

THE POTENTIALITIES OF MINDFULNESS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This research paper presents ideas that argue in favor of the integration of mindfulness techniques (visualization, meditation and breathing) in the process of language teaching. In addition, this document contains a brief overview of the most common methods used for teaching languages, which identifying some of the reasons for implementing mindfulness techniques. At the same time, it describes the possible difficulties and potentialities that would be found when applying them in the classroom. For concluding, it presents some strategies to implement these techniques through a proposal which is put into consideration with the purpose of improving the processes of language teaching.

Key Words: Methods, Learning, Acquisition, Languages, Mindfulness, Consciousness, Attention, Visualization, Relaxation.

Resumen

Este trabajo de investigación presenta ideas que argumentan a favor de la integración de las técnicas de mindfulness (visualización, meditación y respiración) en el proceso de enseñanza de idiomas. Además, este documento contiene una breve visión general de los métodos más comunes utilizados para la enseñanza de idiomas, que permiten identificar algunas de las razones para la implementación de técnicas de atención plena. Al mismo tiempo, describe las posibles dificultades y potencialidades que se encontrarían al aplicarlas en el aula. Para concluir, presenta algunas estrategias para implementar estas técnicas a través de una propuesta que se pone en consideración con el fin de mejorar los procesos de enseñanza de lenguas.

Palabras Clave: Métodos, Aprendizaje, Adquisición, Idiomas, Plena-Conciencia, Conciencia, Atención, Visualización, Relajación.

Potentialities of Mindfulness in Teaching Foreign Languages

In the process of learning a language, students have to deal with several factors that might be detrimental to the development of their abilities and their performance, and which can hinder foreign language learning. According to Ellis (1994) these may be affective states such as anxiety, low motivation or competition with their classmates or other elements such as age, sex, and ethnic identity. With the rapid development of technology and the overwhelming advertising even the tools and materials that are used in activities or to practice the target language have become powerful sources of distraction and sometimes of alienation (Morgan, 2011).

Eastern traditions have offered an alternative to solve problems such as stress, distraction, anxiety and distrust, factors that affect not only education but the quality of Western life. Among the advantages of the process of globalization that began to develop in the second half of the 20th century, the strengthening of communication and interdependence among countries in the cultural field arose. Various philosophical systems and spiritual practices from East have been adopted by the West in order to achieve balance, tranquility and harmonious life they promise. Foreign language learning has always been permeated by advances in other areas and this flexibility has allowed important advances. It can be noted, for example, that technology, psychology and sociology have influenced areas such as CALL, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. It is not surprising, then, that Eastern practices are currently permeating different aspects of our lives.

A clear example of this fact is the participation of the humanitarian leader Ravi Shankar in the peace process in Colombia. In June 2015 the Hindu guru, founder of the humanitarian organization "Art of Living", met President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC commanders. One of

the aims of his visit was to convince the leaders of the guerrillas to acquire a peaceful and compassionate attitude to continue fighting for their ideals but without violence.

After a couple of meetings and a meditation session commanders announced a ceasefire and the start of peace talks with the Colombian government. There have been several occasions in which this ambassador of peace has contributed as a mediator between countries in conflict through his eastern techniques Pérez, (2015).

Taking into account the aforementioned facts, and considering that second/foreign language (L2) teaching and learning are always evolving, it can be said that the main objective of this study is to analyze the potentialities of the application of mindfulness techniques as a strategy to facilitate the processes of foreign language teaching. In addition, it seeks to highlight the benefits that such practices can bring not only in terms of academic achievement but also in aspects such as emotional balance and mental training, both for students and teachers. Finally, after analyzing and clarifying the themes relevant to the topic, this research seeks to propose an alternative for enhancing language teaching effectiveness by applying mindfulness-derived strategies.

To begin, it is important to indicate some points that give relevance to this research paper and could serve as a basis for subsequent studies and their potential application. First, this research paper focuses on mindfulness, a topic that has not been abundantly researched, especially in our region. This brief paper might provide people interested in the topic a theoretical and referential introduction to it. Second, despite the accessibility to immeasurable amounts of information through the media, the philosophy and eastern traditions are no more than vague concepts for some people. Hence, the riches of this wisdom and the benefits they might bring to

different aspects of life are not evident. This paper serves as a starting point for getting more knowledgeable about mindfulness and its potential connection to instruction. Finally, this paper suggests ways to apply techniques from a different tradition which can broaden learners' horizons and foster their academic and personal growth. Teaching is much more than providing information about specific knowledge. Teachers nowadays also provide learners with the environment and tools that can foster values and other types of learning. The study and practice of mindfulness techniques in the teaching of foreign languages can have a positive impact on the lives of learners that goes beyond their academic studies, and enhances their personal, family and social spaces.

If mindfulness techniques can be useful in the above mentioned areas, they can also be a great alternative to L2 instruction because of the versatility in its application. These techniques can be developed with audiences in any age range, offering benefits to all of them. Weare (2012) presents a compilation of numerous studies applied to students whose ages range from 5 to 19 years which results shows improvement in areas such as attention, resilience, motivation, confidence and academic performance. Moreover, mindfulness techniques do not need expensive resources because their application is based entirely on physical and mental exercises which can be carried out lying down, sitting or standing. Thus, mindfulness strategies can become didactic strategies, potentially applicable to any type of audience and context.

Although it looks like mindfulness and L2 instruction are not related, this is not entirely true. Following is a brief review of some methods whose characteristics are closely related with the techniques of mindfulness. The similarities between methods and mindfulness techniques will allow to see how some techniques might be valuable in the L2 classroom.

Brief Historical Review of Methods for Language Teaching

As a result of the struggle between teaching a language by means of an analysis of grammar and teaching a language highlighting the importance of practical and spontaneous use of language for communication, in the second part of the 20th century, a group of methods arose seeking to go beyond this dichotomy that seemed to offer no solution. Nunan (1989) named these as “Designer Methods” and it can be suggested that what they have in common is their humanistic approach which innovates and brings language teaching outside the lethargy in which it was immerse. The methods are:

Community Language Learning (CLL).

It is founded by the Jesuit priest Charles Curran who focused this method on the emotional factor in language teaching. The most important aspect was the interpersonal communication between students and teacher which generated an enabling environment for language acquisition. Brown (2007) states that “In such surrounding, each person lowered the defenses that prevent open interpersonal communication. The anxiety caused by the educational context was lessened by means of the supportive community.” (p. 25). This method was derived from counseling principles, which are even featured in its procedure.

The Silent Way.

It was developed by Gattegno who understood language as an instrument of experience, so it is the experience that gives meaning to language. In this way the teacher stays most of the time in silence to stimulate the student to grasp the spirit of the language by experiencing it. The spirit of language refers to “the way each language is composed of phonological and suprasegmental elements that combine to give the language its unique sound system and

melody.” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 82). The purpose of this method was to allow students to discover knowledge rather than just learn what they are told.

Total Physical Response (TPR).

This method has a fairly simple dynamic. The teacher gives students a series of commands which they must act out in order to establish a connection between mind and action. Commands increase in complexity and students are not forced to respond verbally, they only do it when they feel secure and comfortable enough. This method seeks to reduce the stress and anxiety through physical movements which are points in common with the practice of mindfulness.

Natural Approach.

This approach was developed by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell. It shares the idea with the TPR method that the “learners would benefit from delaying production until speech “emerges,” that learners should be as relaxed as possible in the classroom, and that a great deal of communication and “acquisition” should take place, as opposed to analysis.” (Brown, 2000, p. 108). This method is supported by the theory of second language acquisition which consists of the following 5 hypotheses (Krashen, 1982).

1. The Acquisition - Learning Distinction Hypothesis: There are two ways for an adult learner to achieve mastery of a foreign language. The first way is through *acquisition*, which is “the “natural” way to develop linguistic ability, and is a subconscious process” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 26). This is a similar process to the one children go through to develop language, as they do not pay attention to grammatical rules but only focus on the message they want to communicate. The second process a person can undertake is *learning*. Krashen suggest this is a

conscious process in which the learner knows the grammatical rules that should apply and seeks to implement them in his/her speech. The learning process has relation with the monitor hypothesis which will be discussed later.

2. The Natural Order Hypothesis: This hypothesis states that when learning a language either the mother tongue or a foreign language, the acquisition of grammatical structures is given in a predictable order. Krashen (1982) states: “The agreement among individual acquirers is not always 100% but there are clear, statistically significant, similarities.” (p. 12). Moreover, the order in which the structures are acquired may vary depending on the individual’s characteristics and on whether the person is learning his/her mother tongue (L1) or a foreign language.

3. The Monitor Hypothesis: This hypothesis supports the idea that the acquisition and learning processes meet entirely different functions. While the acquired system is responsible for communication and does not focus on the form but in the content, “The learned system, on the other hand, acts only as an editor or “monitor”, making minor changes and polishing what the acquirer system has produced.” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 38)

4. The Input Hypothesis: This hypothesis affirms that the only way a person can acquire a language is through exposure of a *comprehensible input*, which is an oral or written message that the acquirer can understand. Krashen (1983) explains this hypothesis with the following equation: a learner who is in a level i of any language needs an input of $i + 1$ to advance to another level. If the input is too advanced for the current proficiency of the learner, there will be no language acquisition.

5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Lightbown and Spada (1999) define “affective filter” as “an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from acquiring language from the

available input.” (p. 39). Diverse factors like shame, distrust, or anxiety among others can block the reception of input which would hinder language acquisition. Then, the higher the affective filter, the lower the possibility of assimilating the input received and the acquisition of language. This hypothesis will be revisited again later because the issues it addresses are precisely the problems this research paper intends to tackle, or at least recommend possible solutions.

Suggestopedia.

This method was specifically designed to provide an environment that reduces the affective filter, within which students feel relaxed, confident and open to the acquisition of language. It was developed by the Bulgarian psychotherapist Georgi Lozanov in 1970s and has as a theoretical foundation the application of positive suggestion in students to achieve the learning of a foreign language. In addition to his knowledge in psychology about how the human brain works and how to exploit its potential effectively Lozanov based this method on raja-yoga techniques for relaxing and improving concentration, which he practiced for more than 20 years. Brown, (2007).

An outstanding feature that distances this from others is the attention it lends to elements such as the physical environment and atmosphere: comfortable chairs arranged in a semicircle around the teacher, decoration and colorful posters on the walls of the classroom that allow peripheral learning are fundamental factors for comfort and therefore student's confidence. Another part to note is the use of music within their techniques. In some phases of the lesson while teachers or students are reading, selected music is played in the background. This is an element that not only allows students to immerse themselves in the subject being addressed but also contributes to the generation of a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

As mentioned above, the ability to choose the right strategies and organizing a methodology that ensures good results depends largely on the clarity with which the teacher understands the mental processes that are carried out in the teaching-learning process. In general terms, and from the psychological point of view of Cacioppo and Freberg (2014), the mind is basically what leads activities of the brain including thought, emotion and behavior. These are functions that may influence the learning and acquiring of a second or foreign language.

Every time we attempt to reach something, to acquire knowledge or to grow in any way we must have a goal to achieve, an objective that directs us in the right way. In this case the objective to achieve is a state of mind, a state that allows the mind to unify and focus all functions under its command towards the same target, which is consciously chosen and free from distractions and vagueness. This leads us to the concept and central theme of the paper “mindfulness”. A simple definition that allows seeing clearly the purpose and usefulness of mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145)

Expanding what the author states, mindfulness can be understood as the quality of being aware by observing and attending moment-by-moment, it intends to place the subject in the here and now, drawing the attention to the immediate event, avoiding looking at past experiences or future expectations. It means an attitude of curiosity, experimental openness and acceptance towards personal experiences. Mindfulness should be no judgment to what is happening; this means that the subject should focus their attention only in the event, obviating feelings of pleasure, disgust, identification or repudiation and therefore eluding distractions.

This is just one example among several of concepts and definitions that arise based on the results of mindfulness-based therapies or studies where mindfulness has been a component of the therapies e.g. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, Schmidt, Dimeff, Craft, Kanter, and Comtois, 1999), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al, 2002), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2004) or Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Although these and other treatments have been mostly focused on different clinical syndromes and psychiatric conditions like depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorder, head injury, dementia, obsessive- compulsive disorder and personality disorder, it is important to make a clarification.

Mindfulness approaches are not considered relaxation or mood management techniques, however, but rather a form of mental training to reduce cognitive vulnerability to reactive modes of mind that might otherwise heighten stress and emotional distress or that may otherwise perpetuate psychopathology. (Bishop, 2004, p. 231)

A research conducted by Yeganeh and Kolb (2009) supports the idea that the practice of mindfulness allows developing a maximum cognitive potential, but it adds that it can also be focused on the educational field. From this view they propose two means to work mindfulness in academy:

- The first, is the meditative mindfulness which is based on the development of mindfulness through performing of meditative practices. This characteristic makes it a discipline that aims to bring in and maintain the person in the present moment through breathing exercises, acceptance and intentionality.

- The second, is known as socio-cognitive mindfulness. This perspective was developed by social psychology which understood mindfulness as a cognitive categorization whose objective is to construct new forms of thought with which the person can have a better understanding of the world.

After considering these two schools of thought about mindfulness the authors highlight their three similarities, which can be summarized as *awarenes, novelty and engagement*. It is important to recognize that these three characteristics allow to enhance attention, concentration and memory processes in any discipline of knowledge when are applied in education field. With that it is guaranted a high performance, a significant and lasting learning and self-regulated emotions, all of this under the frame of the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

Similarly, Wang and Liu (2016) provide more evidence that mindfulness could ensure high performance in students of English as a second language, enabling them to have a meaningful learning experience. The study is centered in how mindfulness affects EFL students at a Northeast University in Mainland China and what strategies support their learning. The authors state “that teacher and students need to build a mindful learning environment in class, where students are encouraged to think, are interested in studying and working, are respected and respect each other, and are continuously supported and challenged.” (p. 144) therefore they proposed mindfulness techniques as an alternative to solve these problems.

Among the strategies tested in the research are: meditation, graphic organizers, improving questioning skills and free writing. All of them were integrated with guided meditation.

The results based on pre-surveys, work samples and interviews to students yielded the following data: students become aware of their thinking and generate new thoughts; students became more

willing to take risks, to be confident, motivated and engaged in the learning process than before; students ownership their learning by cultivating creativity and intelligence; mutual respect between teacher and students and among students was strengthened and finally, students report they acquired more than they expected from mindfulness strategies. As a general conclusion their study shows that mindfulness techniques do facilitate EFL learning process and support the goal of this paper.

There is a variety of studies carried out on the benefits of mindfulness in learning a foreign language. Some are focused on specific topics. Vardanjani and Zade (2013) studied the effectiveness that could have mindful-based language learning games in the learning of vocabulary. An experiment was carried out with 63 students of a regular course of English from Islamic Azad University of Omidiyeh (IAUO) who were randomly divided into control group (CG) and experimental group (EG) being the experimental group to which mindfulness techniques were applied.

However, the clear positive impact in EFL students and the benefits that the practice of mindfulness can bring to the field of foreign language teaching are not limited to learners but also to educators. Due to the requirements of the profession, language teachers are constantly forced to deal with factors such as large amounts of stress, hostile work environments and high academic loads, for which most of them have not been prepared and do not have another tool than their own experience. In order to provide emotional and mental stability and to qualify teachers for the fulfillment of labor demands, several programs have been developed focused on making teaching an enjoyable experience. Among them: Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE for Teachers), Mindfulness, Courage and Reflection for Educators (Center for

Mindfulness), Mindful School and Passageworks for Soul of Education Course for Teachers. H. Takiguchi (2015)

Applying mindfulness techniques in the classroom

As it was suggested before, mindfulness techniques can be easily applied. The fact that they can be applied with young learners, teenagers or adults is a great advantage in classes with mixed-ability levels and with students of different ages. Also, the tasks do not require any particular equipment or laboratory and that is a great advantage if we intend to apply them in public schools where resources are limited. Finally, the techniques can be implemented as part of the class so that they do not disturb the dynamics of the L2 classroom. They can be adapted and applied in various methods according to the convenience. For example, content-based instruction can be used to give students key vocabulary and short, modified readings about mindfulness, about the affective filter or about how we can use techniques to lower our affective filter. As a follow-up activity for the formal part of the class, the teacher may ask students to engage in some techniques. The reaction of the students to mindfulness techniques could even be used as an assessment task for writing. Other short techniques that teachers can use to enhance foreign language learning conditions in Colombia are explained next:

Focusing on breathing is a technique that needs to be done for a short period of time (one to three minutes). It can be done at the beginning of the class and can help learners clear the mind of distractions and concerns, allowing them to be fully present in the classroom. This technique can be used as a warm up for any class or as activity within the TPR method in which the teacher guides students on how to perform the exercise step by step. In this case, this technique would be applied in order to provide listening instruction (Morgan, 2011).

Conscious sighting is another useful technique in the process of language learning. An object or sound is selected and learners need to allow their attention to be completely absorbed by it. In addition placing the student in the present, this exercise can help language production, either by the description of the object or the opinion and the impression of the observer about it. This technique could be useful for classroom management, to calm down the whole class or some students. It could also be useful to develop writing (e.g., describing the object with as much detail as possible) or speaking (Jenkins, 2015)

To venture a little more in the vastness of mind and exploit its potential we can use exercises like *thoughts monitoring* or *visualization*. Students sit quietly with eyes closed and just observe their thoughts in total freedom without exercising any judgment or identifying with them. The teacher can guide the exercise reminding the goal, just watching their thoughts, such as a movie. In a variation of this exercise, it is the teacher who tells a story which should be visualized by students. This technique not only keeps students relaxed and focused but also it is a great way to increase creativity, an indispensable quality at the time of learning and problem solving. This practice can be complemented with an activity such as freewriting. Where students are asked to write with complete freedom about what they visualize in their experience, their thoughts or feelings (Wang and Liu, 2016).

Although mindfulness techniques do not require many resources to implement and they can be easily adapted to different methods discussed above, it is important to establish its limitations and weaknesses. Number of students, time and aversion because of religious beliefs may be some barriers in their application. However, appealing to creativity and opening of thought that it promotes, it will be possible to convert any condition in a relaxed and comfortable environment for language acquisition.

Conclusions

According to the theory of language acquisition proposed by Krashen and the theoretical foundations of methods like “Community Language Learning”, “The Silent Way”, “Total Physical Response”, “Natural Approach” and “Suggestopedia” it is a fact that affective factors have a direct influence in the process of language acquisition. Just as each student has a variety of skills and are at different levels of knowledge, they can also present a variety of emotional characteristics both internal and external that can affect their performance in the classroom. Mindfulness techniques are a suitable solution for the problematic of affective factors. They were designed for handling and suppression of feelings such as anxiety, distraction, embarrassment and nerves, the weaknesses of many students in the classroom. The correct unification between these techniques and teaching methods might generate a positive impact in foreign language learners not only in their academic performance but in personal, social and family aspects. (Yeganeh & Kolb 2009)

Besides generating significant improvement in factors such as attention, resilience, motivation and confidence which can bring a significant increase in academic performance in learning a foreign language, mindfulness techniques have the advantage of versatility in its application. One reason is that it has a close relation with some methods of language teaching for example: natural approach and Suggestopedia. Also, it can be used in any age range, from children of 4 or 5 years to adults and does not require any type of resource for their application.

Within the teaching profession one of the most important roles that must be met is that of the education of the student, not only as a professional but as valuable and useful person. While it is essential that at the end of the cycle or period meets established expectations about mastering a

particular field of knowledge, this is complementary to the mental and emotional stability so that such knowledge can be put into practice in the society. Then, it is a matter of ethics to offer students a conducive environment to the optimal development of their potentialities, because the calmer and confident students feel, the more likely they are to absorb the input provided and allow the language acquisition.

Finally, the benefits that mindfulness brings to the field of language teaching are not exclusive to learners, but also to teachers. The fact that both students and teachers can be immersed in these practices generates a bidirectional environment in the classroom, within which enters the third element that is the language. Thereby, it can be obtained the most benefit of the process of teaching language learning.

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