

# Integrating Mindfulness into EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

Along with the trend of using English as the medium of instruction (EMI) for learning academic subjects, and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning methodology), it seems that many students are under more pressure and stress in learning English itself. This is not only because they are no longer learning English just as a foreign language anymore but also because it has gradually become the key to understanding their academic subjects, which are sometimes not easy to understand even in their own native languages. Meanwhile, EFL teachers are often in a quandary, trapped between the expectations of the school and the reality of their students' true English levels. Teachers are particularly stressed when they have to manage classes with mixed or very low English levels. Therefore, in order to have a more positive energy circulating in the class and to help both teachers and students to sustain their motivation for teaching and learning, it is becoming more important to consider practising mindfulness in the EFL classrooms. Implementing mindfulness will reduce both teachers' and students' stress and also help students greatly to pay more attention to their learning process and discover how to be more creative and productive for better achievement.

## Keywords

Mindfulness, EMI, CLIL, EFL teachers, motivation for learners and teachers, internationalization of universities, English education

## Introduction

According to Nikkei (2014), in a survey of self-assessment conducted among young people aged 13 to 29 across 7 countries, - Japan, Korea, USA, UK, Germany, France and Sweden-, the result showed that young Japanese people have a very low self-assessment and are not confident about themselves. In addition, a survey conducted by Adecco (2017) also shows that young Japanese, aged 18 to 30, are less confident than those in other countries. It is not just about learning English, but also about many

things in general. Young people tend to have a negative image of themselves and it certainly influences their motivation and attitude toward learning and many other things in their daily life. In this paper, I would first like to explain what mindfulness is about. Then I will explain why it is important and relevant to building our EFL classroom environment, and share my thoughts about its benefits. As a reference for future teacher training possibilities, I would like to introduce a teacher-training course in Florence. Finally, I will give three simple examples of mindful activities for EFL teachers to use immediately their classes.

### **What is mindfulness?**

Let us look at the definition of mindfulness first. Mindfulness is a simple practice, a way of training our ability to pay attention to what's happening here and now (Wax, 2016). It is a kind of meditation that involves the process of focusing on the present moment. Doing this can help people to relieve unnecessary stress and be more focused. Jha, Krompinger and Baime (2007) also investigated the needs for using mindfulness training to enhance the ability to focus attention. Both teachers and students are living hectic lives; teachers usually have an endless to-do list and students are busy with their study, circle activities and part-time jobs. Every day is just like a nonstop train. We have so many things to do, to catch up and to deal with. However, in order to get positive results, we all need to have some time for self- reflection, to know where we are and learn how we got there. LaBerge (1995) also discussed the importance of paying attention to the mental processing central to learning, and provided a systematic view of the attention process.

Mindfulness is not just an exercise in concentration but also a preparation for students to realize their well-being and cultivate their awareness of the value of happiness, which will be an investment for their future and provide support when they face difficulties after graduating from university (Hanh, 2017). I believe that it is also part of the basic function of a school in general, a place to provide knowledge and the life skills for students' future life. Therefore, mindfulness is in fact an essential and a core element for better learning and we need to exercise and cultivate it in ourselves, our students, our schools and our communities.

## **Why do we need mindfulness in EFL classrooms?**

For decades, EFL teachers and researchers have been seeking effective and efficient ways to teach and help students to learn English and improve their English proficiency. However, in general, after finishing their entrance exams for the universities, most students no longer have a clear motivation to study English, except those who want to study abroad in the future or go job hunting when they are in their third year.

From my observation through teaching at universities for more than 15 years, if students don't have a clear purpose or if they are not motivated to learn English, the compulsory English classes for the first two years could be quite a difficult and stressful time for them. Personally, I think that introducing mindfulness at university level could benefit both teachers and students. First of all, students have just finished their entrance exams, so it is a good time to change their way of learning English and help them to look at it from different angles. Secondly, students with lower English levels particularly need to feel less stress before starting their learning; thus teachers need to create a positive and calm environment to make them feel safe and free during the learning process. Integrating mindfulness into activities can refresh students' minds and help them to have, or to be aware of, their personal goals of learning.

In Japan, unfortunately, the teaching methods and styles at most universities are still teacher-centered, so students are always waiting for the teacher's next instruction before doing something. However, in order to meet the need for engagement in international settings, students should take more responsibility for their own learning. If students feel they have some influence over what is happening rather than always being told exactly what to do, they can be more motivated. If they take more responsibility for their own learning, they can become more active learners. Mindfulness can strengthen students' attention and concentration and thus improve classroom participation.

According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), there are two factors that can define learners' motivation in second language learning. One is the learners' communicative needs and the other is their attitudes towards the second language community. In Japan, as English is learned as a foreign language, there is little need to speak English outside the classroom. However, as the 2020 Tokyo Olympics approaches and the

Japanese government is also promoting English Education in response to globalization, motivation to learn English is on the increase. Therefore, if teachers can create a positive and calm environment for English learning, it will help students to learn more effectively and reduce their stress when they have to learn other academic subjects in English accordingly. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2017) observed, exercising mindfulness will help students to focus, pay attention and achieve deeper understanding, which is the basis for all learning processes.

### **Mindfulness benefits teachers too**

Jennings (2015) in an online magazine, “Greater Good Magazine”, mentioned seven ways in which mindfulness can help teachers.

Mindfulness helps teachers...

- 1) understand their own emotions better
- 2) communicate more effectively with their students.
- 3) manage students that they find difficult.
- 4) set up a positive learning environment.
- 5) strengthen their relationship with students
- 6) slow down when they need to
- 7) build community

According to the above 7 ways, she said that mindfulness helps teachers understand themselves better, and communicate more effectively with students, thus enabling them to set up a more positive learning environment. If teachers become role models through their energy, enthusiasm and passion, they will be more eager to get to know their students in spite of their daily workloads and stress. Good relationships with the school and the students will help teachers to feel their contributions are valued and thus they will be more eager to share ideas. As Stoeber and Renner mentioned (2008), teachers are among those professionals with the highest levels of job stress and burnout across many countries. Teachers certainly live hectic lives and mindfulness helps us to slow down when we need to; and it also reminds us of the reasons why we started our teaching careers by bringing us back to the basics. Teachers need to practise mindfulness first in order to generate positive energy in the classroom. For students, the teacher is one of the main role models of English learning, after all. Mindfulness will help teachers to create a shared vision with their

students; this will be useful and helpful for teachers to reflect upon their teaching. I believe that teachers themselves are the most important tools that they bring to the class; their teaching and emotions would have certain influence on the students and the class atmosphere.

### **A teacher training course in Florence**

I had a precious training experience in Florence for a week this summer. The title of the training course was “Happy School: positive education for well-being and life-skills development”. It aimed to promote well-being and happiness in a holistic perspective in the classroom, focusing on strengths and virtues that enable learners, organizations and communities to succeed. We were introduced to mindfulness as a part of the course and it was a refreshing experience to train our minds, to relax and boost our self-awareness through several simple exercises and valuable discussions with teachers from other countries. I have been working in education for many years and the synergies between education and positive psychology are an endless source of inspiration to me. By having discussions and group work with other teachers, we found that we share a lot of similar problems and difficulties, and it was really nice to be heard and know that we are not alone. We teachers are so busy every day and hardly have time to face each other so it was really a great opportunity to sit down together, talk about what we think, share and sympathize with the common issues in our daily teaching. There were also some mindful activities that we actually tried ourselves during the course and they were all great fun and useful to try out immediately in our classes. The materials we used in the activities are not difficult to find; in fact, they are all something we can find in our usual daily life. After participating in the course, I have learned many ways of thinking and I have also gained some resources for future class use. In addition, I noticed two important things. One is the importance of creating a place, a network for teachers to discuss and share, which also helps them to relieve their stress. The other is the necessity of integrating mindfulness practice into the school curriculum and the classroom management, which will generate good learning attitudes and increase the connection between the teacher and the students.

I have attended some other teacher training courses and most of them focused on the content and pedagogy. However, as the society is constantly changing, personally I think that teachers also need to receive more different kinds of training, on subjects

such as Mindfulness, creativity or psychological applications that can help us deal with daily reality. The social, emotional and cognitive demands of teaching itself are happening in real life classrooms but most of us have never received any training that relates to them which, if we don't take care of ourselves well, may lead us to feel discouraged, depressed, lonely and even burnt-out. It is important to note that some professional development workshops, seminars arranged by the school, will certainly help teachers to develop their teaching techniques and well-being. Just like the students in a 'mindful' classroom, teachers also need a space, an occasion to share ideas, thoughts and problems with other colleagues. If teachers have more opportunity to improve their professional experience, it will surely also mean better learning opportunities for the students.

### **Three simple and mindful activities to use in EFL classes**

The following are three simple activities with which teachers can incorporate mindfulness into the classroom. In fact, most teachers have already used these activities in their own ways but they could be arranged by adding something extra to each activity.

(1) Breathing exercises can be helpful for students to increase their focus and feel less anxious. Because when we breathe, it connects to our brain and, our emotions, and goes through our body. Deep breathing can help students to feel calm and, relieved, and prepare them to learn. It also gives them some confidence to do difficult or complicated tasks.

(2) Writing at the beginning of a class can provide a period of silence and provide the time to say something in writing. Sometimes some light and relaxing music could also inspire their thoughts. Reading with light music can also do the same trick. One point for this reading exercise is that the text should not be too long and the words used in the text should not be too difficult. Something simple but meaningful which makes students think more deeply would be good. The teacher can also write some notes for some difficult words depending on the students' English levels.

(3) Mindful eating is also one typical exercise to practise mindfulness. I remember the trainer in Florence gave each of us one small raisin and we tasted it with our eyes

closed. Then we talked about how we felt and how the taste was. It was quite a simple task but there were a lot of feelings came to our minds when we closed our eyes, and sharing thoughts with other people also made the raisin tasting special.

I believe that integrating mindfulness into EFL classrooms will help learners become aware of their learning process and promote achievement, and help teachers to feel calmer and more positive when they face difficult situations and challenges.

## **Conclusion**

Mindfulness is a type of meditation, but it doesn't mean that the students have to sit on the floor with their legs crossed, close their eyes or empty their minds in class. In fact, we can provide some simple mindful exercises as warming up activities as mentioned above for students to focus on what they have to do at the present time and prepare them for switching to the English learning mode. As mentioned earlier, mindfulness is not just an exercise in concentration but also a preparation for students to realize their well-being and cultivate their awareness of the value of happiness. Many students have been learning English for the entrance exams; it is a good opportunity to relieve them from the idea that "English learning is difficult and frustrating".

Mindfulness will not help us run away from our worries and problems but it will help us to face and deal with them. By practising mindfulness, teachers and students can establish good relationships and generate the connection in a positive and thoughtful way. By integrating mindfulness into EFL classrooms, teachers and students can ease the stress of learning in English. They can focus better and be able to find fun and meaning in their learning. By acquiring the habit of mindfulness, teachers and students can be more efficient, creative and productive and they can live with more awareness and fulfillment not only in the classroom but also outside.

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