

Incorporating Mindfulness into EFL Literature Courses to Foster Critical Reading Ability

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DOI: 10.26907/esd15.4.06

Abstract

Recently, educators are becoming interested in exploring the use of mindfulness-based approaches to learning and teaching a foreign language. Through these approaches they tend to reduce stress (for teachers and students alike), enhance and improve classroom atmosphere, and help students to focus their attention, and even think more clearly (Tregenza, 2008; Yager, 2009; Collins et al., 2011). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of mindfulness techniques on the development of critical reading abilities of EFL learners in literature courses. Although much research has been conducted in the realm of mindfulness and positive effects are reported on stress reduction, relaxed environment, and so forth, research on the role of mindfulness in students' critical reading performance is scarce. To this end, a quasi-experimental study was undertaken with the participation of 35 BA students (both male and female) majoring in English language and literature. The participants were divided into two groups of mindful and less mindful students based on their scores on Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). Data were collected while students were engaged in some mindfulness techniques before they performed different forms of critical reading activities. A critical reading test was used as pre and posttest to investigate the gain in critical reading ability, if any, after the treatment. Paired-samples T-test through SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test of all the participants. However, since both meditative and socio-cognitive mindfulness practice was utilized in this study, further research is required to shed light on the nature of mindfulness in some new ways and explore the differential effects of these two approaches. Overall, the findings of this study will be beneficial for teachers to be aware of some mindfulness techniques and use them in their classes in order to give students the opportunity of learning in a more relaxed and focused environment.

Keywords: mindfulness, reading comprehension, critical reading.

Применение методов осознанности на уроках английской литературы для развития навыков критического чтения

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DOI: 10.26907/esd15.4.06

Аннотация

В последнее время педагоги проявляют интерес к использованию технологий, основанных на осознанности изучения и преподавания иностранных языков. С помощью этих подходов снижается стресс (как учителей, так и студентов), улучшается межличностная атмосфера, что помогает студентам сосредоточить внимание и даже мыслить более ясно (Tregenza, 2008; Yager, 2009; Collins et al., 2011). Цель настоящего исследования – изучить влияние техник осознанности на развитие критических навыков чтения обучающихся английскому языку как иностранному (EFL), на уроках литературы. Несмотря на то, что в области осознанности проведено большое количество исследований и получены определенные результаты, подтверждающие положительное влияние на снижение стресса обучаемых, все же исследований о роли осознанности в критическом чтении студентов крайне мало. С этой целью было проведено квазиэкспериментальное исследование с участием 35 студентов бакалавриата (представителей обоих полов) по специальности «английский язык и литература». Участники были разделены на две группы на основе их результатов по шкале оценки осознанности и внимательности (MAAS). Данные были получены, когда студенты были задействованы в выполнении техник осознанности перед выполнением различных заданий по критическому чтению. В ходе исследования проводился пред- и посттест для определения уровня сформированности критических навыков чтения. Для анализа данных использовался t-тест парных выборок с помощью программного обеспечения SPSS. Результаты показали, что существует существенная разница между средними баллами до и после тестирования всех участников. Однако, поскольку в этом исследовании использовались как медитативная, так и социально-когнитивная практика осознанности, необходимы дальнейшие исследования, чтобы определить природу осознанности и изучить различные эффекты этих двух подходов. Настоящее исследование будет полезно для учителей, которые смогут более подробно ознакомиться с методами осознанности и использовать их на своих занятиях, для того чтобы дать студентам возможность учиться в более комфортной и сосредоточенной обстановке.

Ключевые слова: осознанность, понимание прочитанного текста, критическое чтение.

Introduction

Reading is an essential part of any educational program. Learners need to be able to read different texts and comprehend what they read. Reading comprehension thus has received special attention in the learning environment. Research has shown that for developing language skills, especially reading skills, a more focused approach such as intensive reading or explicit instruction is also needed (Khonamri & Roostae, 2014). Intensive reading, also known as creative reading, has recently been ignored by researchers. The skill of reading comprehension is an aspect of practical reading experiences which

can be developed through teacher intervention. One way to help learners to improve the skill is a strategy instruction (Chválová & Stranovská, 2019; Stranovská, Gadušová & Ficzer, 2019). Moreover, what is, in fact, important is that comprehension will not take place without thinking and learners need to think critically if they want to be able to read critically and therefore, they should be taught how to read critically. One of the most common problems that almost all teachers face in their classes is that students are easily distracted and do not pay attention in the classroom. This is especially true in reading classes, which demand a high level of attention on the part of the learners to be able to understand and comprehend the text they read. Although research on strategy training has shown positive effects (Khonamri & Ahmadi, 2015) and most of the students are familiar with reading strategies and know how to use them in order to go through a better comprehension of the texts they read, still many are easily distracted and cannot fix their minds on the reading task. Teachers often tell them to “relax” and “calm down” but they never instruct them how to relax (Hsieh, Sass & Guerra, 2012). Distraction is a major problem in schools and even at higher academic levels. Perhaps one of the reasons why students cannot interact with each other positively in the learning environment is their distraction. Many studies have been conducted and a variety of solutions have been offered to tackle this problem. One of the ways through which learners will be able to improve their attention and achievement is to focus on the present moment and pay careful attention to what they read. In this regard, some studies have been conducted in the field of language teaching to emphasize the positive effect of being mindful in English language classrooms (e.g., Grossman et al, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2004; Salomon & Globerson, 1987; Stranovská et al, 2013). Many studies address the positive effect of mindfulness activities in learning environments (e.g., Grossman et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2004; Salomon & Globerson, 1987). In recent years however, approaches to teaching of reading comprehension have focused on the importance of acquiring strategies (e.g. summarizing, questioning, clarifying etc.) that help students become strategic readers while coping with difficult passages (Stranovská, Ficzer, & Gadušová, 2020). Since reading comprehension is not an observable phenomenon, assessing learner’s comprehension and development of the reader’s competence through the use of those strategies is important in order to affect learners’ achievement (Chválová & Stranovská, 2019).

There are different definitions of mindfulness. Langer and Moldoveanu (2000, p. 1) suggest that it is “best understood as the process of drawing novel distinctions”. This definition explains that, by drawing novel distinctions or looking at things in new ways, it is possible to stay in the present. Alternatively, mindfulness is defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn’s 1994, p. 4), which is a frequently-used definition in the literature. Bishop et al. (2004) provided an operational definition of mindfulness that has the two components of self-regulating attention and accepting orientation toward one’s experiences.

Mindfulness training (MT), which can involve engaging in daily mindfulness exercises, taking a multi-week course, or participating in an intensive retreat, may be used to cultivate this mental mode. MT has been well-studied in clinical and health settings (see, e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003), and there is growing evidence that MT is helpful for stress reduction, as well as improving mood and well-being (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). Since exercises that engage attention are central to most MT protocols, a prominent hypothesis is that MT may improve aspects of attention (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008). Recent studies have further suggested that affective improvements, which are well-reported with MT, may be mediated by improvements in non-affective core cognitive-control operations of attention and working memory

(Goldin & Gross, 2010; Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010). A growing number of studies manipulating aspects of attention have reported results consistent with the hypothesis that MT improves attentional control (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008).

By practicing mindfulness activities students can overcome their distraction and in respect to this study they can improve their reading comprehension ability, and their ability to become critical readers.

Comprehension requires that the reader go beyond what is given explicitly in order to make sense of them. Readers should employ both their knowledge of language and their knowledge of the world in order to make inferences on the texts. Reading comprehension is a process which demands thinking. Reading is not possible without thinking. One of the ways through which readers can come to a better understanding and comprehension of the texts is critical reading. Critical reading is related to thinking and it requires that the reader think critically. Kurland (2006) claims that in order for students to read critically they need to think critically as well. Waters (2006) believes that critical thinking activities provides learners with tools which can help them “stay with” or “go beyond” the given information in a text. Critical reading involves different skills: predicting, acknowledging, comparing, evaluating and decision-making. As mentioned above, most of the students are familiar with reading strategies and know how to use them in order to go through a better comprehension of the texts they read, but they may not be able to fix their minds on the present moment. Since for critical reading to happen, students need to stay focused and attempt to evaluate the text from several different perspectives, thus, perhaps helping them to become mindful learners can facilitate this process. This is the concern of the current study.

It is also important to develop the capacity for thinking. This requires the ability to manipulate ideas and represent them cognitively. This can be increased by practicing theory-building and creating situations for action. Another tool is the role of the context in current mental models, and what would change if the context changed (Yegane & Kolb, 2006). Developing this capacity is critical to mindful learning and acting requires commitment and involvement. Goal setting and feedback to monitor performance can enhance action, and so mindfulness helps learners to become intentional about action. Thus, “Learners who would like to move to action more often or more strongly will benefit from being aware of any automatic self-judgments, self-schemas, feelings and thoughts supporting inaction” (Yegane & Kolb, 2009).

Previous studies in the literature have revealed that mindfulness activities have positive effects on stress-reduction, self-efficacy, experiential learning, and other areas. But little research was found in the literature that concerned the effects of mindfulness activities on critical reading ability. Thus, the present study intended to explore the role of mindfulness activities in critical reading abilities of Iranian EFL literature students.

This study aims to answer the following research question: Does making students aware of being mindful have any effect on their critical reading ability?

Methodology

Design of the study

A quasi-experimental pretest, treatment, posttest was used to collect the relevant data for this study. There were two experimental groups but unfortunately, there was no access to a control group with which to compare the results. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants.

Participants and setting

The participants of the study were thirty-five English literature students of the University of Mazandaran who were attending their reading comprehension course. The data regarding the effect of mindfulness on critical reading ability was collected from the whole class who were divided into two groups of mindful and less mindful based on the results of the mindfulness questionnaire. The classes met twice a week, for 90 minutes every session.

Instruments

Several instruments were employed in this study to collect the required data:

1. The MAAS: mindfulness was measured through using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. This is a 15-item questionnaire which measures subjects' general tendency to be aware and attentive to present-moment events in life. The MAAS uses a 6-point Likert scale with responses varying from almost always to almost never. Respondents are asked to rate how often they have experiences of being preoccupied, difficulty staying focused, or not paying attention to present moment activities. Examples of these statements are, "I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing", and "I rush through activities without being really attentive to them". The measure is scored by calculating the mean across the 15 items, with higher scores indicating greater mindfulness. The MAAS has been found to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$) and convergent validity. The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) is the most widely used mindfulness scale to date, with validation studies indicating acceptable reliability and convergent validity (Medvedev et al., 2016).

2. Proficiency test: The Oxford Placement Test was used to homogenize the participants with regard to their language proficiency. The OPT measures a test taker's ability to understand a range of grammatical forms and the meanings they convey in a wide range of contexts. The test consisted of 60 multiple choice items of grammar and vocabulary in a cloze-test form with a rubric for scoring. Scores from 0-17 were considered as beginner, 16-29 as elementary, 24-39 as lower intermediate, 31-47 as upper intermediate, 48-54 as advanced and 54-60 as very advanced. Most of the students fell somewhere between lower and upper intermediate level. Therefore, the sample's proficiency level was reported as intermediate.

3. Critical reading test: This test was used as the pre and posttest in the study to be used as a measure of learners' critical reading ability. The reading test consisted of five short, to relatively long, passages followed by some questions of different forms including sentence completion and comprehension questions. The passages were mostly suitable for intermediate students based on the Flesch readability formula (1948). The test was used both as a means of determining the homogeneity of the participants regarding their reading ability and second, as the pre-test and post-test to measure the participants critical reading ability. The test was piloted with a group with similar characteristics to the population and the reliability of test was obtained through K-R21 and was reported to be 0.81.

Data Collection Procedure

A reading comprehension class at the University of Mazandaran was chosen for the study. In order to assess their level of proficiency, an OPT test was administered and those students whose score fell between 24- 45 were chosen as the sample. A test of critical reading was also given to them at the very beginning of the first session of the class as both a diagnostic test of their reading ability and the pre-test. The learners were also requested

to fill out the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) carefully at home and bring the next session.

Learners worked in groups and used collaborative strategic reading as a means of improving their socio-cognitive mindfulness. They had specific roles and were required to collaborate with each other to achieve a deeper understanding of the main ideas of the text. The sessions were audio-recorded by the leaders of each group for several different reasons. First, so that they can reflect on their performance after each session by writing a report for the teacher about what happened in the session. Second, since simultaneous observation the actions of all the groups was not possible, the researcher could use those recordings as sources of data.

The grouping of students in this phase was considered and controlled for their differences in terms of being mindful, and there was a combination of both in each group. As a result of this, so as to have a clearer picture of the nature of their actions and to control for the effect of mindfulness, students were randomly assigned to two experimental groups based on their individual MAAS scores, to do the same activities and tasks separately. In each session they worked on one short story chosen from “Short Stories” published by Iran Language Institute. They were asked to work in groups and each of them explained their chosen role to the rest of the members in a collaborative manner, like finding clicks and clunks, gist, collocations and posing critical questions, as they had done in their reading classes. In the second session, the less mindful learners were told to do some meditative mindfulness activities (which was mostly through paying careful attention to their breathing and relaxation) regularly at home and were asked to video-record their exercises. They were also guided to write self-reports after completing each of the relaxation activities. This was done to examine the extent to which a combination of both socio-cognitive and meditative mindfulness activities would help students in staying focused on their tasks and also in interacting with the other members. Finally, both groups were given the post-tests and the MASS was also repeated after the treatment to see if their mindfulness had improved as a result of the activities.

Results

To answer the research question and investigate whether, by simply making students aware of being mindful, there was any effect on their critical reading ability, the scores obtained from pre-test and post-test of whole class members on critical reading test were analyzed by paired samples t-test through SPSS software. The following table presents descriptive statistics for the results of pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics

		<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Pair	Pretest	16.6786	35	1.55957	.26361
	Posttest	17.6214	35	2.30996	.39045

As shown in Table 1, the mean score of the pre-test for the whole class members was 16.67, and that of the post-test was 17.62. The result of the paired samples t-test for the class is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair	pretest – posttest	-.94286	1.71829	.29044	-1.53311	-.35260	-3.246	34	.003

As Table 2 shows, paired differences of means showed that mean post-test scores of the class increased up to .94 points. The significance reported by the software was .003 and since it was less than 0.05, it showed that there was a meaningful difference between mean scores of pre-test and post-test of the class. It shows that the class has significantly progressed in the interval between the pre-test and post-test by simply making students aware of being mindful in their English reading class. Thus, the research hypothesis was confirmed: making students aware of being mindful will improve their critical reading ability.

The pre-test and post-test scores of the less-mindful group were analyzed by the Wilcoxon through SPSS software, and the descriptive statistics of this group are set out in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest	4	3.0450	.37278	2.73	3.46
Posttest	4	3.6125	.06185	3.53	3.66

As can be seen in the Table 3, the mean score of the pre-test for the less mindful group was 3.0450, and that of the post-test was 3.6125. Thus, there was a 0.5675 points increase in the post-test of the less mindful group and it shows that they had some improvement after they received the meditative mindfulness activities.

Discussion

The findings of this study contradict the study of Hsieh, Sass & Guerra (2012) which claims that mindfulness did not provide a significant increase in academic performance. But, as in this research, Flook et al. (2010) found that a mindfulness-based curriculum improved executive functioning in third- and fourth-grade students. Flook et al. contend that introducing mindfulness-based practices in elementary school may be a feasible and useful way to improve students' socio-emotional, cognitive, and academic development.

Similar to Langer and Moldoveanu (2000), who showed practitioners of mindfulness had improvements in their attention, and consequently a greater enjoyment of the task with improved memory, the present study found effective results in critical reading ability. With respect to mindful learning, Langer (1993) argued "that not only should learning be fun on its own terms, but that learning or gain that is not fun is mindless" (p. 43). Therefore, mindfulness motivates multiple perspectives and encourages the attitude that there is not one optimal perspective—rather, all may be valid (Langer, 1993). Shapiro et al. (2008) also assert that although focused attention in learning is important, educators rarely teach how to achieve this in the majority of educational settings. It is suggested that

future studies identify what type of mindfulness activity is more effective with what type of learning.

The findings are in line with what some researchers suggest, that brief mindfulness exercises *per se* are not exclusively capable of increasing levels of state mindfulness (for example, Johnson et al., 2015). Dispositional mindfulness is considered to be stable over time but can be improved through certain meditative practices, for example, practices involving focused attention and open monitoring (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015; Kiken et al., 2015), integrative mind-body practices such as yoga, tai chi and qigong (Schure et al., 2008; Caldwell et al., 2010). Another study notes that, while everyone has something to gain from practicing mindfulness, to gain the maximum benefits of mindfulness, it needs to be a practice, i.e., it must occur regularly and often (Ackerman, 2017). In another study conducted by Noone & Hogan (2018), it has been claimed that engaging in a 6-week mindfulness meditation intervention did not improve critical thinking or executive functioning to a greater extent. The findings of this study contradict what other studies reported. For example, it has been claimed by Moore, Gruber, Derose, & Malinowski (2012) that even a brief, 10-minute daily practice can result in more efficient cognition and better self-regulation. Another study on the effects of a 10-minute mindfulness exercise showed that even just a few minutes of mindfulness practice can lead to better executive attention and recognition memory, leading to better performance on a simple task (Watier & Dubois, 2016).

However, it cannot be claimed for certain that all the students' progress in critical reading in the present study is because they were made aware of being mindful. It has been claimed that introducing mindfulness programs in universities may improve critical thinking – a particularly important outcome of university education – so the focus on the university context was deemed to be important (Shapiro, Brown, Astin, 2011). However, there was no evidence for the claim that making students aware of being mindful can help them improve their critical reading abilities through the literature. There is much evidence to support the notion that engaging students in CSR strategies (collaborative Strategic Reading) will result in progress in their critical reading abilities (see, Hassanzadeh et al., 2012; Karabuga & Kaya, 2013; Klingner et al., 1998). CSR uses a mix of whole class instruction and small cooperative peer learning groups (Bremer, Vaughn, Clapper, & Kim, 2002; Klingner et al., 2015; Klingner, Vaughn, Boardman, & Swanson, 2012).

Benefits have been found of a student-centered classroom that utilizes mindfulness as a part of the daily curriculum, ranging from students who are creative and critical thinkers and who are able to apply learned material to new and novel situations, to classrooms that are calmer and more peaceful (Napoli et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Throughout the literature, there is a wealth of studies which show that mindfulness training has positive effects on different ranges of matters such as well-being, stress reduction, behavior. Within the educational context, there have been also a few studies that have focused on the benefits of mindfulness in the classroom. Barnes, Bauza, and Treiber (2003) used a meditation routine with students who had behavior problems, and discovered that attendance and behavior improved.

The results of this study showed that doing mindfulness activities and being mindful of the present moment and of what we do now, and using activities based on socio-cognitive approach to mindfulness (that is CSR in the present study) can result in improvements in critical reading ability. Therefore, it is concluded that it is better for the teachers to ask their students to be mindful in their classes and also for the teachers to be mindful of students' progress. In fact, teachers have the responsibility to let their students

know about different learning strategies especially in reading English texts, with which Iranian students have shown to have more problems. Mindfulness can improve learning according to what was experienced in some studies and was noted by some researchers namely Hyland (2008), and Nunan (1999).

Acknowledgements

This article was published with the support of the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-17-0158. The work was performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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