

INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS PRACTICES IN EFL/ESL: ENHANCING TEACHER AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Mindfulness is becoming a popular practice around the world, due to the myriad benefits it offers. Although mindfulness has been applied in educational contexts, the emphasis on the role of mindfulness in language learning is still inadequate. For this literature synthesis, a search was conducted using Google Scholar to identify empirical and conceptual papers on mindfulness applied in EFL/ESL contexts. Studies identified in this review indicated that higher mindfulness among students was associated with favorable outcomes on general measures such as mental wellbeing, resilience, stress, and anxiety, and specific learning-related outcomes such as higher engagement, critical and reflective thinking, better cognitive abilities, as well as lower anxiety in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, leading to better scores on language tests. Better teacher outcomes fostered by mindfulness included psychological wellbeing, coping skills, emotional competence, and work engagement. Mindfulness also promotes better student-teacher interactions. Based on the findings of this review, it can be recommended that integrating mindfulness practices such as breathing exercises and guided meditations would benefit both students and teachers.

Keywords: ESL; EFL; language learning; teaching; mindfulness

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Introduction

Mindfulness is a concept that has grown in popularity immensely over the last several decades (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021). When the concept of mindfulness is concerned, Kabat-Zinn (1990), an American professor who is a prominent figure in the field of mindfulness studies, defines mindfulness as the full attention to the experiences of every present moment and the non-judgmental acceptance of all those experiences. Empirical studies provide evidence to support the notion that mindfulness has positive impacts on various domains, gaining the attention of scholars worldwide: a substantial number of meta-analyses have emerged supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in reducing psychological distress, most notably anxiety and depression, and improving well-being and quality of life in a broad range of populations (Khoury, et al. 2015; Chiesa & Serretti, 2011). Simultaneously, scholarly interest in the applications of mindfulness in the context of education has also grown in the recent years. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Klingbeil et al. (2017) depicts that mindfulness positively impacts learning outcomes, meta-cognition, cognitive pressure, academic interest, and attention (Weare, 2019, as cited in Lesmana, 2022). Furthermore, Zhang & Zou (2022) have highlighted the positive influence of mindfulness on work happiness, stress management (Fisher et al., 2019), and inhibitory control (Logemann & Molnár et al., 2022). Moreover, Zenner et al. (2014) argue that mindfulness-based interventions in schools can be regarded as a promising approach.

The terms English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are used interchangeably in the field of English language Teaching, but these terms do have distinct focuses in language teaching: To briefly provide an insight, when EFL is concerned, learning English takes place in countries where English is not considered as a primary language. Then, ESL refers to teaching English to non-native speakers of English where English is a primary language. Essentially, ESOL can be considered as an umbrella term that encompasses both EFL and ESL, covering teaching English to non-native speakers in any context, whether they belong to an English-speaking country or not.

Learning in general comes with a set of challenges to both student and teacher. These challenges can lead to certain difficulties and hindrances in learning - especially for language learning. Out of the challenges that students undergo in language learning, one could assert that the challenges regarding retaining attention, focus and concentration play a crucial role. The empirical literature provides evidence that anxiety in general and the anxiety related to language learning can hinder language proficiency development of students: Ariani et al. (2017) and Umisara et al. (2023) argue that high levels of anxiety is debilitating, obstructing language learning process by becoming a barrier to overcome challenges in language development. Moreover, research suggests that the students' attitudes towards learning the language, the level of motivation they have, and sociocultural factors can greatly affect the process of language learning (Alqahtani, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2018; Burgos & Pérez, 2015). In addition, it is known that anxiety is a major affective factor that hinders learning in general: Gunawardena et al. (2017) argue that medium to high anxiety levels can cause serious issues in the education of students including lower academic achievement due to demotivation to learn, impaired learning capacity, and the possibility of dropping out of school. Nonetheless, the general anxiety or academic stress experienced in the context of education can be regarded as a natural phenomenon too: Ledford et al. (2013) posit that uncertainty about academic expectations can contribute to learner anxiety by making academic activities during placement tests challenging.

With regard to foreign language learning, excessive anxiety or stress can be observed and identified as a hindrance to language acquisition: According to Swanson (2013), high levels of anxiety such as

performance anxiety can act as an affective filter, hindering the intake of comprehensible input that is necessary for language learning. This is theoretically validated under Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Further, Rahman et al. (2021) also state that stress is accountable for a high affective filter that follows low input and causes poor performance in language learning. In addition, the ambient learning environment evidently play a role in language learning process: Srisopha (2022) claims that the student achievement in language learning can be affected by factors such as method of instruction, classroom environment, attitudes towards language learning, and student availability. Further, it is essential for the learners to have a better rapport and interaction with their teachers in order to have a learning mindset with right attitudes: Several studies have shown that greater classroom participation and more interaction between teachers and students are beneficial to students' English learning (Xiang et al., 2023). This can provide the students with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation which is necessary for language learning: "[...] students need motivation to help them learning English, they should establish the right goal to enhance them learning English well" (Long et al., 2013).

On the contrary, teachers also face various challenges within the teaching and learning process. Liu & Wu (2021) argue that English teachers, especially English as a foreign language teachers experience teaching anxiety and foreign language anxiety due to factors such as English proficiency, workload, classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and dearth of educational resources. Furthermore, Muchtar et al. (2020) assert that this anxiety that teachers experience may arise from their worries and concerns about their proficiency in English and teaching skills. In addition, emotional demands of teaching English including meeting parental expectations, pressure to comply with educational policies, and varied perspectives of language, education and syllabus can contribute greatly to emotional strain of English teachers (Deng et al., 2023). Depending on the empirical data, one could argue that the psychological distress, anxiety, and lack of confidence can impact teacher-student relationship, thereby hindering the desired outcomes of teaching and learning process.

Addressing the above-mentioned issues experienced by both teachers and students require gradual identification of the issues and implementation of possible remedies. One effective solution is integrating mindfulness practices into the teaching and learning process. Empirical data depicts a positive interconnection between mindfulness, and academic/professional development. Thus, this study makes an effort to identify the potential benefits of mindfulness-based interventions in improving teacher and student outcomes in the ESL/EFL context.

Methodology

An electronic search was performed on Google Scholar to extract relevant studies. The search strategy used keywords related to English language learning-teaching (e.g. 'EFL', 'ESL' and 'TESOL') along with 'mindfulness.' In order to contextualize the findings within educational principles, a general search on the applications of mindfulness in education, and then on language learning, was conducted. The abstracts were reviewed and relevant articles were identified. The full papers of the selected studies were read and relevant information was extracted.

Results and Discussion

Mindfulness in Education

It is evident in the empirical literature that mindfulness has drawn attention to its implications in various fields including education and healthcare sector. According to Ergas (2019), several studies have identified three key roles of mindfulness in education: mindfulness in, as and of education, emphasizing its significance and versatility in educational settings. Moreover, Moafian et al. (2019) claim that psychological phenomena such as mindfulness play a significant role, and is inseparable from the

process of language learning. In support of this notion, Dr. Ellen Langer, who can be identified as an expert in the application of mindfulness in the field of linguistics, proposed an influential theory known as mindful learning theory that can be conducive to second language learning (Langer, 1997).

According to Langer (2000), mindfulness is “a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context. Being mindful leads us to greater sensitivity to context and perspective, and ultimately to greater control over our lives”. Thus, one could argue that mindfulness is directly related to fostering a flexible mindset and improving focus and concentration required in second language learning. Moreover, in the above-mentioned theory, Langer argues that if the learners apply mindfulness in the process of language learning, they tend to utilize creativity, experience and use mental adaptability and flexibility, and gain the ability to better use of information (Langer et al., 1989; Thornton & McEntee, 1995). Moreover, according to Langerian mindfulness, novelty seeking, novelty producing, engagement and flexibility are identified as the four major elements in conceptualizing the notion of mindfulness in educational settings (Langer, 2004). Moafian et al. (2019) assert that these four elements can facilitate second language learning.

Furthermore, there is emerging evidence that integration of mindfulness-based interventions in education settings is associated with improved academic performance, and enhanced overall well-being of students (Carroll, 2023). In addition, mindfulness practices are identified to increase social and emotional factors of students: it is observed that mindfulness meditation fosters the executive functioning of children, i.e., the skills that are crucial in academic performance and social–emotional wellbeing (Koncz et al., 2021). Further, it is evident in the empirical literature that school-based mindfulness programs have exhibited positive effects in enhancing cognitive and affective functioning of students (Broderick & Schussler, 2021). To add, incorporating mindfulness practices in the teaching and learning process benefits both teachers and students because mindfulness practices and training can help teachers alleviate their stress and thereby improving effective interaction between them and students (Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012).

Impact of mindfulness on student outcomes

Numerous studies and meta-analyses indicate that mindfulness programs may have positive effects on a variety of student outcomes, across different age levels. Among school children, mindfulness practice reduces stress and depressive symptoms (Felder et al., 2016; Kuyken et al., 2013; Zenner et al., 2014), improves positive mental health (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016) and promotes psychological wellbeing (Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Kuyken et al., 2013). Additionally, mindfulness boosts adaptive coping strategies (Sheinman et al., 2018) and enhances resilience among students (Felder et al., 2019). Positive affect measures, such as happiness and optimism are also promoted through mindfulness programs (de Carvalho et al., 2017). Mindfulness training also supports social-emotional learning (SEL) (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Some SEL curricula such as the MindUP programme have been primarily based on mindfulness-based interventions (Maloney et al., 2016). Similar benefits of mindfulness have been observed among university students (Dawson et al., 2020).

Mindfulness training is linked to improvements in cognitive functions among students. Improvements in executive functioning (Janz, Dawe, & Wyllie, 2019), attention, and other aspects of cognition (Dunning et al., 2019; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Maynard et al., 2015) have been reported. In addition, mindfulness is recognized to enhance student engagement, effectiveness in information processing and organization, and self-construction of knowledge related to English language learning through techniques like mind mapping (Anggraini, 2023; Luangkrajang, 2022). As cognitive functions are

crucial for successful engagement in academic activities including test performance, mindfulness can be expected to improve the academic achievement of students.

The impact of mindfulness on student outcomes specifically in the context of EFL has been studied by many researchers. Several studies have focused on foreign language anxiety in EFL settings. Charoensukmongkol (2019) observed that Thai students who reported higher levels of trait and state mindfulness while speaking English experienced lower anxiety during their presentations. Fallah (2016) conducted a similar study regarding the impact of mindfulness on English language anxiety and found that higher levels of mindfulness correlated strongly with lower language anxiety. Other studies have found evidence of beneficial effects of mindfulness on anxiety related to reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the EFL context (Alsharhani et al., 2023; Ersanlı et al., 2022; Wang & Liu, 2016; Zhao et al. 2022).

Studies also suggest that higher mindfulness may be associated with better reflective thinking and critical thinking abilities in EFL settings (Wang & Liu, 2016; Moghadam, 2022). Research findings also indicate that mindfulness is linked to greater creativity among young EFL learners (Cheng, 2023). Furthermore, Wang and Liu (2016) observed that “mindful writing helped students generate new thoughts and become aware of their thinking; mindfulness facilitated their learning process, and cultivated creativity and intelligence; mindful cooperative learning provided students with an opportunity to discover their awareness, learn from others, reflect and think critically”.

Empirical literature provides support for the benefits of mindfulness on language learning performance outcomes. Higher mindfulness has been linked to better performance on reading comprehension tasks in many studies (Sheikhzadeh et al., 2017; Alsharhani et al., 2023). Similarly, mindfulness has been associated with better vocabulary retention (Zeilhofer et al. 2022), public speaking performance (Charoensukmongkol, 2019), and writing competency (Saputra et al. 2020). These and other studies suggest that mindfulness promotes academic achievement in the EFL classroom (Zeilhofer, 2023).

Impact of Mindfulness on Teachers

It is evident that language teachers are required to be motivated to teach with the right mindset and attitudes: that is, teachers are expected to be mentally fit to teach students. This notion is evident in empirical studies: Ting & Gilmore (2012) assert that positive attitudes of teachers are linked to better outcomes of English language learning students. Furthermore, Song & He (2021) argue that mindfulness is beneficial to teachers in maintaining a positive outlook in challenging situations related to teaching. Then, a study by Peiris et al. (2022) demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between mindfulness of teachers and classroom climate in TESL context of Sri Lanka. In addition, Li (2022) assert that mindfulness is a predictor of work engagement for EFL teachers by emphasizing the significance of its benefit in teaching and learning context.

Zhao (2024) emphasizes the efficacy of integrating mindfulness meditation in improving English language learning skills by enhancing student motivation and confidence. Thus, one could argue that incorporating mindfulness practices into the language teaching process allows teachers to be more aware of the students' needs and behaviors. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, teachers face various issues regarding their mental well-being in the process of teaching- including work stress and anxiety. Research suggests that mindfulness training programs can assist teachers to cope with challenging and stressful situations they face in their profession (Napoli, 2004). According to Cicek and Gurbuz (2023), EFL teachers undergoing mindfulness training experience positive changes in their teaching, find it easier to cope with stressors effectively both in class and out of class, and led to improved student-

teacher interactions and less conflict in the class. In addition, empirical studies indicate that incorporating mindfulness practices into the teaching practice can lead to reduced stress, burnout and increased efficacy in teaching (Flook et al., 2013). Luken & Sammons (2016) also suggest that mindfulness practices are linked to decreased job burnout among educators.

Moreover, it is important for teachers to have a positive, hopeful and motivated mindset to effectively engage in the teaching process. Garner et al. (2018) argue that mindfulness elevates emotional competence of teachers leading to positive emotional experience in teaching. In addition, Huang (2022) further states that mindful and compassionate training is linked to equipping EFL teachers with skills to foster a joyful learning environment by exhibiting understanding and providing assistance to learners with their learning needs, whilst inspiring learners to be courageous and joyful in the learning process.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Mindful L2 Teacher Education (introduced by Johnson & Golombek, 2016) into their professional development can assist ESL teachers in conceiving and delivering their duties in a more creative manner (Shufflebarger et al., 2021). According to Luo & Huang (2018), the multiple intelligences (MI) theory has been extensively utilized in literacy education and ESL teaching context under curriculum development and instructional strategies. They further argue that MI may depend on motivational and contextual factors related to instructional settings. Thus, one could argue that mindfulness can potentially increase MI related to teaching strategies, if carefully incorporated into teaching process.

Mindfulness strategies for the EFL classroom

Mindfulness-based interventions or strategies tested specifically in the ESL/EFL context are few. In addition to generic stress reduction methods such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness has been adapted to the education setting as well (Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018). In general, mindfulness training involves a variety of techniques to direct learners' conscious attention to the present moment of learning; this frees their learning channels from anxiety related to past negative learning experiences and future anticipation of failure. Included among these techniques are breathing exercises (i.e., mindful breathing, square breathing), guided sitting meditations, body scan, simple exercises rooted in Yoga, visualization meditations, journaling and gratitude practices.

Gönen (2022) has suggested sample tasks to assist EFL teachers to integrate mindfulness practices into the teaching and learning process. He endorses breathing techniques such as rainbow breathing, and worm breathing, and guided meditation practices which can be used at various parts of the lessons or tests (i.e., before the lesson starts, during the transitions, when unexpected negative experiences happen, at the end of a lesson, before language tests, etc.). In addition, Gönen (2022) proposes 'mindfulness-based language tasks' to practice language skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing with a mindful attitude. Jenkins (2015) has shown the usefulness of three minutes of mindfulness meditation practices in language teaching as a classroom management technique, facilitating vocabulary learning, and promoting calmer and more diligent learning by lowering the sensory filter.

Although not validated specifically in ESL/EFL contexts, mindfulness-based interventions tailored for educators have been introduced, namely, SMART-in-Education, Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), and Cultivating Emotional Balance Training (CEBT). A meta-analysis of the effects of these programs on teacher outcomes suggested that they had small-to-medium positive effects on therapeutic processes and therapeutic outcomes. Effects on measures of classroom climate and instructional practices were modest.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Mindfulness leads to a variety of benefits for those who practice it. Applications of mindfulness in educational settings have become a recent trend. Along with this trend, research has recently begun to explore the potential uses and benefits of mindfulness practices in the ESL/EFL context. Studies identified in this literature review indicate that mindfulness practices may benefit both students and teachers in various ways. There is evidence that mindfulness reduces foreign language anxiety among students, increases engagement in the ESL/EFL classroom, fosters creativity and critical thinking, and improves cognitive functions that are required for learning, such as attention and executive functions. There is also evidence that students with higher mindfulness do better academically. Teachers also appear to benefit from mindfulness practices which improve their psychological wellbeing, coping skills, and emotional competence, and fosters work engagement; mindfulness also reduces stress, anxiety and burnout among teachers. Consequently, teacher-student interactions and classroom climate improve. However, most studies identified in the literature survey were cross-sectional studies; more longitudinal and interventional studies are required to generate stronger evidence.

It can be recommended that mindfulness practices be integrated into the existing ESL/EFL curricula. Practicing brief mindfulness meditations and breathing exercises at the beginning of a lesson, during breaks and before language tests would be helpful for students. Providing training in mindfulness for teachers would be essential in delivering the interventions to students. Efforts should be made to create an EFL environment where both the students and the teacher practice mindfulness regularly.

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