to tolerate or alter it (Admiraal, Korthagen, and Wubbels 2000). Coping is commonly described as problem-focused and emotion-focused.

Kyriacou (2011) notes, "The main sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher will be unique to him or her and will depend on the precise and complex interaction between their personality, values, skills, and circumstances." Kyriacou classifies teachers' coping strategies, at the individual level, into two categories. The first category consists of direct action techniques that focus on teachers' actions to mitigate stress sources through establishing "a clear idea of what the source of stress is and then carrying out some form of action that will mean that the demands that are causing the stress can be successfully dealt with in the future or changing the situation in some way so that the demands no longer occur". These techniques include effective self-management and organization, skill development, and collaboration. The second category consists of palliative techniques. These techniques are either mental or physical, and they focus on mitigating the feeling of stress rather than its source. Palliative techniques evoke the notion of change. Thus, these techniques include strategies about how teachers assess the stress situation, reduce anxiety, and relieve tension (Masters et al, 2023).

4. The role of e-learning in education

Lepori et al. (2003) suggest that most higher education universities have introduced e-learning degrees in their programs. E-learning has many advantages for learning and teaching communities. Fostering interaction and providing flexibility in time and space characterize e-learning. These barriers in time and space are combined with the break with face-to-face activities. It is worth noting that these barriers are welcomed in times of pandemic situations because they foster psychological relief through the absence of contamination. As a result, e-learning is a good solution to get rid of stress.

E-learning contributed to fostering flexibility in student-centered education, especially in higher education arenas. Students can feel more secure because e-learning is able to meet their learning needs by considering contextual information (Romero & Wareham, 2009). Teachers become empowered to focus on personalized learning and respond to learners' needs. As a result, the use of technology provides more options for how, when, and where to learn.

E-learning is a good mechanism for improving communication and collaboration. In Garrison and Akyol's (2009) perception, e-learning is approached as the ability of students to project themselves onto the social and emotional development of others. By the same token, Gunawarda and Zittle (1997) associate e-learning with students' satisfaction through fostering interaction, be it synchronously or asynchronously. Interaction promotes collaboration beyond physical academic boundaries. However, achieving all these goals is restricted by the students' perceived efficacy.

It is the role of the teacher to motivate learners by engaging them to be active agents in the process of learning (Hernandez et al. 2009). Many researchers focus on e-competence. For example, Stalmeier (2005) defines e-competences as the educational competences required to make appropriate judgments on the effective integration of technology into the educational context and processes. Others have focused on the criteria for this competence. It is important to consider the technological quality criteria in addition to the psycho-pedagogical ones proposed by (Reeves and Reeves, 1997). Therefore, linking pedagogical, psychological, and technological criteria to teachers' competence is substantial in linking competence to performance. According to Chomsky (1980), competence is understood beyond skill acquisition.

5. The impetus to think about the coping approach

My approach to coping in the EFL classroom in this paper is different from the stated definition in the literature. This difference arises from my belief that many variables should be taken into consideration to cope properly in crisis times. The EFL classroom in general is overwhelmed with many complexities that should be deciphered and understood instead of taken as a whole entity. In the Tunisian context, teachers suffered a lot from the inappropriate conditions and the psychological instability that they faced while teaching online during the COVID-19 period. The lack of readiness and awareness about how to cope pedagogically in times of crisis represents a major factor in causing these problems. Thus, I attempted to decompartmentalize these complexities in this approach to gain a new understanding of how to cope with the instructional challenges. The approach is informed by the challenges imposed in the EFL context in Tunisia during the COVID-19 period. This approach is an attempt to raise questions about how to meet challenges in the future on the basis of past experience; in other words, to learn from the past to reflect on the present and to enlighten the future.

6. Explaining the initiated coping instructional approach

My coping instructional approach is based on the related challenges faced in the EFL classroom in the higher education sector. My approach is based on mobilizing knowledge, skills, and values to cope with stressful situations in education. By doing so, teachers' competence will be more flexible to integrate new elements and to achieve better agency, as stated by

MacIntyre et al. (2020) and Nazari et al. (2023). The rationale behind this approach to teachers' coping competence is to look at the possible challenges in different domains that create stress and fear. This approach is based on the following questions: What can I do with what I know?

Raising teachers' coping awareness through blurring the boundaries between the cognitive, the strategic, the psychological, the socio-ecological and the logistic domains to shape the core of EFL teachers' coping competence to manage future challenging situations.

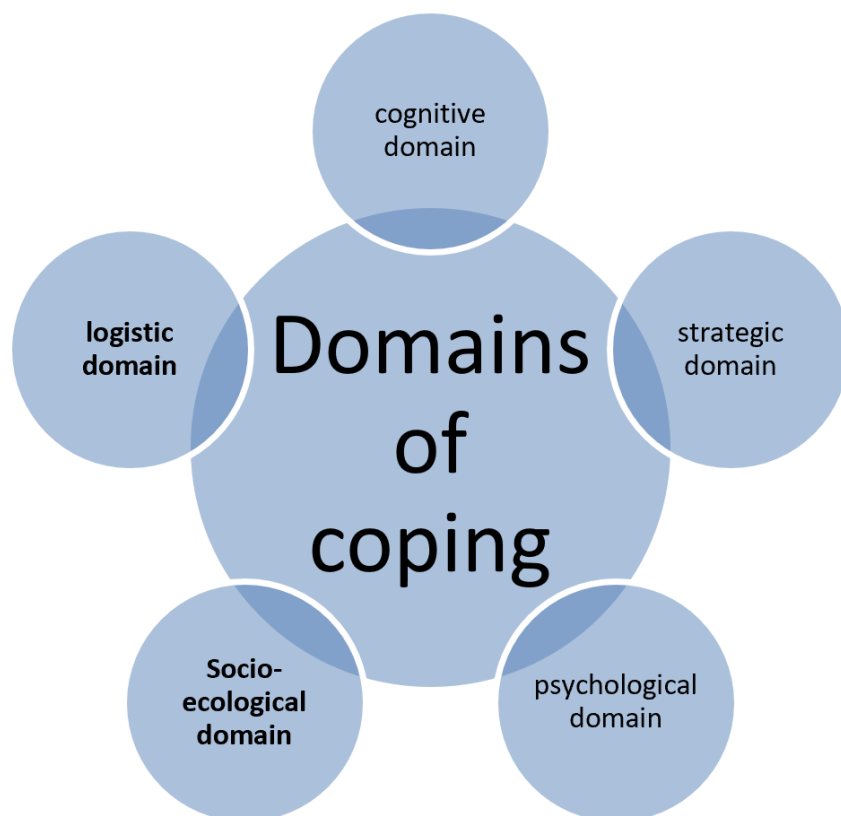


Figure 1. Coping Domains

The cognitive domain

This domain is linked to the different types of knowledge that EFL teachers can possess. First, pedagogical knowledge is based on factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, and strategic knowledge. Second, subject matter knowledge is related to syntactic structures, content, and substantive structures. Third, general pedagogical knowledge is concerned with learners and learning, classroom management, curriculum, and instruction.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (knowledge of students' understanding, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of instructional strategies) Knowledge of context (students, community, district, school) (Grossman, 1990)

The strategic domain

This domain focuses mainly on the communication strategies of both teachers and learners, teaching strategies, learning strategies, and evaluation strategies in relation to the EFL classroom.

The psychological domain

The psychological domain is linked to the motivation in the classroom, the empathy among teachers, the anxiety, and the stress. Understanding these psychological components helps strike a balance in the EFL classroom to enhance education.

The socio-ecological domain

This domain focuses mainly on environmental elements such as stressful life events, non-cognitive aspects such as intrapersonal aspects, and campus ethos and cultural climate.

The logistic domain

The logistical domain has to do with the technological equipment in relation to e-learning. The shortage or absence of this equipment represents a real challenge in pandemic time. Both teachers and students suffered from the unfamiliarity of online instruction.

My approach to coping takes into consideration these different domains in an attempt to reach professionalism in the EFL classroom. So, moving from the simple information given to professionalism requires a special competence, which is labeled in this paper as 'coping competence.'" So as it is presented in the following figure.

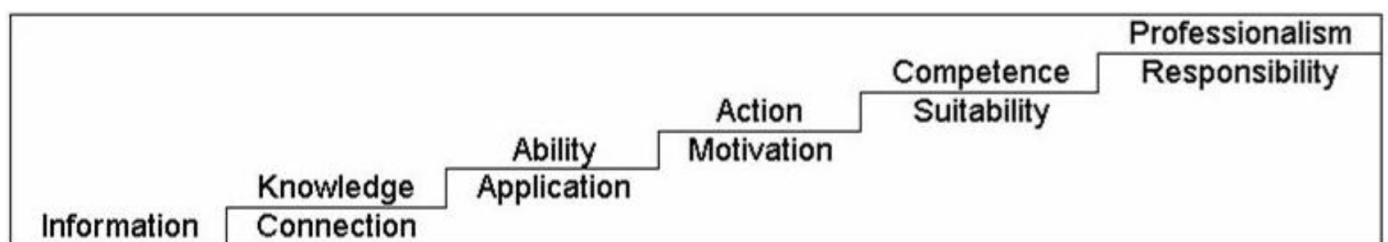


Figure 2. The ladder of coping competence

On the first step, information about the EFL classroom challenges is related to knowledge. In the second step, they are applied and result in abilities. This is the step where Individuals have practical experiences with using coping strategies, tools, or instruments. On the third step, through motivation and will, these skills are converted into actions. Competence, however, necessitates a second assessment of whether the task performed is appropriate in the current situation. The suitable application of these actions will lead to the generation of competence, which is responsible for professionalism and quality development. They can be social norms, regulatory requirements, standards for human behaviour, or criteria established in a particular corporate setting. Therefore, coping competence is more than just information or skills; it should

pertain to all forms of knowledge, information, and behaviour that are linked to instruction. Considering e-learning and coping with its challenges represents a major component of this competence that instructors should gain. It seems these coping strategies are particularly critical for language teachers, given that interaction, negotiation, collaboration, and feedback provision are canonical aspects of the EFL classroom. These characteristics are best realized in face-to-face settings, but in virtual settings, they demand a high level of commitment and can generate anxiety and apprehension.

7. Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of coping in the EFL classroom. It is a key concept, and it makes the difference between a professional and a non-professional teacher. So professionalism in this sense is no longer limited to the pedagogical practices, but it goes beyond to cover the coping competence, which has been approached in this paper as a complex construct that should be addressed carefully. The main contribution of this paper is that it gives a broad understanding of coping, which is perceived as a competence rather than a simple strategy. It is highly recommended that this approach will be considered in EFL teacher education programs. Additionally, it puts forward how to learn from past experiences by turning challenges into opportunities.

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