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Learned Helplessness of Secondary-School Students Learning English During Covid-19 Distance Education: a Research Report

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Abstract

Objectives of the research: This article presents a diagnosis of the learned helplessness experienced by secondary-school students learning English remotely during the 2021 lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives are to (1) show the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students learning English, (2) investigate the relationship between foreign language learning strategies and the learned helplessness of secondary-school students, and (3) determine the relationship between the level of learned helplessness and the use of private tutoring by secondary-school students.

Research methods: The study was conducted via a written diagnostic survey. It also employed the *School Helplessness Scale* by B. Ciżkowicz (2009) and the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* by R. Oxford (1990).

A short description of the context of the issue: The aim of the text is to answer the following research questions: What is the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students? Is there a relationship between foreign language learning strategies and the learned helplessness of secondary-school students? Does the use of private tutoring differentiate the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students?

Research findings: The results demonstrate a significant negative correlation between learned helplessness and the use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The average score of learned helplessness was 2.54, which indicates that the respondents usually felt the symptoms of it. An analysis of the results for the three deficits revealed that the motivational deficit made the greatest contribution to learned helplessness. The students who had hired a private tutor in English had a lower level of learned helplessness and cognitive deficit.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The research findings lead to several recommendations for educational practice in the context of foreign language learning: using new, effective pedagogical approaches to keep learners motivated—including elements of strategy training or social and emotional learning (SEL)—arranging remedial teaching, and promoting teachers’ professional development.

Keywords: distance education, COVID-19 pandemic, learned helplessness, foreign language strategies

Introduction

According to Britannica, distance learning is a “form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student–teacher and student–student communication” (Simonson & Berg, 2016). For Holmberg (1989, as cited in Gunawardena & Mclsaac, 2004), this concept

covers the learning-teaching activities in the cognitive and/or psychomotor and affective domains of an individual learner and a supporting organization. It is characterized by non-contiguous communication and can be carried out anywhere and at any time, which makes it attractive to adults with professional and social commitments. (p. 358)

Distance education encompasses various forms of learning, such as distance learning, open learning, networked learning, flexible learning,

distributed learning, and learning in a digitally connected space. This form of learning is also defined as “a structured learning experience that can be done away from an academic institution, at home or at a workplace” (Gunawardena & Mclsaac, 2004, p. 358). Definitions may differ depending on the distance education culture of each country, but there is some agreement on certain key elements: the separation of the teacher and the learner, the use of new technologies to link the teacher and the learner and to ensure a two-way exchange of communication, and the influence of an educational organization.

Due to the swift advancement of technology, courses using a variety of media have been delivered to learners in various locations, all in an attempt to meet the educational needs of growing populations. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this mode of education was an option that teachers could choose. However, in 2020 the spread of the virus disrupted onsite education in most countries all over the world. Thus, distance learning became the only viable form of education. In response to the new circumstances, many countries, including Poland, began to use various communication technologies that facilitate interaction between students and teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in formidable challenges to students’ psychological health. One example is the phenomenon of *learned helplessness*. It “occurs when someone attributes failure to a lack of ability and gives up easily or shows a steady regression in problem-solving strategies when confronted with failure” (Mecce & Painter, 2014, p. 349). This mental state is accompanied by behavioural changes called deficits. Cognitive deficit is characterized by an expectation of ineffectiveness when facing a new task or situation. Motivational deficit manifests itself in decreased motivation. Finally, emotional deficit relates to anxiety disorders, depression, anxiety, or withdrawal (Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Maier & Seligman, 1976, as cited in Ciżkowicz, 2009; see Kolber, 2022). In addition, students develop new strategies to learn effectively when faced with new situations. Oxford and Lavine (2018) use the term *language learning strategies* (LLSs) to refer to “purposeful mental actions (sometimes also manifested as observable behaviours) that a learner creatively implements to meet learning-related needs” (p. 5).

This research contributes to the discussion on distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in secondary education in Poland. It captures a unique moment in which secondary-school students completed a half-year of remote learning (see Kolber, 2022, p. 42). Framed by Martin Seligman's (1975) *Theory of Learned Helplessness* (see Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Maier & Seligman, 1976, as cited in Ciżkowicz) and Rebecca Oxford's (1990) *Foreign Language Strategies Taxonomy*, the article aims to 1) show the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students learning English, 2) investigate the relationship between foreign language learning strategies and the learned helplessness of secondary-school students, and 3) determine the relationship between the level of learned helplessness and the use of private tutoring by secondary-school students. Based on these objectives, the following research questions were formulated: What is the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students? Is there a relationship between foreign language learning strategies and the learned helplessness of secondary-school students? Does the use of private tutoring differentiate the level of learned helplessness of secondary-school students?

Problems faced in distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic – a literature review

Remote education started overnight because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools, kindergartens, and universities did not manage to prepare for this sudden change. In the literature review presented below, numerous problems faced by students, parents, and teachers in distance education during the COVID-19 period are discussed. The factors that might have led to learned helplessness were expressed by students as well as parents and teachers. An analysis of the narratives revealed repeated exposure to challenging working, living, and learning conditions. Moreover, it was found that there is little room to develop learning strategies in the virtual COVID-19 classroom.

Teachers' perspective

In research carried out in Poland, as many as 85% of surveyed teachers declared having no experience with remote teaching prior to the pandemic. Only a few (15%) had had contact with this form of learning before. Moreover, their experiences were poor and amounted to “individual consultations with students via Zoom, Skype, Messenger, etc.; active and passive participation in webinars, workshops and e-learning courses, supporting lessons and school clubs (sending students links to additional materials)” (Buchner et al., 2020, p. 5).

A lack of IT skills and adequate knowledge of how to deliver distance learning using technology during the school closures was reflected in the teachers' didactic methods. In their virtual classrooms, teachers focused mainly on teacher-centred transmission models of teaching, for instance, uploading videos and giving presentations. Unfortunately, such methods are aimed at presenting and verifying knowledge rather than active involving the students, problem-solving, or group work (Ptaszek et al., 2020, p. 66).

Parents' perspective

A study conducted in the first months of remote education (April 2020) reports that parents mainly complained of general fatigue, their child's fatigue (72.1%), their child's difficulties in getting down to studying (58.6%), excessive burden to help their child learn (57.6%), difficulties motivating their child to study at home (52.9%), uneven study load (49.4%), and general study overload (49%) (Całek, 2021, p. 22). The analysis of parents' responses to an open-ended survey demonstrated that during the pandemic, schools shifted a large part of the responsibility onto students and parents. The parents, in turn, were not always able to help the children, due not only to their usual professional duties (often performed remotely), but also to their lack of relevant subject knowledge (Całek, 2021).

The feeling of helplessness made some parents turn to professional help for their children. Research conducted on 502 eighth-grade elementary-school students learning remotely suggests that private English classes were the most popular: 185 of the respondents (36.85%) claimed to have had a(11.75%) took on a tutor for Polish (Kolber, 2022).

Students' perspective

A study conducted by Marek et al. revealed the difficulties of university students, as reported by their lecturers during the abrupt shift to distance learning. Some comments expressed by faculty members provide evidence that the students adapted well, but others point to some dysfunctional behaviour. According to the lecturers, students were unable to take control of and responsibility for their own learning. They struggled to manage their learning process. Some lecturers also noted that most students were not as tech-savvy as was commonly believed, because they seemed unable to transfer and use their technological knowledge in a distance learning environment (2021). private English tutor. Students must have also experienced learning difficulties in other subjects, as 141 eighth-grade students (28.09%) claimed to have used tutors for mathematics and 59 students

Another study confirmed a significant decline in adolescents' subjective well-being. Eighteen percent of young people felt much worse and 30% of teenagers felt a little worse three months after the school closures than prior to the lockdowns (Ptaszek et al., 2020, p. 84). Students were not motivated enough to learn and they were angry with teachers for giving them too many assignments. Their anger translated into fear that they would not meet deadlines or master the material. Moreover, adolescents were reluctant to turn their cameras on because they were ashamed by their appearance (Ptaszek et al., 2020, p. 29).

The emotional functioning of students learning remotely in the COVID-19 pandemic is perfectly illustrated by the study conducted by Kolber (2022). The most important finding was that the highest level of learned helplessness among eighth-grade elementary-school students learning remotely was recorded for mathematics, slightly lower for Polish and the lowest for English. In addition, the motivational deficit made the greatest contribution to the sense of helplessness (Kolber, 2022). However, this study did not cover higher levels of education (secondary school) or fully explain what should be done to reduce or prevent learned helplessness.

Method

Procedure

Only those secondary schools that accepted the invitation participated in the study. Participation in the study was approved by the school management, who could also consult the parents' council and/or the pedagogical council. In some institutions, the management appointed a school coordinator (e.g., a psychologist or school counsellor), who supervised the course of the study. The anonymous online questionnaires were disseminated and collected between March and April 2021.

Participants

The data were collected from 569 students learning English in secondary schools in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, including 206 boys and 363 girls (Table 1). Of these students, 354 (62.21%) attended general secondary schools, while the remaining 215 (37.79%) were students at technical and art schools. Regarding the level of education, the sample consisted of 165 (29%) first-year students (named according to the new structure¹), 181 (31.81%) second-year students (according to the old structure), 81 (14.24%) second-year students (new naming convention), and 142 (24.96%) third-year students (old naming convention).

¹ The *old structure* of the education system, which came into force in 1999, divided the educational process into six years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*), and either four years of general secondary school, five years of technical secondary school, or three years of vocational school. The educational reform of 2017 changed this structure to eight years of primary school and either four years of secondary school, five years of technical (vocational) secondary school, or three years of vocational school (stage I) and two years of vocational school (stage II). Between the 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 school years, Polish secondary schools saw a double cohort, consisting of students being taught according to both structures. In the 2020/2021 school year, only first-, second-, and third-year students were available for the study. Therefore, fourth- and fifth-year students were naturally excluded. The description of the research sample and Table 1 include two naming conventions according to the new and old structures.

Instruments

The respondents were asked to fill in an anonymous questionnaire online. In Part A, the following instruments were used: the *School Helplessness Scale* (Ciżkowicz, 2009; see Kolber, 2019, 2022) and the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Version 7.0* (Oxford, 1990; see Kolber, 2015, 2019, 2021). The former contains 20 items assessing the level of learned helplessness along with its three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and motivational deficit. The latter instrument includes 50 items comprising six strategy groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The respondents were asked to indicate the strength of their agreement with the statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always).² In Part B, the respondents were asked to fill in demographic information. This section provided information on the research sample (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' demographic information (N=569)

Type of school	General secondary school	354 (62.21%)
	Technical and art schools	215 (37.79%)
Gender	Male	363 (63.80%)
	Female	206 (36.20%)
Educational stage	1st year (after elementary school)	165 (29.00%)
	2nd year (after lower secondary school)	181 (31.81%)
	2nd year (after elementary school)	81 (14.24%)
	3rd year (after lower secondary school)	142 (24.96%)
Are you planning to study English philology?	Yes	20 (3.51%)
	No	339 (59.58%)
	I don't know	149 (26.19%)
	I am not planning to study at all	61 (10.72%)
Does your mother have a working knowledge of English?	Yes	245 (43.06%)
	No	324 (56.94%)
Does your father have a working knowledge of English?	Yes	258 (45.34%)
	No	311 (54.66%)
Have you been taking private lessons in English during distance learning?	Yes	154 (27.07%)
	No	415 (72.93%)

² Detailed information on the two instruments is provided in Kolber (2019).

Results

Level of learned helplessness

The *School Helplessness Scale* assesses the level of learned helplessness as well as its deficits. The average score of learned helplessness in the study group was 2.54 (rounded up to 3), meaning that the respondents usually felt learned helplessness. An analysis of the results for the three deficits revealed that motivational deficit made the greatest contribution to learned helplessness, with a value of 2.65. Emotional deficit was in second place, with a value of 2.60. Cognitive deficit made the smallest contribution to learned helplessness, with a mean value of 2.27 (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the *School Helplessness Scale* (N=569)

School Helplessness Scale	M	SD	Mdn	Min	Max	Q1	Q3
General helplessness	2.54	0.65	2.50	1.05	4.8	2.05	3.00
Emotional deficit	2.60	1.02	2.43	1.00	5.0	1.86	3.29
Cognitive deficit	2.27	0.79	2.20	1.00	5.0	1.80	2.80
Motivational deficit	2.65	0.77	2.62	1.00	5.0	2.12	3.12

Relationship between foreign language learning strategies and learned helplessness

To examine the strength of the relationship between learned helplessness and foreign language strategies, Pearson's linear correlation coefficient was used. The level of helplessness correlated significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively ($r < 0$) with the use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The emotional deficit correlated significantly ($p < 0.05$) and positively ($r > 0$) with the use of affective strategies. Thus, the more frequent their use, the higher the emotional deficit. Emotional deficit correlated significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively ($r < 0$) with the use of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. The more often these strategy groups are used, the lower the emotional deficit. Cognitive deficit was found to correlate significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively ($r < 0$) with the use

of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies. This means that the more frequent their use, the lower the cognitive deficit. The motivational deficit correlated significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively ($r < 0$) with the use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between language learning strategy groups and learned helplessness and its deficits

	General level of helplessness	Emotional deficit	Cognitive deficit	Motivational deficit
Memory strategies	$r = -0.303, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.053, p = 0.204$	$r = -0.201, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.443, p < 0.001 *$
Cognitive strategies	$r = -0.473, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.232, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.555, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.387, p < 0.001 *$
Compensation strategies	$r = -0.074, p = 0.077$	$r = -0.043, p = 0.305$	$r = -0.213, p < 0.001 *$	$r = 0.016, p = 0.711$
Metacognitive strategies	$r = -0.475, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.195, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.52, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.46, p < 0.001 *$
Affective strategies	$r = -0.09, p = 0.031 *$	$r = 0.131, p = 0.002 *$	$r = -0.056, p = 0.183$	$r = -0.29, p < 0.001 *$
Social strategies	$r = -0.365, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.149, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.359, p < 0.001 *$	$r = -0.376, p < 0.001 *$

* statistical significance ($p < 0.05$)

The research shows that the strongest relationships involve metacognitive and cognitive strategies. One can assume that these strategy groups determine the level of helplessness to the greatest extent. This implies that helpless students may lack the skills to manipulate and transform the target language as well as to coordinate their learning process.

Relationship between private tutoring and the level of learned helplessness

The values of the quantitative variables in the two groups were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. P values of < 0.05 indicated statistically significant correlations. The general level of helplessness was significantly higher in those students who did not use private English tutoring compared to those who got such assistance. One can conclude that private tutoring supports cognitive and emotional processes in students.

Similarly, in their wide-range investigation, Bray et al. (2013, as cited in Türkan, 2022) showed that private tutoring positively affects students’ motivation. Private tutoring appears to be a phenomenon which maintains and increases social inequalities. Research indicates that students from more affluent backgrounds tend to participate more in private tutoring than students with a lower socioeconomic status. The explanations provided by Zwier et al. (2021) are that rich parents “are not only better equipped to pay for these supplementary learning activities, but also have more knowledge on how educational institutions work and are more intensively involved in their children’s educational career” (p. 412).

Although no statistically significant differences were found, it is worth adding that both motivational and emotional deficits were also higher in students who did not hire tutors than in students who did. These research findings suggest that students who had a private tutor might have fewer symptoms of emotional and motivational deficits of learned helplessness. Table 4 shows the distribution of perceived helplessness and its deficits according to the use of private tutoring.

Table 4. Distribution of learned helplessness among students learning English and its deficits, by the use of private tutoring

School Helplessness Scale		Have you been using private tutoring in English during remote learning?		p
		Yes (N=154)	No (N=415)	
Learned helplessness	M±SD	2.39±0.54	2.59±0.68	p=0.004 *
	Mdn	2.35	2.55	
	Q	1.95–2.84	2.05–3.05	
Emotional deficit	M±SD	2.48±0.94	2.64±1.05	p=0.154
	Mdn	2.43	2.57	
	Q	1.86–3.00	1.79–3.43	
Cognitive deficit	M±SD	2.04±0.69	2.36±0.81	p<0.001 *
	Mdn	2	2.2	
	Q	1.60–2.40	1.80–2.80	
Motivational deficit	M±SD	2.54±0.74	2.69±0.78	p=0.077
	Mdn	2.5	2.62	
	Q	2.00–3.00	2.12–3.12	

* statistical significance ($p < 0.05$)

Discussion and pedagogical implications

The research proves that there is a relationship between learned helplessness and the use of foreign language strategies. The more strategies students use, the lower their level of helplessness. This research finding drew attention to the importance of a paradigm shift away from teacher-centred toward student-centred learning. A learner-centred approach requires new roles from the teacher, who is expected to be, among other things, a helper and a guide in raising students' awareness of their learning strategies. Although language learning strategies have been of interest to researchers for several decades, most research findings do not apply to language learning. Gu (2018) calls for promoting and implementing strategies into school curricula:

Researchers on LLS should do more teacher/learner-friendly research. This involves making research results more readable to classroom teachers and learners. More practice textbooks should be published aiming at integrating LLS research findings into real teaching and learning situations. Teacher-friendly research also involves teachers being encouraged to do their action research by trying out different ways of LLS intervention. (p. 161)

Secondly, various tools such as questionnaires, observation sheets, and task-specific diagnostic instruments should be made available to the teacher. Another way of promoting LLS is to build them into teacher training programs, so that student teachers and full-time teachers begin to trust research findings rather than their own folk knowledge or teaching experiences (Gu, 2018).

In line with the research findings, the emphasis should be on memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. According to Rebecca Oxford's *Foreign Language Strategies Taxonomy* (1990), these strategy groups include certain strategy subgroups. Memory strategies include creating mental links, applying images and sound, reviewing properly, and employing action; cognitive strategies comprise practising, receiving

and sending messages, analysing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output; the metacognitive strategy group include centring ones' learning, arranging and planning learning, and evaluating learning; affective strategies consist of lowering anxiety, self-encouragement, and taking the emotional temperature; social strategies include asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathising with others (see Kolber 2015, 2019, 2021).

Another recommendation for post-COVID teaching methodology is to emphasize active learning. This can be done by enhancing teaching and learning with technology. Digital education resources need to be rethought as not merely methods of instruction, but a vehicle to change the educational paradigm from assuming that all learning happens the same way to focusing on lifelong learning and preparing students for an ever-changing world (Alemán de la Garza et al., 2019). One promising pedagogy that helps students "learn to learn" is flipped learning. Teachers wishing to use this pedagogical approach must incorporate four pillars into their practice: a flexible environment, a learning culture, intentional content, and a professional educator. The first element, *flexible environment*, means adaptable classroom settings. Students do not sit in row after row of desks. On the contrary, their desks are rearranged so that they can move around, work in groups, or learn independently. Educators who use flipped learning are obliged to establish physical space and time frames that allow students to discuss and reflect on their learning. Flipped learning is based on learner-centred education and thus offers a different *learning culture*. The core of a learner-centred culture is to assist and guide each student's learning rather than provide a one-way delivery of information. *Intentional content*, the third element of flipped learning, means that students are given an opportunity to ask and answer authentic questions and to work on authentic tasks. As a result, students are actively engaged in knowledge construction because they participate in the learning process in a meaningful way. Finally, a teacher who uses the flipped learning model should assume the role of a *professional educator*. This role is definitely more challenging than teaching in a traditional classroom. Professional educators continually observe their

students, providing them with immediate feedback assessing their work. They are also reflective practitioners willing to connect with each other and to accept constructive criticism to improve their teaching (Sams et al., 2014).

The study shows that tutoring might be highly effective in preventing learned helplessness. The students who had private tutors were characterized by less learned helplessness than those who did not have such assistance. Brzezińska and Appelt claim that students need tutor-teachers with clearly defined roles who are highly aware of the tasks to be accomplished in the educational relationship. The tutor-teacher is needed by the student as a source of (1) boundaries, (2) cognitive and social requirements and challenges that stimulate the student's development, and (3) a sense of competence and satisfaction with school achievements (2013).

Tutor-teachers should target their tutees' real-life goals. Students know precisely what kind of help they need. However, these needs can be very short-term. Therefore, it is very important for the tutor to be able to respond to new, immediate concerns. Secondly, tutors should constantly explore students' understanding of the material. To this end, they constantly need to investigate students' prior knowledge in detail. Last but not least, support needs to be balanced. On the one hand, an excess of control can lead to a deep dependence on the teacher. On the other hand, insufficient control may mean leaving the student on their own in their struggles. The purpose of tutoring is to help the student until they can use new skills and strategies on their own. This means a gradual decrease in assistance and a gradual increase in student autonomy (Topping, 2000, pp. 9–10). Miller (2015) claims that certain types of questions may promote independent learning and develop metacognition. Using questions such as "What else could you try? Have you experimented with another idea? Why do you think that?" will probe students' thinking and encourage them to think about their learning.

Conclusions

The results show that secondary-school students usually felt learned helplessness during English classes. Moreover, motivational deficit made the greatest contribution to learned helplessness. The level of helplessness correlated significantly and negatively with the use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The strongest relationships were between learned helplessness and metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Those students whose parents took on a private tutor had a lower level of learned helplessness. These research findings lead to several recommendations for educational practice:

1. Include elements of strategy training in the school curriculum. Special emphasis should be placed on memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.
2. Promote teachers' professional development by creating training schools, where both student-teachers and in-service teachers could broaden their knowledge on strategy training and tutoring in education.
3. Use new, effective pedagogical approaches or methods to keep learners motivated and engaged in the learning process (e.g., flipped learning).
4. Teach digital competencies to educators. This is essential for the development of necessary skills in the post-pandemic educational landscape, in which teachers need to design cognitively engaging didactic materials for the virtual classroom.
5. Bridge the gap between students by arranging remedial teaching at school. Extra care or attention should be delivered to low-income students who fall behind with their studies and whose parents cannot afford a tutor.
6. Last but not least, embrace the concept of social and emotional learning (SEL). Research conducted in low- and middle-income nations focuses on declines in academic learning (e.g., literacy and numeracy) due to the pandemic. It is crucial to note that schools play

a pivotal role in fostering social and emotional development and that school closures have impacted students' emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and social skills. By supporting students' SEL, they can improve their mental health and well-being and, in the long run, adapt to new circumstances. Moreover, educators must become skilled at adjusting to an unstable, rapidly changing educational environment. Experts offer the following practical ways to introduce and broaden the use of SEL practices in the classrooms:

a) assess students and teacher's social and emotional needs; b) establish community and a sense of belonging; c) establish and maintain relationships between students, teachers, and staff to promote a positive learning environment; d) create space for students to conduct self-reflections and recognize/identify their thoughts and emotions; e) promote self-care and stress management. (Social-Emotional Learning, 2022)

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