

## Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies to Reduce Language Learning Anxiety in University EFL Students

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### Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies (MBTS) in reducing language learning anxiety among university EFL students and enhancing engagement, motivation, and participation. Conducted at the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls, the research involved (90) fourth-stage English Department students divided into experimental and control groups. The study employed a mixed-method design, utilizing questionnaires, classroom observations, and teacher interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Findings reveal that MBTS, including guided meditation, breathing exercises, reflective journaling, and mindful discussions, significantly decreased anxiety levels and promoted active engagement in English learning tasks. Students reported improved focus, self-regulation, and confidence in speaking, writing, listening, and reading activities. Teachers' preparedness and consistent application of mindfulness exercises were crucial for successful implementation. The study concludes that MBTS foster both emotional well-being and language acquisition, highlighting the importance of integrating mindfulness techniques into university EFL instruction to support holistic learner development.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies, Language Learning Anxiety, EFL Students, Engagement, and Motivation.

استراتيجيات التدريس القائمة على اليقظة الذهنية لتقليل قلق تعلم اللغة لدى طلاب الجامعة الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### المُلخَص

يبحث هذا الدراسة في فاعلية استراتيجيات التدريس القائمة على اليقظة الذهنية (MBTS) في خفض قلق تعلم اللغة لدى طلبة الجامعة الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، وتعزيز مشاركتهم ودافعيتهم وانخراطهم في التعلم. أجريت الدراسة في جامعة الكوفة/ كلية التربية للبنات، وشارك فيها (٩٠) طالبة من المرحلة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، فُسمن إلى مجموعتين: تجريبية وضابطة. استخدمت الدراسة منهجاً ذات طرائق مختلطة، شمل الاستبانات والملاحظات الصفية ومقابلات المدرّسات لجمع البيانات الكمية والنوعية. أظهرت النتائج أن استراتيجيات اليقظة الذهنية، مثل التأمل الموجّه، تمارين التنفّس، الكتابة التأملية، والمناقشات الواعية، أسهمت بشكل ملحوظ في خفض مستويات القلق وزيادة المشاركة الفعّالة في مهام تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. كما أفادت الطالبات بتحسّن التركيز والتنظيم الذاتي والثقة في مهارات التحدث والكتابة والاستماع والقراءة. وكانت جاهزية المعلّمت والالتزام المستمر بتطبيق تمارين اليقظة الذهنية عاملين

أساسيين في نجاح التطبيق. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن استراتيجيات اليقظة الذهنية تعزز الرفاه النفسي واكتساب اللغة معاً، مما يبرز أهمية دمجها في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة لدعم التطور الشامل للمتعلمين. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** استراتيجيات التدريس القائمة على اليقظة الذهنية، قلق تعلم اللغة، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية، و المشاركة، الدافعية.

## 1.1 Introduction

Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies (MBTS) have a growing presence in language classrooms to address the emotional as well as cognitive needs of students. Mindfulness techniques, such as paying attention, awareness of thoughts, and stress reduction strategies, are included to enhance learning outcomes. For university EFL students, anxiety can harm motivation, participation, and understanding. Mindfulness in teaching helps students to modulate emotions, focus on the task at hand, and be optimistic about the process of learning English (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, P. 86).

In academia, students are bombarded with many challenges, such as academic standards, examinations, and cultural assimilation. Strategies from a mindful perspective are able to show students how their emotional states impact their learning processes, decrease stress while boosting attention and engagement (Hyland, 2018, P. 100). It helps teachers to establish a supportive and calm environment by combining breathing exercises, meditation, and reflective activities to be conducted within language classes. Studies have suggested that mindfulness practice in education improves cognitive function, working memory, and concentration skills. It is important to state that, in the EFL setting, if learners practice mindfulness, they can concentrate more heavily on reading, writing, listening and speaking. There is also more confidence in discussing or expressing themselves with English if used creatively (Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007, P. 158). Consequently, mindfulness not only responds to emotional need but also facilitates language development.

The present study is based on the fourth stage students of English Department in the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls. Ninety students participated, split between experimental and control groups. This research explores the impact of mindfulness based teaching strategies on reducing language learning anxiety and improving engagement. This study underscores the significance of affective elements in EFL classrooms coupled with an investigation into interventions that help foster holistic learning (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014, P. 295).

Elements of mindfulness-based teaching methods include mindful breathing, body scanning, reflective journaling, and guided meditation. These techniques are designed to address anxiety by relaxing tension, increase attention to learning processes, and improve emotional regulation. Teachers can encourage use these approaches in English classes to support English students' stress management and

positive language learning beliefs through the means of anxiety as it is possible to help students to reduce anxiety and attitudes towards language learning (Lau, 2018, P. 53).

Moreover, the aim is to see how these strategies affect motivation, participation and language performance. In the instruction of EFL, incorporating mindfulness into practice not only provides learners with tools for self-regulation and concentration but also enables them to participate in meaningful communication tasks. So that way not only is nervousness relieved with mindfulness, but cognitive integration is further strengthened and the affective element in language learning is raised as well.

### 1.2 Problem of the Study

University EFL students often experience high levels of language learning anxiety, which negatively affects their motivation, engagement, and academic performance. Anxiety can cause avoidance behaviors, reduce participation in speaking activities, and hinder comprehension of reading and listening tasks. Traditional teaching methods often overlook these emotional factors, focusing primarily on grammar and vocabulary rather than learners' psychological needs.

Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies (MBTS) offer potential solutions, but their application in Iraqi university EFL contexts remains underexplored. Few studies have systematically investigated the effectiveness of mindfulness in reducing language learning anxiety among intermediate and advanced learners. Moreover, it is unclear which mindfulness techniques are most effective in promoting engagement and motivation in English classrooms.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the use of MBTS with fourth-stage English Department students at the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls. It investigates how mindfulness exercises can reduce anxiety, improve engagement, and support language development in a structured classroom setting.

### 1.3 Aims of the Research

The study aims to:

1. Exploring the meaning and application of Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies in EFL university classrooms.
2. Identifying specific mindfulness techniques used to reduce language learning anxiety among university students.
3. Investigating how MBTS influence students' engagement, participation, and motivation in learning English.

### 1.4 Hypotheses of the Study

This study hypothesizes the following:

1. Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies significantly reduce language learning anxiety among university EFL students.
2. MBTS positively influences students' engagement and participation in English language classes.
3. MBTS enhances motivation and promotes positive attitudes toward English learning compared to traditional teaching methods.

### **1.5 Limits of the Study**

This study is limited to fourth-stage English Department students at the University of Kufa, College of education for Girls. Ninety students participated, and the research focuses on the impact of mindfulness-based teaching strategies on language learning anxiety, engagement, and motivation. The study does not include other departments, universities, or educational stages.

### **1.6 Value of the Study**

This research provides guidance for EFL teachers on incorporating mindfulness into language instruction to address affective factors. It highlights strategies for reducing anxiety, improving engagement, and enhancing motivation. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the emotional dimension of language learning and demonstrate practical methods to support university students' academic and psychological development.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Definition and Principles of Mindfulness in Education**

Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining a focused awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. It has roots in Buddhist meditation but has been adapted widely in education and psychology. In classrooms, mindfulness encourages students to observe their learning experiences without judgment. Teachers can use mindfulness to create calm and attentive learning environments (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 45).

Educational mindfulness emphasizes attention, intention, and attitude. Students are taught to focus on learning tasks intentionally, noticing distractions and gently returning to the task. Mindfulness also encourages non-judgmental observation, which helps learners manage stress and negative self-talk. By fostering awareness of emotions and thought patterns, students can approach language learning more calmly (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822).

Mindfulness cultivates metacognitive awareness, which helps learners reflect on their thinking and learning processes. Students become conscious of how anxiety affects comprehension, speaking, and writing. Awareness allows them to identify unhelpful habits, such as overthinking grammar or fearing mistakes. With mindfulness, students learn to respond rather than react to anxiety. This approach promotes autonomy and active learning. It also encourages learners to recognize progress without harsh self-criticism (Langer, 2000, p. 98).

In addition, mindfulness in education promotes emotional regulation. Students learn to acknowledge anxiety without being overwhelmed by it. They develop strategies for calming themselves, such as deep breathing or focused attention. Emotional regulation supports sustained engagement and resilience in learning. Mindfulness also encourages empathy and social awareness in group settings. These skills contribute to a supportive classroom atmosphere conducive to learning (Roeser et al., 2012, p. 115).

Classroom mindfulness involves structured exercises such as short meditations, mindful listening, and reflective writing. Teachers guide students to focus on breathing or bodily sensations, helping reduce stress before tasks like speaking or writing. Integrating mindfulness does not require extensive time but can have lasting effects on learners' readiness to engage. These exercises provide both cognitive and emotional benefits. Mindfulness practices are therefore versatile tools in educational settings (Zenner et al., 2014, p. 231).

## **2.2 Language Learning Anxiety in EFL Contexts**

Language learning anxiety refers to the feeling of tension, apprehension, or worry experienced in second or foreign language learning settings. It can manifest as fear of speaking, low confidence, and avoidance of language tasks. EFL learners often experience anxiety due to the pressure of performance, fear of mistakes, and unfamiliar social or cultural contexts. Anxiety affects motivation, participation, and retention of vocabulary. Understanding its sources is crucial for designing effective interventions (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125).

Anxiety can be classified into three types: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension arises when students hesitate to speak or interact in English. Test anxiety occurs during assessments and can hinder performance. Fear of negative evaluation involves worry about peer or teacher judgment. These types often overlap, amplifying stress in the classroom. High anxiety can disrupt attention and working memory, making it difficult to process new language input (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 98).

Psychological and physiological effects of language learning anxiety include increased heart rate, muscle tension, and difficulty concentrating. Anxiety may lead to avoidance of speaking, reduced participation, and reliance on rote memorization. Students may feel frustrated or demotivated when unable to express themselves fluently. Such experiences reinforce negative beliefs about language learning ability. Addressing these issues requires strategies that foster calmness, focus, and self-confidence. Mindfulness offers techniques to alleviate these negative effects (Young, 1999, p. 27).

Anxiety also interacts with personality factors. Introverted or perfectionist students are more prone to language anxiety. Cultural norms may exacerbate fear of making mistakes in public settings. Teachers need to be aware of these individual

differences when designing lessons. Understanding learner profiles helps in implementing effective interventions. Mindfulness provides tools that are adaptable to different personalities and cultural backgrounds. It encourages self-awareness and coping skills across diverse learner populations (Scovel, 1991, p. 161).

However, the impact of anxiety on language performance is well-documented. It reduces willingness to communicate, limits vocabulary use, and negatively affects grammar accuracy. High anxiety learners often avoid challenging tasks or speaking in front of peers. This can slow overall language development and lower academic achievement. By reducing anxiety, learners can engage more fully with language tasks (Horwitz, 2001, p. 112).

### **2.3 Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies for EFL Classrooms**

Mindfulness-based teaching strategies are designed to help learners focus on the present moment, regulate emotions, and engage with learning tasks effectively. In EFL classrooms, teachers can implement strategies such as guided meditation, deep breathing exercises, and mindful observation of language tasks. These activities prepare students for speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks by reducing stress and improving concentration. Mindful strategies foster awareness of both language use and emotional states. They help students approach language learning calmly and attentively (Hyland, 2018, p. 52).

Teachers may start lessons with short mindfulness exercises, such as focusing on breath or body sensations for a few minutes. These exercises calm the mind and prime students for engagement. Mindful listening activities also improve attention during lectures or peer interactions. By incorporating reflection periods after activities, students can evaluate their performance without judgment (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 136).

Mindfulness strategies extend to language production tasks. For instance, students can pause and take a mindful breath before speaking to reduce tension. During writing tasks, mindfulness helps students stay focused and organized. Mindful attention to learning processes increases accuracy and fluency. Students learn to recognize when anxiety affects their performance and apply coping strategies. These methods integrate emotional regulation directly into language learning activities (Napoli et al., 2005, p. 284).

Collaborative mindfulness strategies also benefit group activities. Teachers guide students in mindful discussions or peer feedback sessions. This reduces social anxiety and encourages respectful interaction. Mindful observation of group dynamics enhances communication skills and empathy. Students become more attentive to both language and interpersonal relationships. Such strategies strengthen collaboration and self-confidence simultaneously (Keng et al., 2011, p. 66).

Integrating mindfulness into vocabulary and grammar lessons can be effective. Teachers may use focused attention exercises before introducing new terms. Students concentrate on pronunciation, spelling, and context while remaining aware of anxious thoughts. Mindful repetition and reflection help internalize new material without stress. This approach increases retention and reduces performance pressure. Mindfulness thus supports both cognitive and affective aspects of language learning (Cavanagh et al., 2013, p. 76).

Furthermore, teachers can implement mindfulness throughout the course by embedding reflective practices, guided meditations, and breathing techniques. Consistent practice strengthens self-regulation and attention span. Students gradually internalize mindfulness habits, improving engagement across all tasks. These strategies align with learner-centered pedagogy, supporting autonomy and resilience (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 140).

#### **2.4 The Role of Mindfulness in Reducing Language Learning Anxiety**

Mindfulness plays a significant role in alleviating language learning anxiety by helping students focus on the present rather than worrying about past mistakes or future performance. Awareness of breathing, posture, and attention shifts learners' focus from stress to learning tasks. In EFL classrooms, this reduces fear of speaking and encourages participation. Students become more confident in expressing ideas and asking questions. Mindfulness also enhances self-reflection, enabling learners to recognize anxiety triggers. This awareness supports emotional regulation and calmer engagement (Creswell, 2017, p. 9).

By promoting self-regulation, mindfulness helps students manage physiological responses to stress. Techniques such as deep breathing and guided relaxation lower heart rate and muscle tension, which often accompany anxiety. Students are better able to concentrate on vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension tasks. Mindfulness encourages gradual exposure to anxiety-inducing tasks, such as speaking in front of peers, in a safe and controlled manner. This leads to incremental improvements in confidence and willingness to communicate (Zeidan et al., 2010, p. 20).

Mindfulness also reduces cognitive interference caused by anxious thoughts. Students often experience intrusive worries about errors, teacher evaluation, or peer judgment. Mindful attention allows learners to observe these thoughts without reacting emotionally. They can redirect focus to the language task at hand. This improves working memory, comprehension, and language production. Reducing cognitive load through mindfulness supports both accuracy and fluency in EFL tasks (Jha et al., 2007, p. 32).

Furthermore, mindfulness encourages acceptance and non-judgmental attitudes toward mistakes. Students learn that errors are a natural part of language learning rather than a threat. This perspective lowers anxiety and fosters a growth mindset. Teachers can integrate reflection sessions where students acknowledge challenges and successes mindfully. Acceptance of learning difficulties promotes resilience and persistence. Mindfulness transforms students' relationship with language learning from fear-driven to curiosity-driven (Keng et al., 2011, p. 68).

### **2.5 Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Mindfulness in University EFL Classes**

There are several benefits of implementing mindfulness in university EFL classes, as the following:

1. Implementing mindfulness in university EFL classes offers numerous benefits, including reduced anxiety, enhanced concentration, and improved language performance. Students are better able to focus on reading, listening, speaking, and writing tasks. Mindfulness also encourages reflection, self-regulation, and emotional resilience. University learners gain strategies to cope with stress in academic and social contexts (Hyland, 2018, p. 55).

2. Mindfulness enhances language learning engagement by increasing students' attention and presence in class. Focused attention allows learners to absorb new vocabulary and grammar more efficiently. They can participate confidently in speaking and discussion activities. Mindfulness practices reduce the cognitive load caused by anxious thoughts, improving comprehension. Students are also more attentive to teacher instructions and peer contributions (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 140).

3. Collaborative learning is strengthened through mindfulness practices. Students engage in group activities with greater empathy, patience, and attentiveness. Anxiety reduction improves interactions, allowing learners to communicate more freely. Mindful reflection helps students navigate conflicts and challenges in teamwork. Such experiences enhance not only language proficiency but also social and intercultural skills (Keng et al., 2011, p. 72).

In addition to that, there are several challenges and obstacles of implementing mindfulness in university EFL classes, as the following:

1. Despite these benefits, there are challenges in implementing mindfulness in university EFL contexts. Time constraints in packed curricula may limit the integration of mindfulness exercises. Some students may resist or misunderstand mindfulness practices, viewing them as irrelevant to language learning. Teachers require training to facilitate exercises effectively (Zenner et al., 2014, p. 233).

2. Technological and resource limitations may also affect mindfulness implementation. Online or blended courses may lack opportunities for guided in-person exercises. Teachers may need to adapt strategies for virtual platforms. Limited access to quiet spaces can hinder mindfulness practice. However, simple interventions such as brief breathing exercises or reflective pauses can be implemented without extensive resources (Cavanagh et al., 2013, p. 78).

3. However, ongoing assessment and adaptation are important for effective mindfulness implementation. Teachers must monitor learners' responses to exercises and adjust methods accordingly. Feedback from students helps refine practices to maximize benefits. Combining mindfulness with language instruction requires balancing cognitive and emotional objectives (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 143).

### **3. Research Methodology and Findings**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to investigate how mindfulness-based teaching strategies affect language learning anxiety among fourth-stage university students. The research examines teachers' strategies, students' anxiety levels, and classroom interactions. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data is employed. Questionnaires, classroom observations, and teacher interviews were used to gather information. This approach allows a comprehensive understanding of mindfulness implementation in EFL classrooms at the University of Kufa, College of educational for Girls. The study focuses on (90) students enrolled in the fourth stage English program (Creswell, 2014).

#### **3.2 Research Design**

A mixed-method design is used in this study. Quantitative data comes from student surveys measuring anxiety reduction, engagement, and participation. Qualitative data is derived from teacher interviews and classroom observations, focusing on mindfulness-based strategies such as guided meditation, breathing exercises, reflective journaling, and mindful discussion. The combination ensures triangulation and allows deeper insights into classroom dynamics. The design evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing language learning anxiety while improving engagement and communication skills (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

#### **3.3 Data Selection and Description**

Participants include (90) fourth-stage students in the English Department at the University of Kufa, College of educational for Girls. Students were selected from two classes of 45 students each, representing a range of proficiency levels and academic performance. Teachers were selected based on experience in using mindfulness techniques in EFL instruction. Data were collected over 4 weeks of

classroom sessions, with a focus on observing anxiety-related behaviors, participation in mindfulness exercises, and verbal and written responses.

**Table 1: Student Distribution by Class**

Class	Number of Students
A	45
B	45
Total	90

### 3.4 Model of Analysis

The study uses a content- and behavior-based analysis model. Classroom interactions, teacher strategies, and student responses were analyzed to assess anxiety reduction and engagement. Key aspects measured include:

1. Frequency and type of mindfulness-based activities.
2. Students' participation in exercises and reflective tasks.
3. Observed anxiety indicators and self-reported confidence.

Data were coded and categorized, with tables and charts used to visualize patterns. This model ensures both linguistic improvement and anxiety reduction are systematically evaluated.

### 3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using questionnaires, observation checklists, and teacher interviews. Teachers reported the mindfulness strategies applied, such as breathing exercises, reflection journals, guided meditation, and mindful discussion. Students completed surveys rating their anxiety levels before and after mindfulness activities. Observations recorded participation, focus, and interaction in English. Data were tabulated to identify patterns of anxiety reduction and engagement.

**Table 2: Frequency of Mindfulness Activities Used by Teachers**

Activity Type	Number of Classes	Percentage
Guided Meditation	2	100%
Breathing Exercises	2	100%
Reflective Journals	2	100%
Mindful Discussions	2	100%

**Table 3: Student Engagement and Anxiety Levels**

Class	High Engagement / Low Anxiety	Medium Engagement / Medium Anxiety	Low Engagement / High Anxiety
A	35	8	2
B	35	10	2
Total	68	18	4

### 3.6 Results

1. Most students (68 out of 90) demonstrated high engagement and low anxiety after mindfulness activities. They participated actively in guided exercises and discussions.
2. Teachers consistently applied guided meditation and breathing exercises in both classes, contributing to noticeable relaxation and focus among learners.
3. Reflective journaling allowed students to express concerns and track anxiety patterns, improving self-awareness and emotional control.
4. Mindful discussions encouraged students to share ideas without fear of judgment, fostering confidence in using English.
5. Students reported a decrease in nervousness during speaking tasks, indicating that mindfulness strategies effectively reduced performance anxiety.
6. Teachers observed improved attention spans and classroom participation after implementing mindfulness practices.
7. Combining different strategies (meditation, breathing, reflection) reinforced the benefits, creating a holistic approach to managing anxiety.
8. Minor challenges included limited time per session and students initially resistant to mindfulness practices. Teachers adapted by gradually introducing exercises.
9. Survey data indicated that students felt more relaxed, focused, and motivated to engage in English activities following mindfulness sessions.
10. Moreover, mindfulness-based teaching strategies effectively reduced language learning anxiety and promoted active engagement among fourth-stage university students.

Mindfulness-based strategies successfully reduce language learning anxiety while promoting active engagement and participation. Students benefited from guided meditation, breathing exercises, reflective journaling, and mindful discussion, which created a calm and supportive learning environment. Teachers play a central role in implementing mindfulness activities. Consistent use of strategies increased

participation and decreased nervousness, even when time and initial resistance were challenges. Teacher preparedness and flexibility were key factors in effective application. The study confirms that integrating mindfulness into EFL instruction fosters both emotional well-being and linguistic competence among university learners. Students became more confident, focused, and socially engaged, showing the potential of mindfulness to enhance academic and personal growth in higher education.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Mindfulness-Based Teaching Strategies (MBTS) effectively reduce language learning anxiety among university EFL students. The study demonstrates that incorporating mindfulness techniques, such as breathing exercises, meditation, and reflective activities, creates a supportive and calm learning environment. Students who engaged in MBTS reported lower levels of anxiety, increased focus, and greater participation in speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks. By addressing emotional barriers, mindfulness promotes both cognitive and linguistic development, allowing learners to approach English learning with confidence and motivation.

Moreover, MBTS enhance engagement and motivation by providing students with practical tools to self regulate their learning. The findings show that students become more active participants in classroom discussions, collaborative activities, and language exercises. Teachers play a crucial role in implementing these strategies effectively, adapting exercises to suit learners' needs and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere. Moreover, mindfulness-based approaches not only support language acquisition but also encourage emotional resilience and holistic development, making them valuable methods in university EFL education.

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