

## ESOL LEARNERS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 REMOTE LEARNING TRANSITION: THE INFLUENCE OF AGE, GENDER, AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Article History</b> Received: April 2024 Revised: June 2024 Published: July 2024	<i>The compelled transition of ESOL services to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented learning challenges for learners and instructors, with relatively unexplored psychological impacts. Recognizing and understanding learners' emotions can assist ESOL teachers, administrators, and students to develop adapted methods and techniques to improve students' mental health and social-emotional learning, thereby facilitating the learning process. Few studies have investigated ESOL students' emotional reactions to the transition to remote learning due to the pandemic. This quantitative study provides insight into 156 ESOL learners' perspectives on their emotional responses to the transition to online learning instructions during COVID-19 school closures. This will help to understand what enhances learners' success or academic issues to be addressed concerning English skills acquisition. This study seeks to understand learners' metacognitive challenges and emotional stressors experienced when participating in synchronous online learning during the COVID-19 transition. It also examines factors such as gender, age, and English language proficiency that might affect learners' attitudes and perceptions of their emotional reactions to the unplanned and quick transitions during the pandemic. College and university students in the US were invited to participate in a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The findings inform suggested recommendations and implications for improving ESOL synchronous online praxis and creating motivational online learning spaces to support learners' mental health and learning outcomes.</i>
<b>Keywords</b> Distance learning; Online learning; Social-emotional support; Synchronous e-learning;	
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### INTRODUCTION

The abrupt shift in March 2020 to emergency distance learning in most countries worldwide, which continued to varying degrees over different timespans for large portions of the ensuing two years, brought about unprecedented innovations and challenges for education systems. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health responses (hereinafter "Covid"), educational institutions quickly developed online programs that often omitted consideration of the particular needs of learners. Teachers began to focus on best practices for online teaching, rather than centering their lessons on student wellness and social-emotional learning, causing an increase in stress and anxiety for students (Heng & Sol, 2020; Vanek, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This paper explores the impacts of such activities on ESOL learners, specifically international students in the US (hereinafter "learners").

Distance learning and other Covid measures resulted in heightened social isolation, increased cognitive and emotional health concerns, and various other negative psycho-social impacts, particularly among adolescents (America's Promise Alliance, 2020). Young adults self-reported similar feelings due to on-campus closures, limiting their communication and

physical distance among peers (Kmietowicz, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Researchers continue to investigate the impacts school closures, mask mandates, and remote learning on students' emotional development and well-being. While the pandemic pushed the educational technology divide to the forefront in consideration of student needs, and provided an opportunity for pedagogical modifications, it also imposed a financial burden and irreparable harm on many school systems, as well as a generation of learners blighted by the sudden denial of conventional education services (Binkley, 2020).

Students' psycho-social experiences and emotions are instrumental in the learning process, and online education services should account for these service user priorities in order to facilitate meaningful and high-quality learning experiences. Therefore, the current study focuses on exploring learners' emotional reactions and experiences during the pandemic. It also investigates the association between age, gender, and English language proficiency level, and emotional response and mental health, in the context of the unplanned transition to online learning due to the pandemic. Little is known about ESOL students' mental health and the impact of age, gender, and ESOL proficiency levels on learners' emotional response during the transition period in countries where English is used as a first language, such as the United States and Canada.

The results show that during the transition learners experienced negative and unpleasant emotions, such as stress, anxiety, uncertainty about their future, and lack of emotional support from their instructors. In addition, male and female learners felt differently about the transition to online learning due to the pandemic. This study's results also revealed significant differences in learners' emotional reactions according to their age. However, no significant differences were reported in the emotional responses to the transition among learners based on their proficiency.

This paper aims to highlight the introspection of ESOL students in adapting to emergency online learning in terms of understanding the specific emotional process and learners' experience in synchronous distance learning. Further, the paper examines the ways age, gender, and English proficiency level impact ESOL students' perceptions of their experiences during the unprepared transition to online learning. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What metacognitive challenges and emotional stressors do ESOL learners experience when participating in synchronous e-learning during the pandemic?
2. How did age, gender and English language proficiency affect ESOL learners' perceptions regarding their emotional experience during to the transition to synchronous e-learning due to the pandemic?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study utilizes the Geelong Grammar School (2013) theoretical framework, which aims to enhance a positive learning environment and emotions. In particular, the theory proposes the positive learning associated with the learning process to prompt students' learning and motivation. Norrish et al. (2013) identified six concepts that serve as the foundation for a positive learning environment and the release of stress and anxiety, as per the Geelong Grammar School's (2013) focus on the association of positive psychology with best-practice teaching. First, well-being involves creating a learning environment that fosters positive emotions, aiding students in feeling comfortable and reducing stress and anxiety. Second, positive engagement emphasizes the importance of positive relationships among students and between students and teachers, where emotional support from teachers helps alleviate unpleasant emotions in the educational context. Third, positive accomplishment/outcome highlights the ability to achieve meaningful outcomes despite difficulties and setbacks, mitigating the negative impact of uncertainty about the future. Fourth, positive purpose involves establishing shared goals to encourage cooperation among students and providing a clear

rationale for the work. Fifth, positive relationships focus on fostering positive interactions and interpersonal relationships. Finally, positive health underscores the connection between physical and mental health, with mental health encompassing students' emotional and psychological changes. These six concepts collectively contribute to creating a supportive and effective learning environment.

## Literature review

### *Psychological adjustment and well-being*

Existing literature has identified that difficulties associated with online learning have discouraged learning interactions among learners as they attain negative perceptions (Neilsen et al., 2021). In-person learning, whether in staunchly traditional or modern pedagogical formats, was the primary mode of instruction for students prior to the Covid outbreak. Being forced to stay at home to continue studying independently and remotely led to many students worldwide feeling more anxious and insecure, causing further educational disruption in their feelings of connectedness, belongingness, socialization, attention, engagement, attendance, and studying habits (America's Promise Alliance, 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Safa et al., 2020).

The pandemic led many students to isolation for health safety measures; it also led to an increase in psychological issues that include anxiety and tension, with little social-emotional support offered or available in institutional online spaces (Islam et al., 2020; Safa et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). School closures raised a lack of support services, directly impacted students' well-being and mental states, which in turn influenced their educational learning and academic engagement; in short, Covid exacerbated the challenges facing already vulnerable learners during key life transitions throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Banati et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

An initial study contemporaneous with Covid impacts on education by Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) revealed that ESOL students in the US had greater negative perceptions of stress compared to their teachers, and there was a palpable disconnect between students and teachers in their perception of the quality of teaching and learning. They reported that teachers tended to perceive their instructional practices to be of high quality, while students perceived them to be of low quality. Furthermore, students expressed more concern about their mental well-being due to online instructional delivery and lack of opportunities to connect with their classmates as well as their instructors.

In comparison to traditional face-to-face education, students during Covid experienced considerably greater feelings of isolation, loneliness, tension, and depressive symptoms due to the sudden change to online learning, which negatively impacted their learning process—including levels of attention, motivation, and learning itself (Besser et al., 2020). The problems involved in the non-verbal communication entailed in virtual learning (e.g., the absence of realistic and paralinguistic communication features) are particularly egregious in the context of language learning, and resulted in acutely negative perceptions among ESOL learners, who were found to ubiquitously prefer traditional face-to-face learning to virtual learning (Orlov et al., 2021).

Furthermore, pedagogical researchers have reported that significant numbers of learners experienced difficulty in accessing online education resources due to technological issues, whether in relation to lacking prerequisite hardware, software, and internet connectivity, or their own lack of familiarity and skill with using educational technology resources in the home. Furthermore, such perceptions vary in terms of age, gender, and English language proficiency. In particular, female learners and older learners tend to have greater preferences for face-to-face learning (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021).

The unsatisfactory outcomes evidenced by the scramble to implement various e-learning solutions during Covid exhibited a lack of preparedness. Years previously, Richardson

et al. (2015) indicated that instructors should ensure they create an interactive online learning environment that improves a student's academic performance due to the lack of physical interaction in the environment. In the face of a dilemma or any crisis, including Covid, students' mental health and well-being may be affected, triggering an adverse emotional reaction, increased tension, and concern.

Such impacts have been documented by emerging studies. For instance, Wang and Jiang (2022) emphasize age as a critical factor in shaping the emotional experiences of English learners. Younger students struggle with adapting to remote learning, missing the social aspects of traditional classrooms, while older learners face technological hurdles, leading to frustration and anxiety (Baloran & Hernan, 2021). Surprisingly, given the general trend that younger learners are more familiar with and capable of using technological learning solutions (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021), it was found that more mature learners displayed a heightened measure of adaptability and resilience during Covid, which could conceivably be rooted in their prior exposure to a spectrum of educational settings.

### **Gender**

The influence of gender has been found to be crucial in shaping the emotional reactions of individuals who were learning English. As evidenced by empirical investigations, Gender dynamics further complicate emotional responses, considering the arguments of both Shahrour and Dardas (2020) and Theberath et al. (2022), noting that females tend to express emotions more openly and seek support effectively during stress, fostering resilience among female ESOL learners. Conversely, males may internalize stress, potentially affecting their well-being. Addressing gender-specific responses is vital for tailored support (Meherali et al., 2021).

### **English language proficiency level**

English language proficiency levels were a critical factor influencing emotional reactions amidst the pandemic. Less experienced ESOL students encountered heightened difficulties, as language obstacles further complicated their capacity to obtain and participate in online educational resources. This aligns with the findings of the study conducted by Coman et al. (2020). Bashir et al. (2020) affirming that proficient speakers navigate online learning more easily, facing fewer communication barriers. However, ESOL learners with limited proficiency experience heightened frustration and isolation, impeding their ability to articulate emotions and seek help. The emotional responses of English learners during COVID-19 are intricate and shaped by age, gender, and language proficiency (Superio et al., 2021). Correspondingly, more advanced English learners demonstrated a greater ability to navigate the process, encountering fewer emotional obstacles. Their superior linguistic abilities enabled them to traverse the intricate terrain of the digital learning realm effortlessly, emphasizing the significance of language proficiency in reducing emotional distress (Simamora, 2020).

### **Factoring in social and emotional support**

The use of Social and Emotional Learning can be a powerful tool as it situates academic knowledge within learners' holistic selves, intersecting with attitudes and skills, whereby they can be supported to develop "healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals", deploying empathy in their interactions and fostering "supportive relationships", engaging in "responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2021). Social and Emotional Learning is a lifelong developmental process that changes based on personal experiences and the ways people respond to these experiences, which extends into adulthood. Increased Social and Emotional Learning skills have been proven to increase student achievement levels and improve behavioral outcomes (CASEL, 2020).

Positive emotions have beneficial effects on online learning. Moskowitz and Dewaele's (2019) study involving 129 adult ESOL students revealed that positive emotions positively

affect online learning. Emotional and social support intended for the learner is the provision of adequate learning resources to facilitate learning and deprive them of emotional distress. Providing social support such as love, care, and attention to learners enhances their academic performance. Also, emotional support through essential physiological needs ensures that learners adapt to the dynamic of learning processes (Shahzad et al., 2020).

Social and emotional learning is part of a healthy developmental process that allows one to manage emotions, make responsible choices, and develop a positive identity that is largely influenced by an environment (i.e., families, schools, and communities) (CASEL, 2020). One aspect of social-emotional learning is self-awareness, that can determine and influence students' well-being, educational objectives, and academic achievement (Rosanbalm, 2021). Thus, in addition to teaching and learning subject matter, teachers should prioritize developing and supporting their students' self-awareness in order to positively impact their mental health, especially during Covid and school closures (Besser et al., 2020).

Consequently, promoting self-awareness as one of the aspects of social-emotional learning was critical during the pandemic, to empower students to control their negative emotions and enable them to re-engage in their learning process. Students' lifestyles and habits were altered during Covid, along with the ways in which students navigate their feelings (Besser et al., 2020; Rosanbalm, 2021). While the pandemic may have increased mental anxiety, nervousness, and other negative emotional outcomes, students found comfort in interacting with their classmates through one-on-one communication. Students were cognizant of how distance education could be more effective if administrators took a gradual, pre-planned approach that considered the integration of learning styles (Besser et al., 2020; CASEL, 2020).

### **Opportunities for feedback**

In addition to teaching, providing timely feedback and support are essential aspects of the student learning process. Although feedback is important, teachers in a variety of fields find it difficult in online settings (Evans, 2013; Lee, 2017; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Instructors considered feedback to students to be much more problematic during Covid. For instructors, providing written or verbal feedback is inherently time-intensive, and the eponymous "distance" factor in distance learning meant that they felt a disconnect, whereby they could not be sure that students were reading, understanding, and applying the feedback they supplied (Jiang & Yu, 2021).

Under normal circumstances, instructors may have limited time to provide feedback due to their availability and investment in the course. However, students need to receive timely feedback or comments in synchronous online classes to improve their learning process (King, 2014). In the emerging digital context, which was made starkly manifest during Covid, instructors need to be able to provide live (or at least timely) comments, and consider the ways in which they can provide additional support to students within online structures of courses (i.e., webinars, lectures, and pre-recorded videos), as well as being capable to use such related technologies and teaching skills as part of the formative assessment process (Myung et al., 2020).

Without feedback, student progress and achievement can be negatively impacted (King, 2014; Warfvinge et al., 2021). As a whole, students in higher education were offered less feedback and comments while taking online classes during Covid. As a result, many students were not completely able to comprehend what their teachers expected from them due to limited opportunities for engagement and evaluation of student performance, thus leading to challenges for both instructor praxis and students' learning process, self-awareness, and academic achievement (Warfvinge et al., 2021).

The difficulties of educational service delivery exhibited during Covid were commensurate with increased awareness of the need for instructors to change their mindset that

all students must be high achievers; instead, they should value each student and encourage them to perform better through positive reinforcement. There must not be any negative comments for the students as they experience a high degree of dissociation and discomfort when ridiculed. The way teachers value the students impacts their studies, and teachers must ensure that students develop positive skills, providing additional support and guidance for learners who are struggling, whether academically or emotionally (Zhang et al., 2021).

### **Challenges of online learning**

Although distance education has been popularized and is increasingly available in higher education due to its accessibility to working adults, the sudden shift that Covid brought forth exacerbated pre-existing and long acknowledged equity-related, social, and academic challenges for students, and instructional and technological challenges for instructors (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018). For both students and instructors, having consistent and reliable internet impacted lesson delivery and access to content. Those encountering poor internet service or connection tend to withdraw from participation, impacting attendance and, in some cases, grades (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

Moreover, most Covid responses among ESOL providers (and education systems in general) was premised on a significant reliance on access to technology, whereby instructors held students to greater accountability, as submitting assignments adhered to stringent time limits, and logging in on time equated to receiving participation points. All of these increasingly regimented process factors were based on the assumption that students have access, which may not be the case for some students at some times (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018).

A further assumption is students being adept with technological tools being used to access class resources and navigate assignments. These challenges are exasperated by the limited support in scaffolding assignments and providing comprehensible access to content. It is no wonder that most students reported their online experiences during Covid to be unpleasant compared to their previous experiences of learning in traditional formats (Alawamleh et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020). The bulk of these issues may be related to instructors having limited backgrounds in educational technology, and adapting instruction to aid in emergency learning, building social-emotional support, teaching ESOL online, and navigating online tools on an ad hoc and unstructured basis; however, more research is needed to explore all of these dimensions.

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study adopted a quantitative method in an attempt to understand learners' prescription of emotional reactions. A nine-item self-administered survey was designed to investigate the effect of gender, age, and English proficiency levels on students' emotional responses and mental health during the unprepared transition to online learning that occurred due to Covid-related school closures. Surveys are commonly deployed in applied linguistics as an expedient solution to quantify abstract and subjective constructs, including those related to emotional perceptions in this context (Mahboob et al., 2016).

Participants (N = 156) were recruited from various ESOL institutions in the US. The eligibility criteria for the survey require the participants of this study to have at least one typical English class before the pandemic, and to be transferred to the online class due to school closure and the transition due to Covid from March 2020 onwards. In addition, eligible ESOL participants self-identified as being proficient in reading and writing in English, and as international students.

All participants in this study were over the age of 18, and were enrolled in US colleges and universities to learn English (ESOL). Gender, age, and self-reported English proficiency (based on ESOL proficiency/ placement tests) are examples of demographic and general data provided by participants, after which they filled the emotion-related survey. Four different age

cohorts were studied: 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, and 46-55 years old. A five-point Likert scale was utilized to understand students' perceptions of the rapid transition and emotional reactions to synchronous e-Learning format, for nine statements centered on student thoughts on the unprepared transit to online learning due to Covid (Appendix 1).

Skewness and kurtosis values were used to check the validity of the survey, and all items' values fell within the predetermined cut-off values of +/- 2, demonstrating that the participants' response data were normally distributed; therefore, the data is symmetric to its mean value, and the survey is reliable to use (Table 1).

Table 1  
Skewness and kurtosis values for questionnaire items

Item	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. The unprepared transition from the typical school to a synchronous online learning format was difficult for me.	.835	.419
2. I feel that using the synchronous online platform that the ESOL teachers used to deliver the lessons is challenging.	.603	.376
3. The transition to online teaching due to COVID-19 is an overall negative experience that makes me anxious about my future.	.983	.37
4. I feel that online learning is more anxious and disconnected than traditional classroom learning.	.704	155
5. Overall, I am greatly concerned about the online class.	.870	.478
6. Given that the transition to online teaching is rushed due to COVID-19, it negatively impacted online teaching.	.466	.525
7. My instructors do not use strategies or tips to help me express my thoughts, concerns, and opinions (e.g., with regard to talking in distance classes, or writing a reflection).	.654	.363
8. I think transition to online learning causes a significant negative impact on my mental well-being.	.875	405
9. In online classes, my instructors help me to release my stress by using humor, jokes, games, and so on.	.855	.226

IBM SPSS (2020) was used to analyze the survey data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to present participants' profiles. Mean values were used to measure and interpret the ESOL students' perceptions towards the transition to online learning and their teachers' procedures to support their social-emotional learning in synchronous e-learning formats. Independent samples t-test also told us if there was a significant difference in participants' responses according to gender. ANOVA was used to find out ESOL students' response levels according to age, gender, and English acquisition level.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

An online survey was employed to reach learners and collected data about their perspectives on learners' emotional reactions and their instructors' emotional support during the pandemic and the adjusting process to the synchronous e-learning platform. Demographic and proficiency data are shown in Table 2. The survey asked ESOL learners about the skills they were receiving instruction in during the Covid transition, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and other skills learned during the transitional time. The largest group cited writing (24.9%), followed by grammar (21.5%), while the least prevalent skills (apart from the "other" option) were reading (17.7%) and listening (13.9%). Participants provided self-evaluation of their English proficiency based on their school placement test, with the majority identifying at the intermediate and advanced levels: beginner 22 (14.10%), intermediate 70 (44.87%), and advanced 64 (41.03%).

Table 2  
Demographic and proficiency characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	77	49.4
Female	79	50.6
Age (years)		
18-25	36	23.07
26-35	57	36.5
36-45	46	29.48
46-55	17	10.89
English Level		
Beginner	22	14.10
Intermediate	70	44.87
Advanced	64	41.03

Table 3 presents the findings for the learners' perceptions of emotional issues and challenges during the transition to synchronous e-learning format for the nine statements, including emotional support learners received from teachers. It can be seen that the majority of learners faced various challenges, as their instructors were unable to provide the sufficient emotional support they needed while participating in synchronous distance learning. Consequently, the students felt uncomfortable with transition procedures, and reported negative impacts of the abrupt transition to online learning. They experienced unpleasant emotions. As suggested, using synchronous online platforms was identified as challenging through their experiences with teacher perception. Learners prefer traditional classes to synchronous online learning platforms.

Table 3  
Learners' perceptions of emotional issues during the transition to synchronous e-learning format

Item	Mean	SD
1. The unprepared transition from the typical school to a synchronous online learning format was difficult for me.	2.56	1.49
2. I feel that using the synchronous online platform that the ESOL teachers used to deliver the lessons is challenging.	3.43	0.98
3. The transition to online teaching due to COVID-19 is an overall negative experience that makes me anxious about my future.	3.69	0.98
4. I feel that online learning is more anxious and disconnected than traditional classroom learning.	3.69	1.02
5. Overall, I am greatly concerned about the online class.	3.63	1.13
6. Given that the transition to online teaching is rushed due to COVID-19, it negatively impacted online teaching.	3.89	1.09
7. My instructors do not use strategies or tips to help me express my thoughts, concerns, and opinions (e.g., with regard to talking in distance classes, or writing a reflection).	3.56	1.12
8. I think transition to online learning causes a significant negative impact on my mental well-being.	3.66	1.14
9. In online classes, my instructors help me to release my stress by using humor, jokes, games, and so on.	3.44	1.17

Table 4 displays the impacts of age, gender, and ESOL proficiency level on learners' perceptions of the transition process to online learning during Covid. Significant differences in the learners' attitudes toward the transition regarding their emotional responses and whether

they perceived any emotional support during the pandemic period were found according to gender ( $T = 2.500$ ,  $P = 0.013$ ), with males tending to express more concern about the transition and the use of synchronous online learning in comparison to females; none of the participants self-identified as non-binary. Furthermore, significant differences were also seen according to age ( $F = 3.910$ ,  $P = 0.010$ ), with those aged 36-45 years being the most uncomfortable during the transition process and having the most dissatisfaction with the emotional support provided by teachers and the use of synchronous online learning as a mediator compared to the other age groups. However, no significant differences were seen according to English proficiency level ( $F = 0.990$ ), as the significance level did not exceed (0.05).

Table 4  
Impacts of age, gender, and ESOL proficiency level on learners' perception of the transition process to online learning during Covid

Characteristics	T-/ F-Value	D.F.	M (SD)	P Value
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	T = 2.500	154	0.6318(0.35621)	P = 0.013***
Female			0.7191(0.31999)	
<b>Age (years)</b>				
18-25	F = 3.910,	152	0.7751(0.30114)	P = 0.010***
26-35			0.6606(0.33665)	
36-45			0.6936(0.32839)	
46-55			0.4923(0.39507)	
<b>English Level</b>				
Beginner	F = 0.990	153	0.6753(0.29222)	P = 0.374
Intermediate			0.5988(0.33005)	
Advanced			0.7651(0.34970)	

\* Differences were provided using Independent Samples T-Test

\*\* Differences were provided using one-way ANOVA

\*\*\*Differences are significant at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ )

Beta coefficients indicated that both age ( $\beta = 0.226$ ,  $P = 0.004$ ) and gender ( $\beta = -.202$ ,  $P = 0.009$ ) exerted a significant influence on the total score, but the relatively low variance value ( $R^2 = 7.8\%$ ) denotes that other variables have a stronger role in determining respondents' perceptions, which signals the need for future studies to investigate such possibilities.

## Discussion

This study investigated the metacognitive challenges and emotional stressors faced by ESOL learners when participating in synchronous e-learning during the pandemic. Specifically, it aimed to understand how these learners' age, gender, and English language proficiency affected their perceptions of their emotional experiences during the transition to synchronous e-learning necessitated by the pandemic. The study sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of the emotional reactions and well-being of ESOL students in the US, and how these varied based on demographic and proficiency factors.

The findings revealed significant insights into the emotional landscape of online learning for ESOL students. It was evident that emotions play a crucial role in online learning, impacting engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Bashir et al., 2020; Banati et al., 2020). During the Covid-19 transition, learners reported experiencing a range of negative emotions, including stress, anxiety, and uncertainty about their future. These emotional responses highlighted the psychological toll of the abrupt shift to online education. Furthermore, the study found that learners did not perceive adequate emotional support from their instructors, which compounded the difficulties of adjusting to the new learning

environment. This lack of support was a critical factor in the heightened negative emotional responses, suggesting that more proactive measures from educators could help mitigate the emotional challenges faced by students during such transitions.

The research also explored how age, gender, and English proficiency levels influenced the emotional experiences of ESOL learners. Differences in emotional responses were observed across these demographic categories, indicating that these factors play a significant role in shaping learners' emotional well-being during synchronous e-learning. For example, older learners and those with varying levels of English proficiency had distinct emotional reactions to the transition, pointing to the need for tailored support strategies that consider these demographic nuances. The study underscored the importance of addressing the emotional needs of ESOL learners in online learning environments. The findings highlighted that emotions significantly influence learners' engagement, motivation, and achievement, and that the transition to online learning during the pandemic elicited substantial emotional stress. The lack of perceived emotional support from instructors further exacerbated these challenges, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive and empathetic approaches in educational practices to support students' emotional well-being.

Male and female learners felt differently about the transition to online learning due to the pandemic, with male learners being more concerned about the transition to online learning due to Covid. This indicated that males experience a slower adjustment with a traumatic transition to online learning. Study results also found significant differences in ESOL emotional reactions according to their age. Adult learners in the age group of 36-45 years expressed higher levels of concern regarding the shift to online learning. This indicates that adult learners need additional support in online learning when participating in a traumatic learning context. No statistically significant differences were reported in the emotional responses to the transition among learners based on their proficiency. This finding aligns with Coman et al. (2020), who argue that the transition to online learning had detrimental effects on students' mental well-being caused by the unprepared transition and lack of support from their instructors.

ESOL providers must accommodate and manage the emotional responses and needs of learners and integrate this dimension as part of holistic service provision, alongside academic content and skills development, which have traditionally been the sole focus of educational services in general. Online educators can design and deliver better quality and more meaningful experiences for learners. Students' self-regulation, motivation, and academic outcomes, alongside classroom management, are all profoundly affected by emotion, and the lack of consideration of the emotional aspects of learner needs leads to frustration with the primary academic aims of educational services (Hillard et al., 2019).

Learners' emotional experiences must therefore be acknowledged and addressed to foster efficacious and inclusive online educational services, both as a general principle and for expediency in crises such as Covid. This study seeks to offer insights to help educational institutions incorporate emotional support in their ESOL plans and instructions. International ESOL students struggle more due to language barriers and new social and cultural environments, including isolation from normative sources of emotional support (e.g., their friends and family in their homelands). Thus, the findings of this study call for further investigation of their emotional needs to enable holistic psycho-social as well as academic development.

Although distance education has been popularized and is increasingly available in higher education due to its accessibility to working adults, the sudden shift that Covid brought forth exacerbated pre-existing and long-acknowledged equity-related, social, and academic challenges for students, and instructional and technological challenges for instructors (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018). For both students and instructors, having consistent and reliable internet impacted lesson delivery and access to content. Those encountering poor

internet service or connection tend to withdraw from participation, impacting attendance and, in some cases, grades (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

Moreover, most Covid responses among ESOL providers (and education systems in general) were premised on a significant reliance on access to technology. Instructors held students to greater accountability, requiring timely submission of assignments and punctual logins for participation points. These regimented processes assumed that students always had access to technology, which was not the case for all students (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018). Another assumption was that students were adept with the technological tools used to access class resources and navigate assignments. These challenges were exacerbated by limited support in scaffolding assignments and providing comprehensible access to content. It is no wonder that most students reported their online experiences during Covid as unpleasant compared to their previous experiences in traditional learning formats (Alawamleh et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020).

These issues may be partly due to instructors' limited backgrounds in educational technology and adapting instruction for emergency learning. They were required to build social-emotional support, teach ESOL online, and navigate online tools on an ad hoc and unstructured basis. However, more research is needed to explore all these dimensions comprehensively. Understanding these challenges can help educational institutions develop better support systems and training for instructors, ensuring a more effective and supportive online learning environment for students. The study underscores the importance of considering emotional well-being in online learning environments. It highlights the need for ESOL providers to address the emotional needs of learners, especially during crises such as Covid. By integrating emotional support into educational plans and instructions, institutions can enhance students' overall learning experiences and outcomes. Further research is needed to explore the various dimensions of emotional support and its impact on online learning, particularly for international ESOL students facing unique challenges.

## CONCLUSION

The study underscores the critical importance of addressing the emotional well-being of ESOL learners in synchronous e-learning environments, particularly during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Emotional factors significantly impact students' engagement, motivation, and academic performance. The abrupt transition to online learning led to heightened stress, anxiety, and uncertainty among learners, exacerbated by a perceived lack of emotional support from instructors. The findings highlight that age, gender, and English proficiency influence emotional responses, with older and male learners showing greater concern and slower adjustment to online learning. To mitigate these challenges, ESOL providers must integrate emotional support into their educational frameworks, ensuring that emotional needs are met alongside academic requirements. This holistic approach can enhance the overall learning experience, promoting better self-regulation, motivation, and academic outcomes. Additionally, the study calls for more comprehensive training for educators in online teaching and emotional support strategies to better serve diverse student populations. By prioritizing emotional well-being, educational institutions can create more inclusive and effective online learning environments, ultimately leading to improved student satisfaction and success. Further research is needed to explore the specific emotional needs of international ESOL students and develop targeted support mechanisms to facilitate their academic and psycho-social development.

## LIMITATIONS

While the study indicates the negative perceptions of students' experiences when facing the transition to online instruction, the statements themselves could be perceived as leading. Future studies on perceptions of emergency online learning can adopt a qualitative approach,

allowing for open-ended responses, in order to probe and explore the rationale behind students' perceptions and experienced in more detail. This could potentially triangulate quantitative survey data with qualitative insights into complex phenomena that are instrumental in teaching and learning. Participants in this study self-identified as international students (as per the inclusion criteria), but verification or member-checking was not conducted, due to the scope and participant recruitment through international student social networks. Participants enrollment can range from university international programs to intensive English programs or colleges; however, this information was not collected. Therefore, the author was not able to connect ESOL students' experiences at the programmatic or institutional level.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlighted students' concerns about their transitional experiences to remote learning in terms of their emotional reactions, emotional well-being, and differences in responses in relation to age, gender, and ESOL proficiency level. The study suggests that learners faced challenges during the transition period to online learning that included a negative outlook on their educational future and difficulty with the technical challenges in a remote classroom, and a lack of instructors' emotional support. These challenges varied from learners' ability to adjust to the new learning environment, ESOL teachers' limited communication, and lack of social and psychological support in synchronous online learning.

ESOL stakeholders must offer consistent conditions and practices to facilitate and cater to learners' proficiency in English skills and their related needs. ESOL teachers must be conscious of international students' needs, particularly in a synchronous online space. Opportunities to create spaces to build connections in online formats between instructors and ESOL students, along with ESOL peer-to-peer relationship building, can help alleviate the negative sentiments and open the door to greater communication and identified support. The findings of this study can inform ESOL stakeholders to improve a positive online learning environment in the future.

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