

A NEW WINDOW ON INTERACTION: DOES MINDFULNESS PLAY A ROLE?

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The paper aims to investigate the students interactions engaged in mindful tasks in an English reading classroom. It attempts to explore whether there is any connection between being mindful and having a good interaction.

Methods. For the research a case study approach was utilised, in which eight BA students majoring in English language and literature at the University of Mazanda-



ran participated. They were divided into two groups of non-mindful and less mindful, each having four members based on their scores from Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The data was collected in three sessions of critical reading practice, in which both groups were engaged in different forms of critical reading tasks. The less mindful group was encouraged to engage in some mindful activities prior to the critical reading tasks. All the sessions were video recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The transcribed data were analysed by the researcher and a second rater.

Results. The results of the data analysis demonstrated that there were some minor differences in interactions of non-mindful and less-mindful group in critical reading tasks. The less-mindful group seemed to have more interactions than the non-mindful one.

Conclusions. Due to the study limitations the results cannot be generalised.

Originality. Mindfulness is a fairly new concept in English language teaching which is attracting attention as an alternative to promote learning. However, within the context of education, there have also been a select few studies that have focused on the benefits of mindfulness in English reading classrooms.

Keywords: foreign language, learning, critical reading, interaction, mindfulness

INTRODUCTION

After the coronavirus pandemic, there are many negative consequences that are still affecting our society on a regional (Tkáčová, 2022a) and global scale (Tkáčová, 2022b). In addition to the often-discussed economic, information or healthcare crisis, there is current growing interest in the consequences of the COVID 19 crisis on the human psyche, including subjective satisfaction and well-being (Tkáčová et al., 2021), which might be disrupted due to limited interpersonal relationships (Králik & Máhrik, 2019). This is especially true for elderly ones who had been significantly affected by isolation, parallel to the feeling of age-related losses (Kobylarek et al., 2022), and it is true also for children and young people who “remained the most vulnerable group in terms of considerations and recommendations to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic” (Tkáčová et al., 2022, p. 27676). In all the three groups the access to education due to closure of schools worldwide was also proving to be a problem (Tkáčová, 2022c).

One of the most common problems that almost all teachers have recently faced, and they still face, in their classes during face-to-face education and also during distance education is that students are easily distracted and don't pay enough attention in the classroom. Distraction is one of the major problems in schools, and even at academic levels of study. Maybe one of the reasons why students cannot interact with each other positively in the learning environments is because of their distraction. In this case, many studies have been conducted and a variety of solutions have been offered to tackle the problem. To deal with these problems, several studies address the positive effect of mindfulness activities in the learning environments (for example, Brown & Ryan, 2004; Campbell et al., 2012; Grossman et al.,

2004; Salomon & Globerson, 1987; Thomas & Atkinson, 2016; Watier & Dubois, 2016). By practising mindfulness activities students can improve their, and as far as this study concerns, they may be able to improve their interactional skills in the classroom.

Mindfulness is a psychological mode characterised by full attention to present-moment experience without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity. To cultivate the mental mode mindfulness training (MT) can be applied either by means of engaging in daily mindfulness exercises, or by taking a long-term several-week course, or participating in an intensive retreat. MT has been well-studied in clinical and health settings, and there is growing evidence that MT is beneficial for stress reduction, as well as improving mood and well-being (Ghawadra et al., 2020). As exercises that engage attention are key elements in most MT protocols, a dominant hypothesis is that MT may improve aspects of attention (Lutz et al., 2008). Recent studies have also suggested that affective improvements, which are well-reported with MT, may be studied and observed through improvements in non-affective core cognitive-control operations of attention and working memory (Goldin & Gross, 2010; Jha et al., 2010). A growing number of researches manipulating aspects of attention have reported in the published studies results consistent with the hypothesis that MT improves control of attention (Lutz et al., 2008).

On the other hand, Tammy Gregersen (2017) claims that students' participation in negotiated interaction is essential for the acquisition process, and if students overcome their interaction breakdowns, they can achieve more effective results. This has been demonstrated through the literature by different researchers (for example, Long & Porter, 1985; Pica et al. 1996; Seliger, 1977). In reading classes, skills for reading a text critically can be combined with interactive activities (Rivers, 1992).

There has been a movement within education towards mindfulness (King & Badham, 2020). Terry Hyland (2008) and Eva Stranovská et al. (2019) stated that, mindfulness practice as an aspect of the learning process can successfully link all forms of learning with the needs, interests and values of learners and thus support development of involvement and motivation. David Nunan (1999) furthermore states that knowledge of strategies is very important too; the more aware we are of what we are doing, the more effective learning will take place. Being mindful and then collecting, noticing and doing things with the language are strategies that can improve learning and opportunities to learn.

Recent studies in the literature have revealed that mindfulness activities have positive effects on stress-reduction (Blackburn, 2020; Smit & Stavroulaki, 2021), improving anxiety and job satisfaction (Ghawadra et al., 2020), self-efficacy, social and emotional skills (Magaldi & Park-Taylor, 2016), behaviour improvements and emotional regulation (Accardo, 2017), experiential learning (Henriksen et al., 2020; Stranovská et al., 2021), positive behavioural and cognitive changes (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2016), an over-

all improvement in performance, and social interaction (Khan, 2019), and other areas (Azizi et al., 2020; Azizi et al., 2021; Maturkanič et al., 2022; Stranovská et al., 2013).

But there was little research found in the literature that concerned the role of mindfulness activities in interactions of EFL learners in general and in English reading classes in particular. Thus, the present study is intended to explore the role of mindfulness in Iranian EFL learners' interactions in reading related activities. Within the context of education, there have been a select few studies that have focused on the benefits of mindfulness in the classroom. In this regard, the present study attempted to explore whether there was any connection between being mindful and having a good interaction.

METHOD

Design of the Study

The Qual method approach is used to analyse the data collected in the present study. The study had two experimental groups which received the treatment, and it had no control group. In order to reduce the teacher effect, the participants of this study were selected from one class.

Participants and Setting

The participants of the study were selected from thirty-five English literature students at the University of Mazandaran who were attending their reading comprehension course. Eight BA students, both male and female, who were then divided into two groups of four members based on their scores on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) were randomly selected to participate in the study. The researcher was a participant observer herself during several class group meetings and took notes of the students' performance and behaviour during their reading tasks. All the class group meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed in order to be analysed. The classes met twice a week, each class lasting 90 minutes. The experimental group received some mindfulness activities during the treatment sessions and also they were asked to do the activities regularly at home and keep a record of their practices.

Instruments/materials

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

The MAAS: mindfulness was measured through using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. The MASS is a 15-item questionnaire measuring subjects' general tendency to be aware and attentive to present-moment events in life.

Class observation: the researcher participated in the reading class as a participant observer to keep a close look at the tasks performed in different

groups, and take notes of the important points that may go unnoticed in the audio-recording of the activities.

Audio recording: all treatment sessions were audio recorded by the researcher and students themselves and subsequently transcribed for further analysis.

Proficiency test: The Oxford Placement Test was used to homogenise the participants with regard to their language proficiency.

Data Collection Procedure

To conduct this study, a reading comprehension class at the University of Mazandaran was chosen. In order to assess students level of proficiency, an OPT test was administered and those students whose score fell between 24 and 45 were chosen as the sample. The learners were requested to fill in the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) carefully at home and bring it for the next session.

Students worked in groups with 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. The initial scrutiny of student's audio files showed that there was not much interaction between them when they were working in groups; but when they were asked to present their ideas to the whole class, it seemed that they became more active as if they wanted to be noticed by the teacher or their other classmates. In other words, the same people who were quite reserved and unwilling to communicate with other members, all of a sudden showed a totally different face. Moreover, the grouping of students had not considered and controlled their differences in terms of being mindful and there was a combination of both in each group. As a result of this, to be able to have a clearer picture of the nature of interaction and to follow and check the impact of mindfulness, students were randomly assigned to two experimental groups, based on the individuals' scores on MAAS, to do the same activities and tasks separately. Both groups met in two sessions per week, and each class lasted about 90 minutes. Both groups were instructed and observed by the researcher and the sessions were video recorded and transcribed in order to analyse their differences in terms of their interaction. In the second session, the less mindful learners were told to do some meditative mindfulness relaxation activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the research question and explore whether the interactions of the learners improved as a result of being mindful in the English reading classroom, at first, the groups were observed in their intact forms and some notes were taken by the participant observer. Classroom observation was used to ascertain the extent to which students had interactions

in their group works in their intact forms. The students had been told to accept a role in the group and also they were told not to fulfil just their own tasks, but to have interactions with their group members as well. But the analysis of the observed sessions, as well as the recorded voices of the group works' tasks which were all transcribed by the researcher, showed that the students did not have many interactions in their groups and they just did their part of the task without collaborating with the other members despite the teacher's insistence to do so. Below are some examples that show this clearly (all the extracts are in their intact form; because of being in an EFL situation, there are some grammar and structure mistakes):

L1: *there are some clicks here in this reading I think the sun is the flower that bloomed just one hour they were dreaming and remembering gold or yellow ... for a large enough time to hide a world with. It's like a penny it's like a fire in the store. This sentence has a point. Just want to say that the rain had stopped and the unseen sun is coming out an event which is unbelievable but a good one.*

L2: *here are some collocations. Peer out, drum of, come over, ...*

L3: *critical questions. Why does Margot refused to take a shower in the school shower rooms?*

L4: *all summer in a day. Gist. It is always known that people who are different are treated differently and most times with hate.*

As it is obvious from the extract above, the students are just doing their tasks which they are required to do by the teacher. They don't even try to have an interaction. When L1 started with telling the clicks and clunks of the story and then finished, L2 just came up with some collocations, and after that L3 posed critical questions which was not even answered by the group members, and finally L4 just started telling the gist of the story and it finished. They didn't have even a little interaction.

Here is another example of the same group in another session:

L1: *first of all, I want to read my clicks. My first click is about the single word shadow. As every word in a story can be a symbol. I think that maybe it's a symbol of darkness and uncertainty that exists in Desiree's origin. Another click is ...*

L2: *here are some collocations. drive over to, ride through, ...*

L3: *so, I'm the gist expert. So I read the story. What the point I get from the story was that ...*

L4: *critical questions. Number one: what is the whole point of the story in Desiree's baby? Number two ...*

As can be seen clearly, the group members again start by presenting just the clicks and clunks, secondly the collocations, thirdly the gist of the story, and finally with critical questions. Although the teacher of the class had emphasised collaboration on every role to ensure that they were on the right track, it seemed that they just wanted to complete the task which was assigned to them and were not that willing to interact with other members for better performance and to gain a deeper understanding of the story together. This has been reported in the literature, and shows that when

learners are assigned to work in pairs or groups to collaborate with each other, they rarely succeed in true collaboration and participation (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). In other words, students are not truly collaborative and they are not attentive to each other's talk. For instance, where the leader initiates a question, instead of waiting for the group members to complete or elaborate on his question, students continue either by answering it or posing the next question.

And another point which was odd was that while transcribing the audios sent from the students the researcher came across one in which each of the group members had recorded their voices individually! This shows that not only the group members didn't interact with each other, but also they attempted to do only those tasks assigned to them individually.

However, there were very few groups where the members had some limited interaction with each other. As a whole, the transcribed data showed that the interaction was only 30% amongst all the group works transcribed. In some of the groups there was just 1 interaction and some others had 10 interactions. But the class observations also showed that students were more active when the whole class members were going to discuss the stories. This phenomenon was so obvious that the researcher decided to create a more controlled condition to observe their interactions more closely and to explore whether mindful practice had any role in the nature of their interactions or not. To this end, two experimental groups (a less-mindful group, which received some meditative training as well after the second session, and a mindful group, which received no treatment) were chosen purposefully. Both were engaged in the same tasks as they did in their groups in the reading classroom. Three sessions were held and in each of them the group members worked on one short story. The stories were the same for both groups. Actually, everything was the same for both groups, except for the treatment that the less-mindful group members had received. All the sessions were video-recorded and audio-recorded for further analysis. All the sessions were transcribed and analysed meticulously to find differences between the two groups in their interactions. Comparing the transcriptions of the groups, it was found that the less-mindful group members had more interactions with each other. Some excerpts are presented below:

The lady or the tiger – less-mindful group:

L5: *What was behind the door?*

L7: *you know womens are unpredictable. I think about myself that eh no that's another question I know I want to say that now but womens are really unpredictable em that totally depends on that girl maybe the love was so strong that he couldn't bear see his beloved with another woman or he just she just couldn't bear him to die. It's hard to say what was behind the door*

→ L5: *ok what do you think? (asks L8)*

L8: *you are right but I hope not to be so much cruel to do that to let him die*

L7: *you know if eh that was...*

L8: (interrupts L7) *you said you said maybe her love is very strong to not to let him to marry another girl but maybe ...*

L7: *that's not love you say?*

L8: *yes, not a kind of love there is so not to die I mean her love can be exist can be continuous even though letting him marry someone else*

L7: *you know you say that is cruel but I think if she lets him marry another girl that's cruel to her. isn't it? (laughs)*

L8: *that's cruel to her*

As can be seen, the group members talk to each other and try to answer the critical question posed by L5, and also L5 in line three wants to know the other group members' ideas about the question he asked. And in another part of this story they also showed to have a good interaction with each other. Below is the extract which shows this claim:

L5: *I have another question. Why didn't people do anything against the king?*

L7: *they were scared of being placed on*

L5: *yeah I know*

L7: *I thought about it and so if they became a unity they could go against the king you know they could kill him*

L5: *yes*

L7: *but they didn't. I don't know why. They scared but this fear could lead them to kill that king. The king doesn't have power without the people around him but they gave him the power*

L5: *yes*

L8: *I think they're stupid people I know they are scared but they are stupid too they cannot accept that condition that the king is specified them I mean...*

This script shows that when L5 posed a question, the other members of the group tried to answer his question.

But analysis of the mindful group transcriptions showed that there were fewer interactions among the group members. Below is an example that shows this fact clearly:

The lady or the tiger – mindful group:

L1: *as you said I want to say both of them somehow were the bad decision for that man. Because he was in love with that girl and even behind one of the doors was the prettiest girl. It was no difference for him.*

L2: *and maybe he would prefer to be killed by the tiger.*

L1: *yes, it was a true love.*

L2: *another question. Considering the whole ceremony, how can.....*

L1: *you know I think that It was a true and just using priest but didn't pay attention to the decision. And collocations?*

L3: *turn in to, agreed upon, got out, surrounded by, sat up,*

As it is obvious in this script, the interaction occurred between L1 and L2 and the other members didn't participate in the discussion, and L3 participated only with her role of presenting some collocations and then again she remained silent up to the end of the discussion.

In the following extract again from the mindful group, it's obvious that there is not the expected interaction between the group members, and they are trying to skip each other's questions, just like L3 answers the question posed by L2 in the following example:

L2: *if it was not you know diamond why she acted like this. She was so rich why should she behave like this?*

→ L3: *Ok finished. Collocations?*

L4: *suffered from, aroused in, slip in, worn out, sat down, covered with, served on, drew out, ...*

→ *Finished*

→ L1: *clink and clunks*

L4: *it was three parts that made me excited actually. There's no clunk but the clinks first when I understood that the woman is happy and when she said that she danced with*

This is contradictory to what less-mindful group members did in this story:

L5: *yes, the next thing is to be honest. If the girl of the story was honest, for sure she could live rather for ten years. Actually that is the gist of the whole story.*

L7: *but maybe she had more trouble if she would be honest, you know? Maybe if she told the truth to her friend, something worse happened to them.*

L5: *yeah, let's say the necklace was real. If she had told her friend, maybe she could have paid back in years, not to spend all her money one night and then be in trouble for 10 years. She could have a better life, pay the money.*

L7: *you know if she had been honest, maybe she at least could feel better about her life.*

L5: *yes*

L7: *you know she had more trouble, but bad feelings. In that case, she could have, you know a bad life, but with good feelings.*

L5: *yes, for sure, but, one other thing can I add is that I think if she was honest, she could go to the bar with dress, she didn't need the necklace, that's me I'm going be here, it's my own causes or maybe about the causes, but not a factual real, but not borrowing from others or like that.*

As can be seen, the group members try to discuss the story and inform each other of their own ideas. And another example from this group:

L6: *I'm not sure whether they are lexical or grammatical collocations. Here is the word suffer from, bring about, far from, allows in.*

L5: *those are grammatical collocations.*

L6: *yes, these are grammatical. Thought up, think of, declared with, the charming girl.*

L7: *the charming girl can be a collocation?*

L6: *they're not?*

L7: *I don't know.*

L6: *I never thought about the lexical collocations. At first sight it seems they are grammatical.*

It was also interesting to see that they discussed even the collocations and the type of collocations. This kind of interaction may result in learning, as Barbara Rogoff (2003) points out at the importance of human interaction in the learning process. She in particular described how interaction among students (as opposed to interaction with adults) can lead to higher levels of thinking.

In another part we see interactions between L6, L7, and L8:

L8: *she had a desire.*

L7: *yes, she had a desire.*

L8: *a desire that should be fulfill.*

L6: *but the desire was great.*

L8: *that is normal to love dresses, to love jewelries.*

L6: *yeah, but it's not normal to ruin your life for jewelries.*

L8: *that was an accident.*

L7: *but that was risky.*

L8: *yes*

L7: *she was just thinking about being a best woman in the party.*

L8: *I don't agree with the woman. She could be wiser than that. I think some people have these desires*

The less-mindful group in the third story which was given to them showed desire to interact with group members, too. This is evident in the following example:

L8: *..... I mean, I didn't get the point.*

L5: *I think; most people think they know as he was knowing the best. The more people are in the world; they knew that how small they are.*

L8: *it was a paradox for me. Because he liked the books but in this part... now he is higher from the books.*

L5: *I think it's about how people come up with the things just because it's happen as they go for money and then they think there was people that he knows that those are not to think itself.*

L6: *I want to say something, you know after reading this, I thought about that people and their actions in their lives they have the levels like at the start they were all young and they were having fun at the party, just discussing things. After the die was present, he...*

L5: *he was depressed*

L6: *yeah, at first he was depressed. He was really you know it's my gist.*

L8: *I liked this sentence "death will wipe you off the face, we were no more than mice" it can be the sign of high soul. In my opinions.*

L7: *I don't get the point of this sentence.*

L8: *its spiritual a high level of thinking. This sentence that death wipe you off the face, I think it says that you are not more than some mice. That you are worthless.*

As shown, all group members interacted with each other. The practice of mindfulness meditation is comparable to the science behind Brain Based Learning (BBL), or "research in neuroscience on how the brain works (in

order) to gain an understanding of how students learn and develop in a classroom" (Madrado & Motz, 2005, p. 56). Gerry Madrado and La Moine Motz (2005) believe that lecturing, "the most widely used method in the classroom" is ineffective in comparison to student led learning, when students "practice by doing" and discuss in groups (p. 57).

Another example from this group which shows their interest to have interactions with each other and provide a space for others to contribute:

L6: *yeah, the old guy had money, he didn't care, but 2,000,000 wasn't anything. And the younger was ambitious.*

L8: *I want to say the young man was wiser than...*

L7: *yeah, of course he was, you know he was young and ...*

L5: *he changed the role.*

L7: *yes*

L6: *what do you mean he changed the role?*

L5: *he had money, he said ok, I give you money, I don't want it.*

L7: *not just the money. You know? The young man saw the old man had everything and he wanted to achieve that. at last the old man understood that the young man had everything.*

L6: *yeah, actually had nothing.*

L7: *no, he had the money*

L6: *at the end?*

L7: *at the end he boked it, he broke the debt. yeah.*

L6: *he had enough money to live*

L7: *yeah, that's true. And another question I have, I think you already answered to it. You also think that he broke the debt. He was wise enough, you said.*

It is clearly seen that the group members have a contingent talk (van Lier, 2014) and they share their ideas. According to Rupert Wegerif & Neil Mercer (1997), they engage critically and constructively with each other, and their interaction is lengthier and more attentive to each other's. But the non-mindful group working on the same story with each other revealed that most of the interactions are between L1 and L2 if not all.

The other two group members didn't participate in the discussion. Below are some examples:

L1: *hmm please ask your question and explain it and I will answer I'll try to answer*

L2: *ok. I mean that yes he read book throughout this story but at the end of this story before leaving that place he read more and more you know more book than previous time and before*

L1: *hmm to understand more about different opinions and points of views and well what's your answer?*

L2: *yes, somehow you answered. You know I think this is because he wanted to So it was necessary to know more about people*

L1: *exactly. As a person who had no connection with outer world. Yes*

→ L2: *hmm and another question is that what do you think about the mm banker after reading that letter?*

L1: *the banker well... before that he wanted to kill the person because he had no money to pay*

L2: *yes*

L1: *but then after reading know felt that bet was nonsense. Why they did that bet? Why they bet fifteen years for 2million and fifteen it was all nonsense*

L2: *I think he you know was.... that he thought that what I was thinking about and what is the real life I just thought about money and I didn't want to kill that person just for money*

L1: *yes*

It is obvious that just L1 and L2 interacted together and the other group members were not interested to talk about the story and even didn't try to answer their cohorts' questions. It is obvious that based on previous literature sources, only assigning learners to pairs or small groups to collaborate with each other will not create learning opportunities (Bennett & Dunne, 1991; Donato, 1994; Ellis & Gauvain, 1992; Leki, 2001; Nelson & Murphy, 1993). Merrill Swain (1997) also claims that involving learners in collaborative dialogue during knowledge-building and problem-solving activities supports L2 acquisition; but it needs to be mentioned that not all learners can interact with each other effectively. Teachers should be aware of the fact that learners may not actively mutually collaborate in pair or group work and therefore they may not achieve the goals set for the tasks to be completed (Chen, 2016).

However, the current study found that using mindfulness activities to keep learners focused on their tasks could be a useful pedagogical technique to generate better group collaboration and improved participation. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that mindfulness strategies are effective for improving communication (Amutio-Kareaga et al., 2017), and social interaction (Khan, 2019). Terry Hyland (2008) also states that, mindfulness practice as an aspect of the learning process can successfully link all forms of learning with the needs, interests and values of learners, and thus contribute to the development of task involvement and motivation. As the interaction hypothesis declares, learners can acquire more target-like language when they have opportunity to interact with more knowledgeable partners, and when they are made to correct their language while negotiating meaning in order to solve communication problems (Long, 1996, as cited in Chen, 2016, p.1).

CONCLUSION

According to the results of this study, it has been revealed that doing mindfulness activities and being mindful of what we are doing at the present moment can result in improvements in interaction among learners to some extent. Although it is not possible to generalise the research findings, it was worth trying mindfulness activities because most of the studies in the realm of mindfulness had revealed positive effects on different matters and it seemed that doing mindfulness activities may

help students to be more focused on the present and what they were doing. Thus, it is concluded that it would be better for the teachers to ask their students to be mindful in their classes and also for the teachers to be mindful in their classes. In fact, it is teaches responsibility to let their students know about different learning strategies especially in reading English texts which Iranian students had revealed to have more problems with. Mindfulness can improve learning when studying and reading texts and this claim is noted by some researchers, namely Hyland (2008), and Nunan (1999).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The first limitation was that finding two English reading classes that were taught by the same teacher in the corresponding semester to control for the teacher effect was not possible. Consequently, one class was chosen as the research site with limited participants. Further research with a control group would yield much more dependable results.

Another limitation was that it was impossible for the researcher to observe all the students simultaneously when they were doing the mindfulness activities. Thus, if video- recording of the sessions were available, there would certainly be richer data to use.

Another limitation which was related to Mindful Attention Awareness Scale was that, it wasn't possible for the researcher to check its validity in context of Iran.

Finally, this study didn't consider some factors, such as age and gender. Further research is recommended to consider these factors.

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