

“Under Pressure”: An Autoethnography of a Language Educator Fighting the Fear and Cultivating Resilience during Covid-19

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Abstract

Covid-19 has posed some kind of pressure and fear on educators across the world but educators are commended to not be discouraged but be resilient. However, autoethnographic research on educators fighting their pressure and fear, and subsequently cultivating resilience during Covid-19 is scarce. Thus, in this article, the author, who is a language educator, employed an autoethnography to critically examine her own lived experiences in understanding the pressure associated with her high job demands, the fear of death having to live with Covid-19 patients, and the resilience mechanisms she developed during the stressful time dealing with the respective pressure and fear. This autoethnography suggests three important contributions: the pressure on educators can be eased by providing them ample time to complete their heavy workload; the fear of Covid-19 can be relieved if family members can support each other through thick and thin and not resort to blackmailing; and the key to resilience is to maintain peace at all times. This article is hoped to provide educators and alike a reference to alter the way we live and deal with pressure and fear, now and beyond.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Covid-19, Pressure, Fear, Resilience, Language Educator.

Introduction

When Covid-19 or the novel coronavirus disease first hit China in December 2019 and has since aggressively plagued the entire world, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. It has posed new kinds of pressure to many populations of the world, educators included. The new kinds of pressure include the closure of educational institutions, cessation of face-to-face classes, lack of preparedness, and abrupt decision by many educational institutions to shift face-to-face classes to full-scale online learning mode (Moser et al., 2021; Mouchantaf, 2020). Research by MacIntyre et al (2020); Pressley (2021); Sokal et al (2020) confirmed that educator stress during the pandemic was real and it was associated with high job demands, low adaptability and resistance to changes. Feeling vulnerable, enduring frustration, feeling stressed that productivity is expected even when there is little training in too little time, experiencing somatic illnesses in the head, neck, arms, shoulder and suffering from eye strain, and suffering from exhaustion from long meetings or frustration that arise when well-planned activities need to be given up (Bakar, 2021; Collie,

2021; Pressley, 2021) are some major signs of pressure experienced by educators in general during Covid-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, there is also the emergence of fear of Covid-19, not only in Malaysia but around the world (Khor et al., 2020), especially more among women than men, and more among Asians than any other people in other continents (Luo et al., 2021). There are the fears of death (Enea et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2022), of being infected, of transmitting the virus and infecting family and friends, of being ostracized if infected by the disease, and many more which are driven by real risks and augmented by the 24-hour social media and news feed (Cawcutt et al., 2020).

The 2020 pandemic has affected all facets of almost everybody's life. However, educators must not be discouraged but be resilient, and be positive towards themselves, their students, and the learning process and context in order to bring high quality education to their students (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO (2020) has also outlined that albeit the crisis of Covid-19, educators -- especially language educators -- need to create good communication and rapport with the students and everyone else. Creating good communication is the nature of language educators and this will certainly contribute to the good development of students' mental health and well-being. Language educators and students whom they meet are social beings. As social beings, it is only natural that students would want to work with warm and positive educators whom they trust (Bakar & Bakar, 2021). Barcelos and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2018); De Costa et al (2020) have recognized that it is vital for language educators to exercise positive emotions and resilience as these traits can lead them to having better cooperation with learners besides providing a safe and positive learning environment.

Resilience is defined as having the ability to adapt positively to pressure, to keep calm and going, and to be healthy even when there is crisis (Amtmann, et al., 2020). In short, it is a protective role in moderating difficulties and pressure and can prevent further emotional or behavioural problems in the face of stress (Elisei et al., 2013). Having resilience will allow ones to admit and identify that there is a problem, and that they may be sad but shall not give up; instead they can strategise to come out from the crisis.

Firang (2020); Ungar (2019) argued that resilience-building is worth being investigated, especially during the pandemic. Taking this into account, it is believed that studies on responses of language educators amidst the Covid-19 crisis are called for as they can provide invaluable information on what may be required to recover from pressure and fear, and how resilience is cultivated among language educators. However, autoethnographic research on language educators fighting their fear and cultivating resilience during Covid-19 is scarce. Thus, in this article, an autoethnography is used to examine the pressure and fear that the author who is a language educator herself had experienced, and what strategies she then utilised in forming resilience.

Methodology

In this article, autoethnography is used as a qualitative research method. Adams et al (2017) explained that autoethnography is made up of the words "auto", "ethno" and "graphy". "Auto" brings the meaning personal experience; while "ethno" practices, and "graphy" experiences, texts and beliefs. An autoethnographer who is the researcher cum author

actively interprets and describes his or her individual experiences which are rooted to cultural norms and societal expectations so that the connection between the self and social life can be understood (Adams et al., 2015). This act, which is termed as reflexivity or reflection, is aimed at allowing others to understand the autoethnographer's meanings of his or her experiences, struggle, thoughts and feelings in day-to-day settings.

In this article, the author employed an autoethnography to examine her own lived experiences in September 2021 – the deadliest month since the Covid-19 pandemic began in Malaysia. It raged and infected over two million Malaysians (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2021) and killed some 9,671 others (Latiff, 2021) in the country. September was the month in which she coincidentally felt most pressured in her life.

The author acted as both the participant and researcher. The purpose of the autoethnography was to understand the pressure associated with the high job demands, the fear she underwent having forced to live with Covid-19 patients in her house, and the resilience she chose to develop while dealing with the respective pressure and fear. The author critically reflected on her struggles during the pandemic and wrote her narrative from her detailed and daily note making in her diary which had been her typical habit since she was a child. This note making assisted her in the process of writing this article. This narrative was then analyzed by forming codes and themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Bakar & Bakar, 2019).

Findings and Discussion

Upon analysis of the author's narrative, a few codes were identified and grouped to mark each emerging theme. For example, the codes 'bearing diverse roles in professional life', 'ensuring that things go as planned', 'completing work in too little time' and 'experiencing an increase in work demands' are accounted for the theme 'pressure'. The codes 'fear of death' and 'breach of law' constitute the theme 'fear'. The codes 'to be at peace at all times', 'to focus on one thing at a time', 'to be grateful', 'to listen to religious talks' and 'to transform pressure into a positive act' represent the theme 'resilience'. These codes and themes signify the various forms of struggle that the author experienced, as well as mechanisms in which she developed resilience.

The Pressure

Bearing Diverse Roles

The author expressed that September 2021 was a month full of pressure for her. Pressure was overwhelming since she had to bear the diverse roles that the university had bestowed upon her besides being a full time lecturer with almost one hundred undergraduates under her wings. She was also elected the head of a department who had to plan and oversee several programmes like conferences and webinars within that particular year, to name a few.

Ensuring Things Go as Planned

In that month, her department had to hold an international academic conference despite the Covid-19 pandemic and its ferocious onslaught which had inflicted against more than two million Malaysians (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2021). Since nobody knew when the pandemic was going to be over, the university administration had decided that the conference just had to go on. "Business as usual" was the slogan that was hammered although there were disturbances and difficulties because of the pandemic. Imagine too the

two-year preparation that had been going on since the day they were instructed by their former Dean to arrange for the conference. The nearer the date of the event, the more meetings and rehearsals that they needed to have to ensure that the conference could go on smoothly as planned. She wrote, "The rehearsals sometimes went on till night time, and the pressure of ensuring that everything should be the way it was designed was insurmountable". Her staff's morale needed to also be managed well so that their stress levels were low, communication was intact and morale was high.

Completing Workload in Too Little Time

Besides bearing the pressure of ensuring that the international conference was to be arranged well, she too had to assume the role of an associate member of the university research ethics committee. Before a researcher could carry out his or her research, the particular research proposal must be sent to the research ethics committee so that it could be analysed prior to the ethics approval. The university promised that the each committee member had around two weeks to evaluate one proposal but the truth was that the time given was merely days. To be exact, she had to complete reviewing several proposals in just five days including Saturday and Sunday which were supposed to be the staff's days off. Completing this workload in too little time drove her to feeling angry and burnout sometimes. This is similar to a handful of other educators who reported feeling under great stress and struggling to remain engaged as was informed by (Davis and Chick, 2022).

Experiencing an Increase in Work Demands

In accordance with the university aspiration to be globally renowned by 2025, the staff of her university had experienced increasing work demands. The aspiration was accepted and that same month observed her department signing five memoranda of agreement with international universities. Additionally, because the new semester was to start in October and the number of lecturers in her department was insufficient, she was also required to be present in the interviews held and assess the interviewees before they could be employed as part-time lecturers. Occasionally, she felt that being in her position had made her exert herself. However, because she loved her job, the challenges and pressure each task brought with it could be endured. The weariness slowly slipped away with the victory that ensued. This is comparable to the contentment some educators experience when responsibilities given are honoured and get them into using up their energy and passion well (Kise & Holm, 2022).

The Fear

Fear of Death and Breach of Law

The pressure the writer faced was utterly downplayed by another occurrence. It was a matter of life and death. In that same September 2021, she was alerted that her mother-in-law and her maid were positive with Covid-19. They were not staying with her at the time but with another sibling but were forced to collectively stay in her house by her husband's siblings when pronounced Covid-19 positive. The reason being her husband was the only son in the family and must shoulder the responsibility of caring for the mother at that juncture. 'Filial duty' as it was termed. The writer and her husband are Malays. Despite being in the 21st century, some Malays are still rigid, traditional and not flexible when it comes to the issue of parent-child relationship; thus, no matter how rigid a custom is, it must be followed and no discussions (Firdaus, 2022) nor negotiations are welcome or ones will be labelled as "anak

derhaka” in the Malay language or unfilial children and shall wait for punishment from God (Chin & Daud, 2015). It is always easy to use moral pressure and filial obligations to blackmail others to accept difficult situations.

As much as the writer understood that parent-child relationship must be upheld, she was also crushed by the fear of death and breach of law. Under Movement Control Order (MCO), the Malaysian Government had set that everyone should stay at his or her current location to prevent Covid-19 from widely spreading (Sarifin & Yusoff, 2020) or be fined for non-compliance of MCO and causing others the possibilities of deaths. The writer and her mother-in-law were staying in different locations. Therefore, sending her and her maid from a different location to the writer’s house was without a doubt a breach of law and at the same time endangering more lives. It was an irony too since another reason of sending the mother and her maid to the writer’s house stemmed from the fear that they would infect the grandchildren who were staying in the house the former contracted Covid-19. At that time, the grandchildren were not yet fully vaccinated. In the writer’s narrative, she wrote, “I must admit that my feelings at this point in time were mixed. Despite having the filial affection towards my mother-in-law, I could not help but to be worried and angry -- all these came into play. I was worried because all this while we were hammered with the idea that Covid-19 could kill the ones infected and the ones staying close to them. To me, I had the right to be worried because if it was not out of worry, my mother-in-law and her maid would not be sent off to our house from another child’s for fear that they would infect the grandchildren who were not yet fully vaccinated. Then, what about my own life? Am I naturally immuned to Covid-19?”

Fear is a complex matter (Wolff et al., 2022). Different people experience fear differently as they fear contracting the disease, practising quarantine, curfew and social isolation, as well as experiencing the fear of death due to being contracted by this disease (Kus et al., 2022). As such, the writer could not blame her sister-in-law for sending the mother and maid as the latter feared so much for her children’s lives; for all that the writer too could not be blamed as she actually feared for her own life.

The pandemic is deadly and as deaths spread, the fear of deaths haunts many. The fear has led some family members to issuing moral pressures and filial piety into forcing other family members to accept some difficult decisions. Instead of issuing moral pressures, family members should have been supportive of each other and discuss well, and not telling off others, what needs to be done. This is consistent with the advice given by Kus et al (2022) that family members should plan and organize supportive programmes for the psychosocial diversities they experience. Blood is always thicker than water. Siblings may forget and forgive what is said to each other as blood ties bond them strongly together. But a person who comes into the family by marriage may not be able to digest those authoritative words well.

The Resilience

To Be at Peace at All Times and To Focus on One Thing at A Time

In her narrative, the writer conveyed that her fear of having to care for her mother-in-law and the maid who were down with Covid-19 had brought her to be torn between feeling enraged and consumed by it, and at the same time wanting not to be selfish but to be a dignified wife

and daughter-in-law. She was put under pressure by her own emotions. It was a real, deep struggle.

Luckily, she soon realized that the incident was not pre-planned but a God's test! It was a test on her to see how she must handle things well although unprepared she was. Although pre-planned projects and getting things organized came as second nature in her work, in real life events she had to expect the unexpected. If she were to be angry, it meant that she was angry at God.

She wrote that she could not let emotions win over her and that she must be resilient to bounce back. That is a way to engage fear as reported by (Kus et al., 2022). Although it was difficult, she tried telling herself that as a Muslim, she needed to be at peace at all times and in every situation, although the situation may be very exasperating.

As part of bouncing back, she had advised herself to assist her husband to pay attention to many other important things. One of them was to keep themselves strong physically and mentally and safe while caring for the Covid-19 victims. This is consistent with the findings by Alagamy et al (2022) that meeting old people's health needs requires great effort as they are the most vulnerable group for high morbidity and mortality from Covid-19 cases. Next, she also needed to concentrate on applying to her university to not go to campus while undergoing home-quarantine for becoming close contacts, setting up home office and completing all important tasks while working at home, getting enough face masks, and getting enough ration for medical essentials, house sanitizer and food during home-quarantine. These all consumed lots of time, energy and money but she could soon adjust to them by focusing on one thing at a time. She told herself to be realistic, and that it was all right not to be all right. This act is called acceptance-based coping (Polizzi et al., 2020) and psychological adjustment that enables one to be better pandemic-tolerant (Aggar, et al., 2022).

To Be Grateful, To Listen to Religious Talks and To Transform Pressure into a Positive Act

The writer narrated that she and her husband who were then caring for the sickly mother and the maid were lucky and grateful since their neighbours and friends were very generous to call and ask them whether they were fine, and some even sent breakfast, lunch and dinner while they were undergoing the quarantine period. This neighbourhood social and practical support is found to be of importance during Covid-19 pandemic (Ottoni et al., 2022). That somehow uplifted their sombre mood when both were tired and could be easily flooded by their own fury which needed just the right spark to start any unwanted explosion.

She also wrote that whenever she was exasperated, she tried to be resilient by switching on the YouTube channel and searched for many religious talks to watch and listen to so that the exasperation might be washed away. Talks by Mufti Menk and Omar Suleiman who are both famous and articulate Muslim leaders impacted her most when they conveyed in their talks that pressure, challenges and tests were part and parcel in life but despair not as these were only temporary. They added that if the pressure had brought ones closer to Allah, therefore, the pressure was actually the mercy of Him. The writer had also transformed the pressure she endured into a positive act when she analyzed further these Muslim leaders' talks and turned them into themes that were then published as journal articles (see Bakar, 2021; Bakar et al., 2021).

In Table 1, the pressure and fear the author experienced in the month of September, 2021 and the resilience she developed along the adversities are summarized.

Table 1

The Pressure, Fear and Resilience of a Language Educator during Covid-19 Pandemic

Codes	Theme
Bearing diverse roles	Pressure
Ensuring things go as planned	
Completing workload in too little time	
Experiencing an increase in work demands	
Fear of death	Fear
Fear of breach of law	
To be at peace at all times	Resilience
To focus on one thing at a time	
To be grateful	
To listen to religious talks	
To transform pressure into a positive act	

Conclusion

This study used autoethnography to understand the pressure, fear and resilience through the experiences of a language lecturer during the month of September, 2021 which happened to be her most hectic month and also the deadliest month since the Covid-19 pandemic began in Malaysia. The findings show that despite the pressure and struggle, and fear and anger that are encountered, there are resilience mechanisms that can be developed to fight off these resentments, bitterness, agony and the fear of death. It is very difficult to alienate each feeling as each is inseparably intertwined.

There are several contributions that can be made in this study. First, it is aimed at serving as a window for language educators and alike, administrators, policy makers, and many other stakeholders in the field of education to understand the kinds of workplace challenges and pressure which educators in general are fronting. Perhaps, by understanding this, educators can be helped to ease their burden and stress by giving them proper job descriptions, and ample and reasonable time for them to complete their workload. Secondly, it is aimed at family members to support each other through thick and thin, and to not dump responsibilities and force others to accept duties by blackmailing or using filial piety as an excuse. In this era when almost everyone is well educated and cultured, discussion among family members plays a better role than blackmailing and is much more appreciated. Thirdly, this study is aimed at helping the author specifically and others generally to realize that there are ways to be adopted to fight off the stress encountered at any point in time. The key is to try to maintain peace with oneself and understand that difficulty is not going to be there for long. The significance of knowing this will immensely help one to move forward during the crisis regardless of any triggers.

An important limitation of this autoethnography is that it is informed by the experiences of an individual language educator only. Thus, the data were quite limited both in its qualitative and geographical contexts. Therefore, caution must be taken in generalizing the findings.

The following step for future research would be to build upon the findings of this article by bringing in more language educators' voices to explore their experiences during Covid-19 to understand how they have withstood all the pressure, fought off the fear and been resilient to make it this far. These voices will inspire each other as we continue to live and deal with the struggle, now and beyond.

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