

Mindfulness Teaching in Education: A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

Harumi Takiguchi

1. Introduction

This paper explores the possibilities for new applications of mindfulness teaching in higher education, particularly in the English classroom setting at the college level, by comparing Japan and the United States. As an English instructor at a Japanese university, I have been able to experience teaching in a very practical and challenging setting, in that I had to interact with students from very diverse social and academic backgrounds. I taught in low-level English classrooms at university in light of these circumstances in the paper “Implementing Mindfulness into Teaching English as a Second Language at the College Level: An Exploratory Study” (2015). In it, I identified university students’ academic performance as well as other difficulties that teachers face in the classroom through my observations while teaching approximately 250 ESL students throughout the 2014-2015 academic year.

My previous observations indicated that many low-level English university students lacked effective study skills, motivation in studying English, appropriate social skills, and a positive attitude towards teachers and fellow classmates. With the ever-decreasing birth rate, Japan is facing a time in which all applicants would be admitted to colleges and universities (White, Eguchi, Kawanaka, & Henneberry, 2005). Yoshida also points out that if students have no preference, they can enter any university (2001). This means that students can go to university and receive a degree even if they have not fully understood the subject matter taught in junior high school and senior high school. Despite the fact that English education in Japan has consistently been said to have improved, and that the techniques of learning English have been theoretically debated, there are still a large number of students with low-level English skills even after six years of studying the subject in junior high school and senior high school.

According to Jennings (2011), “Teaching is more socially and emotionally demanding than it has ever been in the past. Growing numbers of children come to school unprepared and often at risk of mental health and behavioral problems” (p.133). University is no exception while there are many more students who are socially and academically unprepared to come to university. Teaching students with varied academic and emotional abilities is also very challenging for the instructors. I demonstrated in the previous study that it was evident that English instructors are emotionally affected and exhausted by the reality of teaching and interacting with students of a very low proficiency level. It also posited that the reality of

classroom challenges at Japanese universities continues to grow, with more incapable and immature students being accepted (Takiguchi, 2015).

This pedagogical shift prompted me to begin to think about how emotions are connected to the teaching process. Mindfulness approaches could be one technique that helps create more effective teaching methods for teachers and helps relieve the related stresses incurred in this process. This paper will first look at how mindfulness approaches are applied and practiced in Japan. Next, it will analyze how mindfulness techniques are applied in educational settings in the United States and how effective and useful the approaches are there. Finally, this paper will attempt to examine the possibility of mindfulness techniques in higher education and suggest this perspective could be beneficial for university level instructors of English as a foreign language.

2. Background

There is recently a growing number of mindfulness-based programs and research for numerous scholarly disciplines including neuroscience, cognitive science, clinical psychology, developmental psychology, business, and education worldwide. The concept of 'mindfulness' originally came from Buddhist meditative disciplines spanning 3000 years of history in the Eastern tradition (Kitagawa & Muto, 2013). According to Ikeno (2014), the growth of mindfulness practice first began to a great extent in the United States from the 1980s to the 1990s. Since Jon Kabat-Zinn embarked on applying mindfulness meditation training to help people cope with medical conditions in 1979, it became more open and more easily accessible in the United States (Ikeno, 2014). Mindfulness has been defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). Jennings (2015) states, "Increasingly, psychologists are using mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) to successfully relieve a variety of mental and physical ailments" (p16). In both Japan and the United States, interest and attention raised dramatically as sufficient results of this research have become better known. I will look at and compare the history and present of mindfulness approaches in Japan and in the United States.

3. Findings

3-1. Mindfulness in Japan

Japanese culture is deeply related to, and historically influenced by Buddhist belief systems for a very long time. This traditional wisdom was profoundly ingrained in Japanese people's lives as can be witnessed in funerals and traditional everyday rituals. The concept of mindfulness might be more significant for Japanese people than they actually realize. However, mindfulness approaches have not been a great movement or drawn much attention in Japan (Fujita, 2014). Needless to say, they have not been looked at as effective teaching methods in education because there have not been sufficient programs or research that implement mindfulness into teaching and education in classrooms at any academic level.

Mindfulness Teaching in Education: A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

In Japan, mindfulness approaches are more acknowledged and accredited in the fields of clinical psychology and cognitive therapy. As Koshikawa writes, “the concept of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation techniques were already introduced to Japanese psychologists in the 1990s” (2014). However, it is still apparent that mindfulness-based therapy has become much more prevalent in Japan recently because of a rapid increase of studies and the promising results of research in Europe and the United States in the 2000s (Koshikawa, 2014). The concepts of mindfulness and mindfulness approaches have been introduced and numerous research studies have been performed among Japanese psychologists in order to better understand mindfulness and its effects (Haruki et al, 2008; Koshikawa, 2010; & Kumano 2013). It is clear that significant psychological research has been carried out in Japan to examine the effectiveness of mindfulness and the utility of MBIs with regards to mental health issues. Katsukura, Ito, Kodama and Ando conducted research on the applicability of mindfulness treatments for outpatients. They found that mindfulness practices could be a supplement to the daily practice of psychotherapy (2008). Hanazawa examined whether or not a mindfulness approach was effective for patients with eating disorders. His research suggested that the mindfulness strategy could be beneficial among patients with bulimia nervosa (2012). Miyoshi, Nagaura and Iwai investigated the correlations between mindfulness and depression and female menopausal symptoms among 183 female participants. They concluded mindfulness techniques were beneficial for menopausal women (2013). As can be seen above, mindfulness approaches have been assessed and will be more increasingly utilized in the fields of clinical psychology, cognitive therapy, and medicine.

In the educational field, Katsukura, Ito, Nedate and Kanetsuki tested the effects of Zazen meditation, one of the main mindfulness practices, on depressive symptoms of college students (2009). Yoshimura investigated the effects of mindfulness programs in a detention center (2014). These studies mentioned above have been performed in educational settings; however, they have focused mainly on psychological outcomes with a focus on the improvement of mental health and stress relief. In the context of English education, Sakata and Fukuda explored the usefulness of a mindfulness approaches in the English classroom for those students who continuously felt negative about learning English. Their research concluded that mindfulness techniques were effective for students to cope with their negative mindset about studying English and also helpful for them to overcome the unpleasant feelings associated with it (2012). Therefore, a mindfulness approach has been primarily examined and applied within the fields of psychology in Japan. Nevertheless, it has not been utilized in the field of pedagogy for the purpose of supporting and caring for teachers as yet.

Mindfulness practice has increasingly been introduced in business management and leadership programs in Japan as well when American leading companies such as Google, Apple, and Intel borrowed it as official in-house programs (Nikkei Business Publications, 2014). Mindful Leadership Institute (2015) proved that it has been acknowledged as a useful

method for business people to incorporate mindfulness practice into their lives because it is effective to help people's mind be clear, calm and insightful. Also, Inoue (2014) made several important statements on the potential of mindfulness as a common foundation for all kinds of caring activities such as child-care, terminal-care and grief-care.

With all positive outcomes from a mindfulness approach verified in the fields of psychology and business, a mindfulness approach should also be beneficial and valuable for educators to create a better learning environment. It might give support to teachers and help them retain the joy of teaching. Much still remains to be done and investigated in terms of confirming the efficacy and benefit of mindfulness practice for teachers in education in Japan.

3-2. Mindfulness in the United States

As mentioned earlier, the mindfulness approach was developed and influenced by the Buddhist meditative disciplines. In addition, however, there is another perspective of mindfulness as a purely secular and behavioral approach, based upon the most current science (Jennings, 2015). As stated above, mindfulness became more acknowledged and recognized among American people after Jon Kabat-Zinn began to apply mindfulness to clinical works and developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and founded the Center for Mindfulness in Massachusetts in 1979. Various studies and research were conducted and concluded that MBSR was effective in reducing stress, improving health and well-being, and mastering cognitive functions such as paying attention in a controlled environment (Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Ivanovski & Malhi, 2007; Keng, Smoski, & Robins; Jennings, 2015).

In addition, Jennings (2015) states, "Other benefits include increases in positive mood, empathy, and immune system functioning; reductions in stress and anxiety; a reduced incidence of relapse after treatment for depression; and decreases in substance abuse (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Davidson et al., 2003; Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Ostafin & Marlatt, 2008; Shapiro, Brown, & Beigel, 2007)" (p.17). Current research has demonstrated that MBSR helps dramatically with learning and memory processes, stabilizing emotions, keeping things in perspective, and self-referential processing. (Hölzel et al., 2011; Jennings, 2015). Gradually, researchers acknowledged that this could help teachers manage their emotions better and handle their emotional instability when the classroom disintegrates (Chang, 2013; Jennings & Greensberg, 2009; Jennings, 2015). Jennings (2015) illustrates that "Over the past decade, researchers have turned their attention to exploring whether MBIs might provide the skills teachers need to effectively manage stress and create and sustain socially and emotionally supportive learning environments" (p. 18). Therefore, mindfulness approaches were introduced in the educational field in order to support teachers emotionally and physically, and to improve their ability to perform as teachers.

Mindfulness Teaching in Education: A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

3-3. Mindfulness in education in the United States

There have been an increasing number of scientific research studies and projects that examine and analyze the effect of mindfulness in education in the United States in recent years. There are more than a few organizations and individuals establishing and applying mindfulness in education in the United States (Jennings, 2015); some examples follow below.

Naropa University was founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974 with a view to combining Eastern contemplative approaches with traditional Western academic disciplines. Contemplative education has been at the core of Naropa University's curriculum, but they also offer bachelor and master's degrees. Contemplative education programs as well as master's degrees are designed for teachers at all levels from pre-K through higher education. Students learn how to incorporate mindfulness approaches into instructional methods and teaching content through the programs. They also learn how to successfully create compassionate learning environments and meaningful educational methodologies.

The Calm Classroom (CC) program was developed on the basis of the work of Herbert Benson, the Harvard Medical School professor. CC program teaches students activities such as mindfulness breath awareness, concentration, relaxation, and stretching. These mindfulness techniques are very short and used several times as an intervention to help students develop self-awareness, mental focus and inner calm. Beson et al. (2000) report that a relaxation response intervention was effective for the academic performance of middle school students and that it improved students' communication skills and fostered respect between teachers and students.

There are several evidenced-based programs for teachers that are designed to support teachers in teaching mindfulness-based curricula (Jennings, 2015). From the perspective of fostering emotional balance, researchers recognized that teachers have to endure much emotional stress and that their emotions can have a huge impact on their students, both negatively and positively. Some professional development programs have been created specifically for teachers to augment their own personal development, and to help them promote resilience to stress as a means of improving their teaching.

Based upon the promising results of the research in applying a mindfulness-based approach to promoting resilience and the current understanding of the neuroscience of emotions, the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) for Teachers program was developed by Patricia A. Jennings, who led a team of former teachers and teacher educators. Jennings (2015) states, "the Garrison Institute in Garrison, New York, initiated the development of a new program that aims to support teacher social and emotional competence (SEC) in order to improve classroom climate and student outcomes" (p. 200). The program focuses on giving support to teachers to help them reduce stress and renew their appreciation of teaching. Consequently, it could help teachers improve their relationships with students both socially and emotionally. The program is designed as four

one-day sessions spread over four to five weeks, with intersession coaching via phone and the internet to support the application of CARE skills.

The CARE intervention offers skills and resources to teachers to help them understand and handle their own emotional patterns, as well as to grasp a better understanding of the social and emotional dynamics of others such as students, parents, and colleagues. In this program, teachers can develop their personality and improve their teaching skills by becoming more reliable, confident, compassionate, and better responsive to stressful situations. The study also demonstrated that teachers who participated in the CARE program were able to promote resilience, work with better efficiency and be more mindful of the classroom environment (Jennings, Franks Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013). Participants reported not only their own emotional development but also physical improvement after receiving CARE. The program was evaluated and indicated that it improved teachers' ability to provide social, emotional, and academic support to their students and to more effectively manage their classroom dynamics (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Jennings, 2015). Research on CARE is still continuing and will provide more evidence that teachers' social and physical improvements will translate to warmer classroom climates and better student academic and behavioral outcomes.

Evidence-Based programs for teachers are increasing and the effects of mindfulness approaches have been recognized among educators as pedagogical methods. Mindfulness practices are efficient ways to train teachers to promote resilience, reduce stress, and connect with their students and themselves. Jennings (2015) argues that, "by approaching our work with an open-hearted, present-moment, nonjudgmental awareness, together we can make an enormous difference in our classroom environments and our students' learning" (p. 205).

4. Discussion

Research and projects performed both in Japan and in the United States prove that mindfulness practices are found to be effective to reduce stress and anxiety and alleviate pain in the fields of clinical psychology, cognitive therapy and medicine. There should be more scientific evidence-based programs and projects in those fields in order for them to be more recognized as effective treatments.

As this paper described earlier, the application of mindfulness practice has been scientifically proven to be valuable in the educational settings in the United States. Researchers and pedagogists in the United States have paid much attention to the effect of mindfulness approaches in education and put them into practice in schools. They demonstrate that mindfulness approaches are useful for teachers to calm their mind, connect more with students, and regain love and joy in teaching and interacting with students. Also mindfulness practices are found to be beneficial for students' academic outcomes and social and emotional well-being. While it has been recognized that mindfulness approaches are worthy of notice, school districts throughout the United States also gradually embrace this practice into the school curricula (The Washington Post, 2014).

Mindfulness Teaching in Education: A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

On the other hand, in Japan the application of a mindfulness approach has not successfully been introduced or practiced in the field of education as yet, but this approach has been introduced and practiced within the field of psychology since the 1990s. I believe the teaching profession in Japanese schools is just as challenging as in schools in the United States. An increasing number of teachers have become overly stressed by students' disruptive behaviors and poor study skills in the classroom. Teachers in Japan also need and should seek help and support to improve their teaching technique and promote a healthy learning environment for students. Therefore, I believe mindfulness could open a new door for education in Japan and provide a breakthrough in creating a better learning environment for both teachers and the next generation of students. If more and more teachers understand the concept of mindfulness and the benefits it can provide, they can create a warmer and better classroom climate for their students. Not many people have realized or acknowledged the possibilities of the mindfulness approach in education yet, but this practice could have a great impact on education in Japan.

Teachers can always initiate the mindfulness practice during the class beginning with small activities such as focusing on a few minutes of deep breathing or stretching as to start to their learning ritual. When students feel that 90 minutes of class is too long to concentrate or they normally have short attention span, it is a good way to refresh students' mind and serve as a mental diversion. Many experiments and inspections should be conducted in the educational field to find the most efficient ways to incorporate the mindfulness techniques into classroom in Japan.

5. Conclusion

Research studies tend to focus on students' academic outcomes and disruptive behaviors in terms of students' English proficiency. With the declining number of students, English educators have tried to create better ways for students to improve their English and promote their motivation to learn. The students and educators both have stresses in their life; teachers feeling unappreciated and disrespected; students not connecting with their teacher or seeing the utility of learning the subject. Ultimately, a connection between teachers and students must be fostered to find ways to get both students and teachers working together toward the same ultimate goals.

Research and successful programs illustrate how mindfulness can be an effective technique in helping address both the problems of teachers and students in Japan. Also it may be one technique for connecting and communicating more effectively and relieving the stresses incurred in the process. At first, it might be difficult to see the relationship between teachers' healthy emotional stability and students' academic performance. However, as research has scientifically proven, if teachers are fully grounded and able to be aware of what goes on among students in the classrooms, teachers can communicate and connect with students better. If teachers are more relaxed and present in the moment, they might be able

to notice how well students understand the material and when students need help. Both teachers and students can find ways to make mutual concessions and establish trust for one another. Therefore, it should create a positive learning environment for both teachers and students.

In closing, the practice of mindfulness has not yet been applied in the context of university teaching in either Japan or in the United States. Mindfulness teaching techniques are originally designed for teachers and students in K-12 schools, and they are successfully adopted into the school curricula. Even though students' English proficiency is low and they have never found joy in learning in the past, this might give students opportunities to enjoy the subject and study more thoroughly because of the more pleasant classroom climate. With mindfulness teaching methods, teachers might be able to find joy and love in teaching and interacting with students because of their better attitudes and higher motivation. Further studies and research are called for in order to prove the effect of mindfulness teaching at a university level.

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Mindfulness Teaching in Education:
A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

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Mindfulness Teaching in Education:
A Comparative Study of Japan and the United States

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