

Stress and Learning: Mindfulness Strategies in Tertiary Level ESL Classrooms

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Introduction

Learning is highly influenced by mental health. Psychological well-being is crucial for both teachers and students to be actively engaged in teaching learning activities. It is evident that when students are too anxious or stressed out, perceptibly they do not perform well in studies. Since mindfulness practice has become popular in different contexts, and studies have proven the positive impingement of this practice on learning, there has been substantial interest in mindfulness-based approaches to reduce cognitive vulnerability to stress and emotional distress that cause learning disorders and pedagogical failures. According to Langer (2000), "increase in competence, memory and creativity and decrease in stress" can be achieved by practicing mindfulness. This is reiterated by Broderick (2013) that mindful education can bring emotional stability and strength together with interpersonal effectiveness. In fact, mindfulness is defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) as an "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally," and by Scott Bishop (2004) as a "nonelaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, sensation that arises ... is acknowledged and accepted as it is."

Research Problem/s, Objective/s

COVID 19 pandemic has already challenged education from primary to tertiary levels due to the rapid shift to remote learning. While slowly getting adapted to the new normal, Sri Lankan students are again facing with serious challenges due to the ongoing power cuts, price hikes and shortages of essential items in the country. Economic crisis has not only hindered the teaching learning activities, but also affected the students' psychological well-being. There is a dramatic decline observed by the researcher in the attendance of the university students for lectures, especially for ESL lectures. Further, when compared to the previous semester, the performance in the formative assessments and motivation and engagement in the classroom of the same group of students recognizably seem lacking. Thus, this study focuses on mitigating the gravity of the issue by integrating mindfulness strategies in ESL instructions.

Materials and Methods

Concerning the ESL students who are supposed to depend on online learning under the circumstance of COVID-19, it is perceived that mindfulness-based approaches work out in introducing them to the ESL instructions. In order to verify it empirically, I carried out an experiment with a group of 72 students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce at a state university through semi-structured interview, focus group discussions, pre-test and post-test. Mixed method was adopted to analyze the data. An intervention of mindfulness techniques was implemented for a month after a pre-test.

Results and Discussion

The results showed that the students apparently knew they were in a state of not being able to concentrate on studies. They agreed that they had to wait in long queues for fuel and other essential items. Most of the students said their families were financially unfit. Thus, they could not attend lectures regularly nor concentrate on studies. After implementing some simple mindfulness techniques like deep, mindful breathing, guided imagery, frequency music and creative visualization at the beginning of lectures, students could slightly get on the track. Their engagement and performance increased. Their post-test marks and the discussion after the intervention also show that these strategies have positive impact on the students.

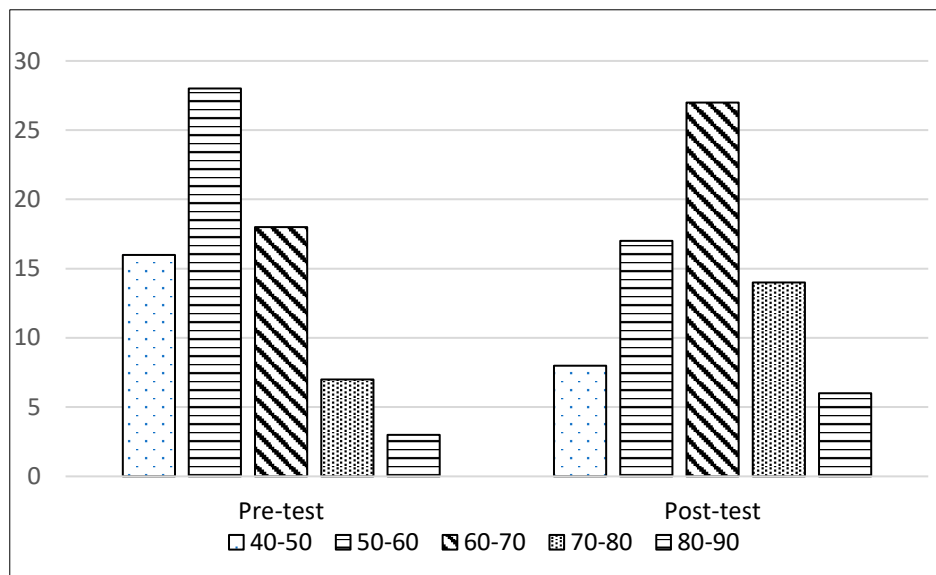


Figure 1. Pre-test & Post-test marks

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlights the potential benefits of mindfulness practice in improving students' personal well-being, concentration and positive emotions reducing stress and anxiety. Mindfulness strategies helped a lot in getting back my students on track. After they got familiar with the practice to some extent, I could observe a positive change in their performance. It helped them learn better as well as cope up with their personal and social issues. Therefore, it is suggested that further empirical studies related to mindfulness strategies with professional assistance can be carried out to promote mindfulness cultivation exercises during classroom management as part of the ESL methodology. Teachers can professionally be trained so that they will be able to give proper guidance to their students.

Keywords: Stress, Challenges, Learning, Mental Health, Mindfulness

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