

Another teacher told me that: *'I have been doing ESOL support in other departments of the college this year. It makes me realise how much we ESOL teachers know about language and language learning which other teachers don't. I also notice that some teachers don't really think about how they do things like giving instructions or they can't imagine why a student doesn't understand something. That's something that's second nature to an ESOL teacher.'* (Helen)
Taking time to notice the special skills we have as ESOL teachers might help to motivate us during moments of despondency.

It's not just an understanding of language that we acquire in our job. We also learn a lot about other countries; their cultures, histories, politics and economies. John said that: *'I am a useful member of my pub quiz team because I can always answer the questions about other countries! I have somehow picked it up because of my job.'* This variety is another positive aspect of ESOL teaching. A teacher with more than 25 years experience had this to say: *'I have often*

been exhausted or stressed by my job, but never bored.' (Helen)

Despite the fact that it's rarely boring, the workload and low pay lead many teachers to wonder whether they should leave the job they have. ESOL teachers have one big advantage when it comes to job hunting. They could potentially work anywhere in the world. *'I didn't really choose ESOL teaching as a career to begin with. I wanted to travel and then found out I liked the job. But the travel thing is always a possibility again. If I get made redundant or when I retire it's an option. That's a good thing about the job'* (Mark)

In conclusion; ESOL teaching is a socially useful career. It's highly valued by the students, is rarely boring and offers potential for travel. It is also, according to most of the teachers I spoke to, a profession with great colleagues who are supportive and make you laugh. What's not to like !

Mindfulness and the ESOL Student (and Teacher)

Rachael Roberts



Many ESOL students have been affected by past traumas, and still more are subject to the chronic stressors of living on a low income and finding everyday tasks complicated by a lack of language or an understanding of cultural norms.

Teachers are certainly not therapists. However, there are some steps we can take to provide a supportive atmosphere in class, some tools we can pass on to help our students deal with their stress, and, not least, some tools we can use ourselves to manage the not inconsiderable stresses of being ESOL teachers!

What exactly is mindfulness?

An ancient practice, based on Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness is becoming an increasingly popular (and entirely secular) way to deal with stress. It is often confused with relaxation, but mindfulness is not about drifting off somewhere else; it's more about being fully conscious, really aware of what we're doing and feeling, right now.

Most of us spend most of our time only dimly aware of what's happening for us right now. We are usually too busy making future plans, worrying about stuff, remembering things and reacting to situations based on what we think we've learnt in the past. Our mind is crowded out with all sorts of stuff.

Mindfulness reduces stress by pulling us back from all that busyness into the underlying peace of the present moment. With practice we become better able to step back from stressful situations and recognise that we have choices about how to respond to them, rather than reacting automatically (and usually unhelpfully).

While I do believe that our remit as teachers can be wider than simply teaching language, I don't think most teachers would feel willing or able to engage in any kind of psychotherapy with their learners. However, most teachers don't have a problem with encouraging students to develop self-evaluation skills, and mindfulness can be seen as simply an extension of this.

Clearly, it is in the interests of learning for students to be fully present in the classroom, so how can this be facilitated?

Starting the class right

A key tenet of mindfulness is the idea of starting the day right. Beginning with just 10 minutes of sitting quietly, becoming aware of exactly what you are feeling without judging it or trying to change it can make a huge difference to how your day unfolds.

The same principles can be applied to a class. It's really important to start the class with everyone fully focused. Some ideas for facilitating this, from Deborah Schoberlein's 'Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness' are:

- For young learners, start with a song, jazz chant or clapping game.

- Take out something really interesting to look at and gradually pull in everyone's attention
- Read something really interesting aloud
- Start with a riddle or puzzle
- If learners are engaged in discussing something as they come into class, start there.

Developing awareness

In an excellent post, (see link below) Kevin Stein writes about keeping a real time journal- a reflective tool where he jots down notes about what is actually happening in the class as it happens. This helps him to make decisions about what to do next- in essence it's a tool for focusing on the present.

The same kind of activity can work very well for students, and is a good short activity for early finishers. Rather than allowing them to drift off, ask them to write a few sentences about what they notice happening in the classroom and/or about what they are feeling. This might give you an insight into the class or the student from a different angle- unless the student wants to keep what they have written private.

Or you could occasionally carry out more extended noticing tasks. For example, the Dogme activity, the Sounds of Silence, from 'Teaching Unplugged', (Meddings and Thornbury) where the class simply listens in silence for one minute to whatever is happening around them (open the windows or door) and then discusses what they heard.

Another classic mindfulness activity is known as 'beginner's mind'. Ask the students to choose an object which is very familiar to them (either something of their own or a classroom object). Ask them to close their eyes and take a few deep breaths (they can keep their eyes open if they prefer). Then open their eyes and look at the object as if they have never seen it before. Imagine you are from another planet and know absolutely nothing about this object. What does it look like? What does it feel like? What could it be used for? What else do you notice about the object?

After a while ask the students to discuss the following questions:

- Did you learn anything new about the object?
- What would life be like if we approached everything in our lives this way?
- Are there any objects, people or situations that you tend to react to automatically, as if you already know what they are and what they will do?

If students are willing and interested, this could lead into a discussion about the impact of not judging people and making assumptions.

Dialogic teaching

Any approach, such as Dogme, where the emphasis is on real-time communication between the people in

the class, will naturally promote being in the present (even if you're talking about past experiences). If students are fully involved and engaged, they are present.

In this way, most teachers will, of course, already be promoting mindfulness with their students, and will be in a mindful state themselves whenever they are completely engaged and 'in the flow'.

However, even in this kind of dialogue, we are not always in the present. Tim Lott puts this very well in a recent Guardian article:

In our western relationship with time, in which we compulsively pick over the past in order to learn lessons from it, and then project into a hypothetical future in which those lessons can be applied, the present moment has been compressed to a tiny sliver on the clock face between a vast past and an infinite future. Zen, more than anything else, is about reclaiming and expanding the present moment. (Lott: 2012)

We talk about 'teachable moments', and it is my experience that the more fully engaged people are, the more teachable moments appear. So, conversation with students can, I believe, be taken deeper, and made more memorable, by asking questions which bring students back to the here and now.

- How do you know that is true?
- Can you think of any situations in which that might not be true?
- Is there another way to see that?

This doesn't mean that you are saying that what they believe isn't true, just that you are getting them to think about it again, from a fresh viewpoint.

Emotional response

A central part of awareness is being aware of emotions and feelings. Fiona Mauchline recently wrote a wonderful blog post (see link below) about getting in touch with emotions as a way of making language more memorable.

We learn language when it becomes 'salient' for us, and an emotional response is a big part of that. A lesson on what makes you happy, on the website 'Designer lessons' (see link below), had a profound effect on a class I taught, both emotionally and in terms of the language they seemed to retain.

Similarly, you could have a lesson about what things make people feel angry (bearing in mind the questions under dialogic teaching above).

In mindfulness, however, there is an important distinction between being aware of emotions, and believing that the emotion IS you. Mindfulness works on recognising the emotion, accepting that you're experiencing it (rather than suppressing it), but seeing it as a passing event, like feeling hot or cold. They're just sensations in the moment, and will pass.

How can mindfulness help teachers?

Although teaching can be highly enjoyable, having to interact with large numbers of people in an intuitive, supportive way while simultaneously making split second decisions about what to teach and how, is quite a challenge.

Add to this the ever present potential for traumatised or stressed students to become emotionally distraught, and we can see that mindfulness is probably equally important for teachers.

Mindfulness helps us to be able to respond to a difficult situation calmly, rather than a knee-jerk reaction of feeling angry with ourselves or the students, or feeling that we're not good enough or whatever our particular 'favourite' reaction might be.

Rather than feeling exhausted and drained at the end of a class, we'll feel energised and alive (and so will the students).

Techniques to develop personal mindfulness

As I mentioned earlier, a key personal discovery is how important it is to start the day right. That doesn't mean you can't get things back on track, but it seems to really help to start by getting into the right frame of mind. How you do this is a matter of individual choice, of course: meditation, a brisk walk taking full notice of nature around you or simply setting your intention for the day- reminding yourself to stay in touch with what's actually happening, take proper breaks, eat well, or to be kinder to yourself etc.

Whenever you remember (and don't beat yourself up for forgetting, because you will most of the time), check in with what's actually happening, and how you are feeling. When those feelings are negative, don't deny or suppress them- just notice them and accept them (rather than telling yourself you shouldn't feel that way), and most of the time they'll just fade away. When they don't, you can put them to one side until later and then try a bit of pillow bashing, talking stuff through, writing it all down and so on. But remember that your thoughts aren't necessarily true- they're just thoughts. This may help you not to get too caught up in the drama of it all.

Every so often (decide when in advance), take a few minutes to just breathe and become aware. I like to go for a short walk outside.

There are several excellent books on developing mindfulness by Schoeberlein, Williams and Penman and Kabat-Zinn, which I would recommend for developing your own practice, listed in the bibliography below. Any of these books will guide you through exercises designed to help build your inner resilience, dissipate stress, deal with difficult situations and students and generally greatly improve your quality of life.

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