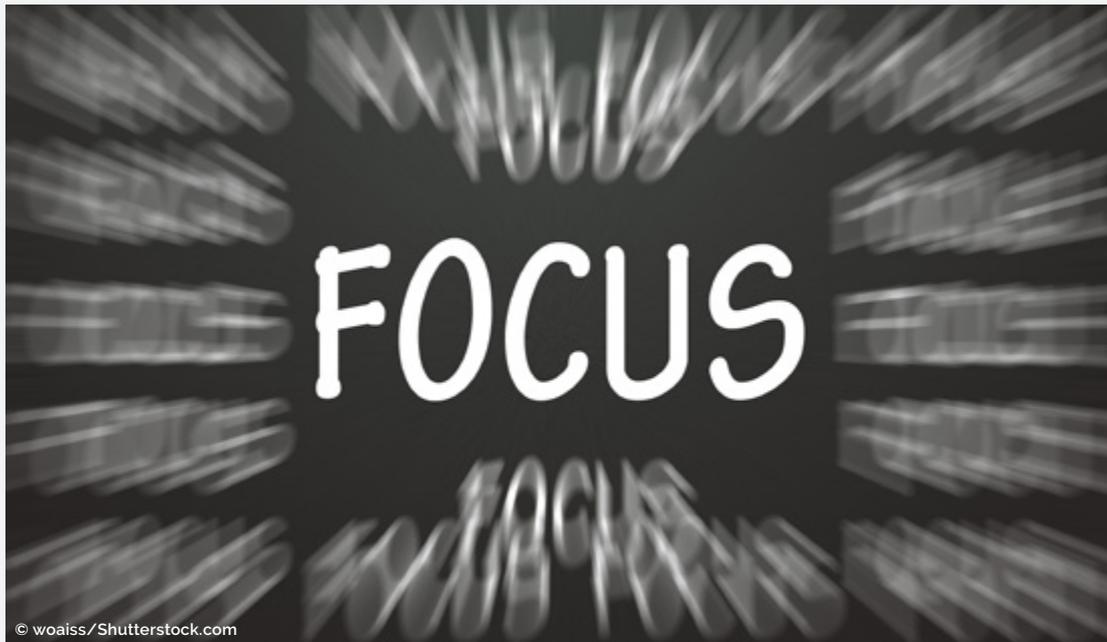


Guided Meditation in the English Language Classroom

by AMY JENKINS



We live in a busy world with frequent distractions and many things to think about. The speed of the Internet, noise pollution, smartphones, and instantaneous thought-sharing on social media keep our world in constant motion. Students entering the classroom are thinking about a thousand things: Did I get my homework done correctly? Who will I eat with at lunch? Why didn't my friend stop at my locker to say hi? Is my hair a mess? Students also have burdens from home on their minds. But when they come into the classroom, teachers expect them to be ready to learn, ready to receive information and retain it. How can students do this with so much on their minds?

As a teacher of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), I have concerns specifically related to English learners. Krashen's (1982) theory of the "affective filter" is often on my mind. I could have a lesson packed with excellent activities delivered in a safe classroom environment, but a student experiencing anxiety will struggle to acquire the day's language. Research has shown that anxiety can affect a language learner's ability to acquire a language. "Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety" (Krashen 1982, 31). What can a teacher do to reduce anxiety and lower a student's affective filter? One answer may be to use guided meditation at the beginning of

English class. Meditation may help students achieve a relaxed state and become more open to acquiring a language.

BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

Meditation has been linked to increased ability to focus and to lowering depression, anxiety, and stress. Meditation is an act of focusing one's thoughts completely and fully. It is being present in the moment, silencing other thoughts and noise running through our minds. Neuroscience has shown that the brain can absorb information and retain memory when in a relaxed state. Meditation can help one achieve such a state, thereby improving a student's memory and attention (Machado 2014).

Schools that have implemented meditation school-wide have found a reduction in suspensions, increased student attendance, and fewer behavior problems—results that lead to increased focus and learning (Campbell 2013; Kirp 2014).

HOW TO MEDITATE IN THE CLASSROOM

Knowing that I needed my students to focus and to have a low affective filter to acquire English, I tried using meditation in my classroom. I was teaching seventh-grade (ages 12 and 13) ESL classes with students representing over a dozen ethnicities.

Set the tone

When my students entered the classroom, they sat down and worked on a “bell ringer.” This is a daily exercise that gets students settled and working quietly at the beginning of class. It is typically a sentence with errors in it that students need to rewrite correctly.

After we shared the correctly written sentence, we did guided meditation for about three minutes. (You can do this longer, but I found that three to five minutes reaped the results I was looking for.) Meditation works as a classroom management technique, a way to introduce new vocabulary, and a quick way to create a calm, focused environment that leads to a lower affective filter.

Before the first guided meditation with my students, I explained meditation and the benefits of meditating. I told students that meditation will help to clear their minds and prepare them for learning. Meditation increases their focus and opens their minds to receive and remember information. I told them that our classroom is a safe place to relax and feel calm. I also described how we would use a meditation message each day, and then I demonstrated the meditation.

Choose a word

There are various forms of meditation; however, I chose to use guided meditation with my students because it provided an opportunity for vocabulary learning.

For each meditation message, I like to use one word that summarizes the thought students will meditate on. This focus word can be a new vocabulary word, a review word, or a word that is a theme of the students' current literary study. You may choose a vocabulary word from the reading of the day or any other word you like. Once you decide on a word, you may define it and provide examples of the meaning. You may also pull examples of the meaning from a text you will read in the day's lesson. For more advanced students, you may choose a famous quote that relates to the word. You can tailor the daily meditation messages to your students' level, making the messages basic or more advanced in thought and word usage. You may also provide pictures to illustrate the message.

And you don't have to choose only positive words. You can also select a word that normally carries a negative connotation and use it to help students find the positive. It is important, however, to demonstrate a positive message overall because this helps build students' self-confidence and motivates students to learn, thus lowering the affective filter.

The Sample Meditation Messages below give examples of a positive word and a negative word; messages can be adapted for a variety

of age groups and levels of learners. The Word Bank provides suggestions of other positive words you can use.

Set the scene

To set the scene for the meditation, you may play a calming sound in the background. I like to use a sound machine that plays the sounds of ocean waves, rain, a waterfall, a rainforest, and a heartbeat. You could play gentle, calming, relaxing music, or you can have silence. You may have students stay in their seats, or you may have them sit or lie in an open area in the room, depending on how much space there is.

Once you have set the scene, read the message in a positive, calm, clear voice as students begin meditating.

SAMPLE MEDITATION MESSAGES

Sample 1 (*happiness*):

Before class, write the focus word, along with its definition and examples of the word in short sentences, on the board:

Happiness (noun)—“the state of being happy” (Merriam-Webster). Happiness is floating in the pool. Happiness is the calm beauty of a sunset. Happiness is my friend’s smile.

You may also put up pictures to help students understand the word. For this message, you could show a picture of someone floating in a pool, a picture of a sunset, or a picture of a smiling friend. Read out loud with students the word, meaning, and usage.

Next, use a spoken script such as this to guide students into meditation:

Now clear your mind of all your outside thoughts. Be present, be here, in this moment. Let’s focus on one thought. Happiness. Think about what happiness is to you. Think of a moment when you were happy. As you close your eyes, picture happiness. As you breathe in, see your

picture. As you breathe out, let yourself feel the happiness you are picturing and say silently to yourself, “I am happy.” Feel yourself relax and feel happy. Breathe in. Breathe out. “I am happy.” Breathe in. “I am happy.”

Give students a couple of minutes to focus on their breathing and say silently to themselves as they breathe out, “I am happy.”

Once the time is up, fade any background music or sound to a quiet stop and say in a soft, energized voice, “You may open your eyes now. Let’s learn English!” Then move directly into the lesson for the day.

If you need to transition students back to their seats, I suggest saying, “You may now open your eyes and slowly stand up. Walk quietly, mindfully back to your seat, ready to learn English.” You may also do extension activities such as journal writing about the meditation message.

Word Bank to get you started on meditation messages

kindness	energy	uplift
mindfulness	laughter	praise
compassion	balance	thankful
empathy	tolerance	health
love	integrity	gratitude
power	trust	creativity
strength	peace	healing

Sample 2 (*failure*):

Write on the board the focus word, its definition, and examples of its usage:

Failure (noun)—“omission of occurrence or performance ... a state of inability to perform a normal function ... a lack of success” (Merriam-Webster). Everyone experiences failure; it is a part of life. Failure can often lead to discoveries and eventual success. We learn from our failures.