

The Possibilities of Incorporating Mindfulness into the English Classroom in Japan

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the benefits of integrating mindfulness practices into university-level English classrooms. The official curriculum guidelines in Japan make English a mandatory subject for Japanese students throughout junior high and high school (MEXT, 2008, 2009). In addition, most university students (non-English majors) are required to take English courses in their first and second years. Whether or not students are motivated to improve their English proficiency, Japanese society consistently emphasizes its importance. For example, higher scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) lead to better career advancement and more job opportunities. An increasing number of Japanese companies adopt the TOEIC scores as a requirement for recruiting and promotions (Nikkei Online, 2014). Moreover, as the 2020 Tokyo Olympics approaches, the demand for English proficiency is increasing (MEXT, 2013).

To enhance Japanese students' English proficiency, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has proposed new curriculum guidelines that promote English education, such as the English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization (2013) and Plans on the Promotion of Improvement of Students' English Abilities (2015). They have also revised existing guidelines to meet the needs of contemporary Japanese society. However, despite these attempts at reform, students did not show sufficient improvement in their English proficiency or their motivation to learn it. The FY2014 Survey on English Abilities for Improving English Education revealed that high school students still have problems with the four key English skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) and that more than 50% of students do not enjoy learning English (MEXT, 2015). Thus, there seem to be many problems with English education in Japan.

After students enter university, some maintain enthusiasm for studying English. In addition to taking the required courses, they may apply for short-term or long-term study-abroad programs to expand their cultural scope as many Japanese universities offer such programs. Some students may regularly take the TOEIC to improve their scores, which can broaden their job opportunities as mentioned above. Murai (2016) stated that, "A TOEIC score has been indispensable to university students who want to stand out from other job-seekers during the shukatsu (job-hunting) season." Having high English skills can be beneficial to students in terms of their future career development and opportunities.

Unfortunately, some students lose interest in studying English as they become busier with other courses, part-time jobs, and extracurricular activities (Hayashi, 2005; Sawyer, 2007; Iwamoto, 2013). As mentioned earlier, more than 50% of high school students do not enjoy studying English, which also could affect their motivation to study the subject after they enroll in university. Agawa et al. (2011) argued that

demotivated English learners tended to make less effort to learn English and had a lower ability of English. Takiguchi (2015) also wrote that, “Students who lacked the motivation to study English tended to have a significant deficiency in their understanding of English...”

Also, many students with low-level English ability do not have confidence and feel anxiety when they study English because of their previous learning experiences (Kiyota, 2011; Makino, 2016). It is difficult for students to think clearly, have self-esteem, and perform well in class when they feel anxiety and stress. Feeling anxiety during class can distract them from learning English efficiently (Noguchi, 2006). Even though they might understand that English proficiency could be beneficial for their future and their careers, they might give up on trying to improve their English ability because they cannot cope with anxiety and stress while learning English. To overcome this, English instructors have sought effective teaching methods, experimenting with various methods in the field of English language learning. However, these methods can be improved upon.

English instructors might not be responsible for students’ state of mind in the classroom, but ensuring students’ well-being and helping them feel comfortable while studying could be crucial for improving their English ability. It is important for both instructors and students to create a positive learning environment where students can perform better, feel motivated, and become more engaged in English language learning. This paper will discuss the effects of mindfulness in educational settings and its benefits in terms of students’ learning and academic performance. In addition, this paper will suggest a lesson plan for an English course that includes practicing mindfulness with students.

2. The Benefits of Mindfulness

2-1. The Spread of Mindfulness in Japan

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p. 4). The number of mindfulness-based programs and the amount of research in many scholarly disciplines, including neuroscience, psychology, business, and education, is increasing every day. Within the field of education, it is emphasized that mindfulness is a secular behavioral approach (Jennings, 2015; Brensilver, 2016). In addition, the concept has become popular among the Japanese population; magazines discuss the effects of mindfulness, numerous books talk about how practicing mindfulness daily can improve one’s quality of life, and many TV programs feature mindfulness and its benefits (Yoshida, 2017, p.21). As a result, mindfulness has become well known among the public in Japan.

From the perspective of business management and leadership, mindfulness can help people think clearly, remain calm, and become insightful. For these reasons, Google, Apple, and Yahoo have incorporated it into their company cultures (Chapman, 2011; Bradberry, 2016). To improve their focus and lower their stress, new employees of Unilever Japan also practice mindfulness during in-house training (Chunichi Shimbun, 2018).

Even though not many reports of successful mindfulness practices or integration into education in Japan have been published yet, the positive outcomes of mindfulness in educational settings are clear. Recently, an increasing number of scientific studies and programs have investigated the effects of

mindfulness in education in the United States. Brensilver (2016) argued that, “Mindfulness benefits people in several notable ways, including decreasing distress, enhancing positive emotions and improving certain attentional skills.” Numerous scientific studies find that mindfulness improves young people’s ability to pay attention, enhances resilience and social skills, and decreases test anxiety and stress (Mindful Schools, 2019).

2-2. Mindfulness in Education in the United States of America

The Coalition of Schools: Educating Mindfully (COSEM) was held in St. Charles, Illinois from February 28th until March 2nd, 2019. The purpose of COSEM was to support school communities by connecting them with mentors, training, curricula, and other resources for mindfulness-based social, emotional, and academic learning. Participants could learn about the benefits of mindfulness and how to embed mindfulness in classrooms from experienced educators. Thus, the conference provided the opportunity to cultivate a better understanding among those who are new to the concept. It also allowed those who had been teaching and applying mindfulness in schools for many years to create a more extensive professional network and learn about various perspectives on mindfulness in education.

On the first day, educators, professors, researchers, certified instructors at Mindful Schools, psychologists, social workers, and other mental health professionals presented their research and shared their experiences in classrooms from pre-kindergarten through college. There were 12 sessions in total, and each 50-minute session included examples of how systemic integration of mindfulness helped cultivate secure, inclusive, culturally responsive, and thriving communication in school communities. There was also a screening of *May I Be Happy*, created by the French film production studio TAMA Production, which showed the impact of mindfulness on children and school communities (Walter & Georgeault, 2017).

On the second day, experts in mindfulness education and the coordinators and founders of various mindfulness programs hosted breakout sessions in which attendees learned about a wide variety of mindfulness topics and programs that can be implemented in educational settings. There were 17 sessions in total, and they gave both experienced and newly educators the skills they needed to bring mindfulness to the students in the classrooms. Primarily, it gave new educators the opportunity to implement a specific mindfulness program or curriculum. Because the experts provided numerous options for integrating mindfulness into classrooms, attendees were able to select the methods that were most suitable for their circumstances while processing the exciting and creative ideas presented at the conference.

On the last day of COSEM, attendees could attend one of four full-day workshops intended to help them start and deepen their mindfulness practices and learn how to integrate a specific mindfulness program at a school. One of the workshops, *Yoga & Mindfulness in the Classroom: Tools to Improve SEL, Academic Success, Behavior, and Climate*, which was taught and led by Lisa Flynn, the founder and director of ChildLight Yoga® and Yoga 4 Classrooms®, was an ideal teaching model as well as an actual tool to use in the classroom. Flynn stated that many students lack self-regulation skills, impulse control, learning ability, and well-being. By utilizing yoga and mindfulness techniques, educators can introduce a convenient, engaging, and effective way to cultivate a positive classroom climate.

In Flynn's workshop, attendees learned how to empower their students and themselves through self-awareness and self-regulation. Attendees also learned how to proactively and effectively practice and integrate mindfulness through over 67 yoga poses and mindfulness-based activities, brain-boosting and creative movements, breathing exercises, visualizations, and community-building games. Additionally, participants learned about the mechanisms of stress and trauma and how they affect learning and behavior, and they obtained strategies for improving their classroom management. Throughout the workshop, Flynn encouraged attendees to become more confident and effective educators while improving their health and well-being.

3. Incorporating Mindfulness into English Classrooms

Due to its benefits, mindfulness should be applied to English classrooms. As mentioned above, it is essential for instructors to lower students' language anxiety so that they can relax and study English in a focused manner. The following lesson plan is proposed as a way to easily integrate mindfulness practices, including breathing, into classrooms.

After calling the roll at the beginning of the class, the instructor should ask each student to write down how they are feeling on a piece of paper. They do not have to share this information with their peers or the instructor unless they wish to. The purpose of this exercise is to help students to see their emotions without judgment and accept them.

Then, the instructor should invite students to engage in a breathing exercise. Guided by the instructor, who is also participating in the exercise, the students can breathe deeply for a minute or two. By focusing on their breathing for a short period, the students can calm down and alleviate stress before learning. After this is finished, students should again write down how they are feeling and observe how the exercise impacted their emotions. This practice gives students an opportunity to be mindful and connect with both their mind and body. It is important that the breathing exercise be optional; if students do not feel like participating, they should not have to.

The activities should take only five minutes at the beginning of the class. After the mindfulness activities, the instructor and students should focus on language learning. During the class, the instructor should be aware of the circumstances in the classroom and students' attitudes so that he or she can implement mindfulness practices more effectively in the future.

Over the 14-week course, the instructor should invite students to engage in mindfulness practices and gradually introduce students to scientifically proven yoga postures and breathing exercises during the course. On the last week of the course, the instructor should ask their students how they feel and let them write down on their feelings on the sheet of paper. Students can read their comments and objectively compare their current emotions with how they felt in previous weeks, allowing them to see what they have experienced and learned.

Also, it is essential for the instructor to give students the same mini-test at the beginning and the end of the semester to measure how students' English proficiency improved throughout the course. This also helps the instructor recognize the power of mindfulness and see its benefits on students' achievements both academically and mentally.

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the benefits of integrating mindfulness into English classrooms. Mindfulness practice may not seem relevant to teaching and learning English, however, it might be one of the most effective teaching and learning strategies for the English classroom because it can improve one's learning readiness, attentional ability, and self-regulation. This can help enhance students' academic outcomes as well as confidence and self-esteem.

Given that students feel anxiety about learning a foreign language and find it stressful to pay attention during class, English instructors need to consider the students' state of mind and help them ease tension and alleviate stress. Helping students feel less anxious with mindfulness practices and connecting with them while teaching might have a substantial influence on the quality of students' learning.

English instructors have sought the most effective ways to improve students' English ability for years. Integrating mindfulness into classrooms could be a breakthrough in terms of improving students' English proficiency and motivation. However, to make teaching and learning creative and efficient, further research is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how mindfulness can be applied in the context of education. As the first step, the author looks forward to applying mindfulness practices in her classrooms and discovering its impact on students' academic outcomes and social development.

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