

Supportive Environment as Mental Health Intervention on Psychological Well-Being from Foreign Language Learning Activity

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ABSTRACT

Background: Mental health issues' awareness is increasing alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. While offline activities are shutting down, people require to adjust both rest and activities from home. That being said, there can also be a possibility to save more time because mobilization from home to another place is not necessary. However, excess free time does not always guarantee a better mental health situation if it does not fulfill the psychological needs. By all means, creating and surrounding in a supportive environment becomes essential to adjust to the new lifestyle and obligations. Foreign language learning activity turns out not only give new knowledge but also create a supportive environment to fulfill the desire for authentic interaction, which might contribute to psychological well-being at home during the pandemic season. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore deeper about the role of the supportive environment from foreign language learning activity on psychological well-being. Later, this finding could be used as a recommendation for the public health sector to promote psychological well-being through mental disorder prevention programs. **Methods:** This study uses a literature review from international journals, data reports, and theses that discuss about the supportive environment benefit on psychological well-being from the foreign language learning activity. The sources used are published in the last ten years. **Results:** The result shows several benefits of the supportive environment from foreign language learning activity to the psychological well-being aspects (pleasure, joy, life value, and resilience) and also alternatives of productive activity during an abundance of free time, social support, empathy, positive mind, and open-mindedness.

Keyword: Foreign language learning, Intercultural communication, Mental health, Psychological well-being, Supportive environment.

INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 health crisis has caught massive global attention for more than 2 years. The infection first emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019 to then declared by World Health Organization (WHO) as a global pandemic. This virus is contagious via droplet transmission (Akhtar, 2021). To anticipate this situation, countries around the world issued a plan to restrict mass gatherings, strengthen the pandemic control by monitoring public behavior such as testing and contact tracing by the government, and encourage people to stay at home (Vallejo and Ong, 2020; Ansah *et al.*, 2021).

Public behavioral prevention policies such as lockdown, social gathering limitations, and travel bans have been used in flattening the number of cases, especially during the peak period of the pandemic (Gwee *et al.*, 2021; Dergiades *et*

al., 2022). Indonesian government stated PSBB (The Large Scale Social Restrictions) in 2020 to then level up the restriction into PPKM (Limiting Micro Community Activities) in 2021 when declared as the new epicenter of delta variant (Menteri Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2021).

These responses to severe public health emergencies affected and changed our ways of socializing, working, studying, and living. The drastic changes in physical and social activities make people experience long-term stress (Giuntella *et al.*, 2021). The anticipation for COVID-19 prevention is quite impactful for general physical health and other aspects such as economic decrease, environment, and mental health (Qi *et al.*, 2021; Shams, Alam and Mahbub, 2021; Belitski *et al.*, 2022).

Mental health awareness and trends are rising significantly during this 2-year of an ongoing pandemic (Quaglia, 2022). The prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms increased globally by



25% in 2021 (WHO, 2022a). Psychology issues have been reported higher since the outbreak of COVID-19. A mental health survey through online self-examination conducted by the Association of Indonesian Mental Medicine Specialists on 14,998 respondents regarding psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma increased by 11.8% (PSDKJI, 2022).

These COVID 19-related traumatic events (e.g., losing loved ones, lockdown stringent measures, poor economic incomes) may impact directly enhance depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress, or indirectly, lowering one's buffering effect of resilience (Rossi *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has significantly affected the lives of young people (15-24 year-olds), and alarming surge in mental health issues among this age group. This finding is that younger people are more interested in spending a consistent amount of time in the digital world than the older population. As a result, the overloaded information, conspiracy theories, and sense of fear of missing out are more likely to attract the younger generation (Rossi *et al.*, 2021; Takino *et al.*, 2021)

Social isolation and public gathering restriction policy make things that can easily be done with face-to-face interaction somehow become more complicated, especially because of the unequal access, education level, and specific age group (Beaunoyer and Dup, 2020; Moore and Hancock, 2020). The lack of refreshment choices and feeling stuck also contribute to the overuse of smartphone usage (Serra *et al.*, 2021). However, excessive non-productive screen-time activity can lead to negative thoughts such as a feeling of guilt, lack of sense of purpose, and lower well-being (Liu, Du and Li, 2021; Wacks and Weinstein, 2021).

In order to strengthen mental health during crisis, it's necessary to create a supportive environment which involve the participation of the community. Community-based mental health care is more accessible and easier than in institutional settings (WHO, 2022). Supportive environments for health offer people protection from threats to health and enable people to expand their capabilities (WHO, 2021).

Psychological well-being is a core feature of mental health. Good mental

health conditions (emotionally stable, and happy) will lead to better psychological well-being (the intention to face life challenges, personal growth, and better quality of life) (Johal and Pooja, 2016). Psychological well-being refers to the levels of positive functioning which include one's relatedness with others and attitude control in personal growth (Burns, 2016). Psychological well-being consists of hedonic well-being (pleasure and joy) and eudaimonic well-being (life value and resilience) (Keyes, 2016).

Learning a new language has been a new trend during this pandemic era. Alongside with travel ban policy both local and international departure, this could be one of the alternatives to cure the longing feeling of travel and cultural differences exposure (Hardach, 2021). Language learning demand has reached a skyrocketing number of new users during the pandemic (Andress, Star and Balshem, 2020; Kelleher, 2021). This situation is also supported by creating a supportive environment in order to adjust to a new lifestyle. Learning a new language is also known capable to stimulate better cognitive function. In this case, a healthy cognitive function could play a huge role in psychological well-being during an under-pressure situation (Fessler, Michael B.; Rudel, Lawrence L.; Brown and Sheean, 2013). Online language learning with the self-directed method outside of the school setting has proved to create a more personal and less pressure. This situation can contribute to individual's well-being by surrounding with the opportunity to enjoy the new skill learning and meaningfulness in one time (Resnik and Schallmoser, 2019).

Therefore, this study aimed to see the role of the supportive environment from language learning activity on psychological well-being outside of the structured language class in the school setting.

METHODS

The method used in this study is a literature review. Articles were taken from various search engine sources such as Google Scholar, Science Direct, PubMed, data reports, and theses published in 2012-2021. The inclusion criteria of the selected article are:

- International article.

- Article which discusses the aspect of a supportive environment for health (physically, emotionally, and socially safe space) in the language learning activity.
- Article which includes language learning experience outside of the traditional classroom setting.
- Article which focused on psychological well-being aspect (hedonic and eudaimonic) from language learning activity.

From 26 specific articles found, 15 articles focused more on simultaneous bilingualism research and 11 articles on language learning. After the reading and analysing process, 5 articles were met the criteria based on the supportive environment and its role related to one or more aspects from psychological well-being (pleasure, joy, life value, and resilience) at the final stage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of Articles on Supportive Environment Role from Language Learning Activity on Psychological Well-Being

No	Authors	Title	Methods	Participant	Aspects	Results
1.	(Resnik and Schallmoser, 2019)	Enjoyment as a key to success? Links between e-tandem language learning and tertiary student's foreign language enjoyment	Qualitative research using in-depth interview	19 English and German students (9 English students and 10 German students) in tertiary education level. The age range is from 20-32 years old.	The relationship between e-Tandem language learning and the sense of foreign language enjoyment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social dimensions in foreign language enjoyment contribute the most to the enhancement of participant's perceived enjoyment • Feeling at ease, sense of accomplishment and meaningfulness in through authentic conversation • Boost a positive mood and culture curiosity and respect through social bonding during the learning process
2.	(Woll and Wei, 2019)	Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning : Broadening our perspectives Final Report to the British Academy	Report	502 participants from 5 different study with the age range from 7-57 years old. The studies criteria as follows : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants reported to study foreign language outside of 	The benefit of cross-cultural interaction from language learning and the factor which might supported behind.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relationship between language learning and function skills is complex, vary, and need to be tested more as it also depends on age and the language exposure • There is a potential of creativity, problem solving-skills,



				<p>classroom setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research has included both foreign language learner's group and monolingual participants as the control group. 		<p>empathy, and confidence enhancement on language learning experience</p>
3.	(Talebzadeh, Elahi Shirvan and Khajavy, 2020)	Dynamics and mechanisms of foreign language contagion	Qualitative research using self-rating and video recording observation	5 students (3 male, 2 female) with average age 18 years old of from University Bojnord, Iran + 1 teacher.	The patterns of enjoyment contagion in the ecology of foreign language learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interaction between teachers and learners within the ecology of a foreign language classroom is not only verbal but also an emotional side • Mimicry and contagion don't always match with the real situation • There are some behaviors to check the positive emotional contagion during the learning process such as eye contact, smiling, nodding, lean-forward posture, and laughter
4.	(Gojkov-Rajić and Prtljaga, 2013)	Foreign language learning as a factor of intercultural tolerance	Systematic non-experimental observation	240 students from Belgrade University who started to learn a foreign language for the first time.	Foreign language learning and its impact on intercultural tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign language learning with familiarization and cultural exposure can make people more open to novelties, respect more to the diversity, more acceptance with multicultural and intercultural

						living in the future, and tolerant individual
5.	(Klimova, 2018)	Learning a Foreign Language: A Review on Recent Findings About Its Effect on The Enhancement of Cognitive Functions Among Healthy Older Individuals	Mini review article	12 articles were chosen with the age group from 60-83 years old	The effect of learning a foreign language on the improvement of cognitive functions in healthy older individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are some benefits from learning a foreign language for the elderly found : enhancement of brain function, self-esteem, and more opportunity to socialize • Learning a new language can be considered as cost-effective activity which also has a long-term effect in public health

Table 1 shows that the safe space environment from foreign language learning can contribute in some aspects to increase psychological wellbeing (Resnik and Schallmoser, 2019). Authentic conversation between a native speaker and language learner also produces a feeling of joy and meaningfulness instead of anxiety.

Sense of accomplishment received from knowing the new way of delivering a message during language engagement. Achievement goals are associated with a better individual's life satisfaction. A higher level of life satisfaction from the socially supportive environment will be related to not only a better psychological status, but also to behavioral and physical well-being (Kim *et al.*, 2021).

Language learning can train creative thinking, problem-solving skills, empathy, and also boost self-confidence (Woll and Wei, 2019). As brain impairment is not only affected by aging but also by poor stress management (Mah, Szabuniewicz and Fiocco, 2016), language learning can be one of the non-pharmacological options to endure cognitive dysfunction. This activity also provides more opportunities for the individual to socialize with people (Klimova, 2018).

Language learning experience shows the various psychological well-being impact on different age groups and

exposure. However, starting from the young adult age group to the elderly, learning a language besides the mother tongue can be beneficial for psychological well-being. Confidence, self-esteem, openness, and creativity are relatively found in the young adult and adult age group (Chen, He and Fan, 2022).

Positive emotion contagion can also be achieved during language exchange engagement. There is some indicators to ensure this by checking from physical gesture such as eye contact, nodding, lean-forward posture, smiling, and laughter. These results can be achieved by the exchange partner's (teacher or peer) creativity during the interaction and language learner's proactive (Talebzadeh, Elahi Shirvan and Khajavy, 2020)

The Abundance of Free Time and Productive Activity

Self-isolation makes people have more time in a day since physical activity and lifestyle mostly switched to online. Having leisure time during the day is necessary to maintain our mental health and motivation. (Kroesen, 2022) proved the death time saved from work mobilization can provide better well-being, especially for people who spent a long duration commuting. However recent research reported that having too much leisure time can't always be a better option for maintaining our psychological health

especially when there is no social interaction in it.

The lack of free time and an overabundance of discretionary hours both can contribute to lower subjective well-being. This is because having too much free time in a day can undermine people's sense of life purpose and productivity. Supportive environment becomes essential to fill the excess free time with activities that included three fundamental psychological needs: relatedness (having a social interaction), autonomy (freedom to choose an enjoyable activity), and competence (doing a productive activity) (Sharif, Mogilner and Hershfield, 2021)

Learning a new language can include these psychological needs and provide a sense of joy indirectly by creating a space to have a conversation and challenge ourselves to express the idea from a new perspective. In this case, learning with peers in 1-on-1 online class, tandem, or student-centered learning is better than classroom setting because people can choose which languages they're interested to learn and the way they want to learn (Resnik and Schallmoser, 2019)

Social Support and Empathy

Social isolation is one of the reasons the mental health crisis rise during the pandemic. Grief, loneliness, financial worries, boredom, and fear of missing out stressors can lead to mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. There is a high intention to do a self-suicide among people who suffered from depression (Kamelia and Terry, 2022). On another hand, depression and anxiety scores are high in individuals who focused on the negative thoughts from the pandemic situation in their life, especially those living alone and low household individuals (Qi *et al.*, 2021). There is also a likelihood from people who suffer from mental disorders to involve in violent acts when it is combined with high-risk factors such as substance abuse, unsafe environments, and social isolation (Elbogen, Dennis and Johnson, 2016).

Supportive environment through community engagement and social support groups could mediate the mental disorder. The prior research from (Mote *et al.*, 2021) found that virtual one-on-one group conversation with strangers has been proved as a helpful solution to facing loneliness, social anxiety, and depression during isolation. Perceived social support

in quality conversation through phone or video contact can reduce depressive symptoms and improve social connectedness.

During this pandemic, access to technology-based learning becomes easier and various. Online learning alternatives are divided into two types which are online interactive lessons and recorded online courses or massive open online courses (MOOC). At this point, an online interactive lesson works better to build a supportive environment because the student can discuss and have a real-time conversation with peers or the teacher (Kang, 2021). Learning language through an online learning platform that provides both community and tutor in 2 ways communication and video comments can fulfill the learner's desire with not only a structured lesson to boost self-confidence, but also an authentic conversation, increase motivation, expand the worldview, meeting new people, exchanging stories, and building friendships. This is also linked with the positive vibes carried by a moment to greet, thank, and express good wishes to someone we just met. This attitude will make individuals more appreciate the small things in their life and might boost the sense of belonging, empathy, and social connection which can be assumed a better psychological well-being predictor. (Gunaydin *et al.*, 2021)

Positive Mind and Creativity

During COVID-19 physical isolation, people are forced to shut down their offline gathering, outdoor activity and real life interaction. This phenomenon could lead to some negative emotions such as : anger, fear, anxious, and feeling of guilt especially in young adults (Id, Dehzangi and Saadati, 2022) .

Several studies have proved the positive relationship between creativity and psychological well-being to handle negative emotions. This includes joyful, optimism, and pleasant feelings (Us and Salavera, no date). The engagement from creative activity can encourage individuals to grow as a person, and do their responsibility (Review, 2013). Individuals with a decent level of well-being show better physical health, work performance, life satisfaction, and less possibility of being trapped in negative emotion. The relationship between creativity and subjective well-being is mutualistic

because well-being can stimulate an individual's creativity, and creativity can enhance well-being at the same time. By all means, creativity might be one of the beneficial solutions which can be promoted to cope with turbulence mental situations (Tan *et al.*, 2021).

Language learning can also improve creativity through divergent thinking and multicultural aspect. In this atmosphere creativity can be achieved through flexible practice to face novelties i.e., new perspectives, engaging with new cultures, new linguistic systems, and a new way of delivering a message (Ghonsooly, 2012). While multicultural aspects can also play a role to increase creativity, however, it will work when the subject has a certain understanding of the new culture. For example, it's easier for non-native English speakers to gain inspiration by watching English resources than for the native English speaker who consumed another language's resources, especially when it has a different alphabet system. This is because English is a lingua franca and its cultural exposure is more widely spread and taught worldwide from an early age (Tan *et al.*, 2019). The flow state through the engagement of divergent thinking tasks is conducive to psychological well-being.

Open-Mindedness

Mental disorder symptoms commonly force the individual to see the world only from the small perspective from the negative side, losing nerves and unlikely to feel peace (Gillihan, 2018). In real-life practice, health guidance might focus on mandatory action and little consideration may be given to whether it's likable or not, including COVID-19 prevention policy. Therefore, maintaining an open-minded mind is crucial to avoid overload stress while adapting to a new culture and way of life during uncertainty (Cherry, 2022). Travel ban and social isolation indeed are still considered the best way to prevent the spread of the oral transmission virus. However, as we know, a long period of isolation could overwhelm, narrow our life perspective, and possibly grow into depressive symptoms (Pietrabissa and Simpson, 2020).

When we learn a new language, we also discover a new opinion, refresh and broaden our minds to move from our negative mode. Prior research showed that people who decided to learn a new language outside of the foreign language at

school based on their will and experience an intercultural conversation with locals are significantly more open-minded (Tiurikova, Haukås and Storto, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new perspective to a lot of our current living aspects, including mental health issues. Social isolation affects the way people socialize and value time management. By doing a lot of home-based activity, the overabundance of time becomes one of the challenges for our mental health damage. Surrounding with supportive environment is necessary to maintain positive mind and resilience while adjusting to the new lifestyle.

Online learning has taken over the education system during the pandemic. Online language learning has surged attention as a new activity at home because not only to upgrade personal skills but also opening the border and have a real-time interaction with the different culture and perspective.

Learning a foreign language can be beneficial to fulfill our human desire for social interaction, challenges, and mental disorder prevention. Exposing ourselves to a foreign culture and sharing each of our country's struggles can create a supportive environment and handle the loneliness feeling from staying at home. This activity can also act as a safe space for people to share and learn to accept the new circumstances. Furthermore, language learning can also level up the individual skill as well which can contribute to increase the quality of life.

One-on-one video chat sessions with native speakers or peers based on the individual language choice, customised, and student-led can bring not only a structured lesson but also a positive mindset like joy and respect along the process.

There are three suggestions that can be considered for the public health sector to promote this activity:

- Educational (high school and university)
This collaboration can enable to facilitate an online intercultural language learning group between students and international students or teacher.
- Parenting organization

The aim of this option is to promote this activity through parents which can be applied for their children, elderly people, or themselves.

- Elderly Foundation and Hospital
This suggestion is to share about learning activity as a method to maintain psychological well-being which also contribute to older adult disease prevention.

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