

BE HAPPY: A mindfulness journey – Mindfulness in language learning & assessment

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This session intended to illustrate the concept of “mindfulness” and the ways of integrating this concept into an educational setting, especially the area of language teaching. All four of the session speakers represented different branches of Pearson. The whole session was basically divided into five different sections:

- introduction to mindfulness
- attitudes of mindfulness in an educational context
- learning languages & growth mindset
- life skills
- well-being at exam time

The session started with a mindfulness practice called “hugging breath”. It was simply opening both arms and breathing in and then closing the arms and breathing out. During this time, the participants were instructed to enjoy their breaths and hug themselves and feel the connection as much as possible. This was an approximately two-minute activity, and was suggested as a nice lesson starter. They moved on to explain “mindfulness” by giving Kabat-Zinn’s definition:

“... the awareness of paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

It was mentioned that this concept is a journey rather than a one-shot solution, replacement for counselling/therapy, or relaxation method. They mentioned that mindfulness is fostered through some formal practices, daily mindfulness activities such as carefully preparing a cup of coffee or tea, and therefore engaging fully with what is happening in the present moment. By doing these, it was suggested that individuals achieve better awareness and self-management. This, as a result, creates happier, calmer, and more focused individuals.

In the light of these, it was mentioned that “teacher well-being” is fundamental, and they suggested nine attitudes to cultivate in our teaching, which are *non-judging, acceptance, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, letting go, gratitude, and generosity*. To give an example of one of those attitudes, a *non-judging* teacher would be more open to new possibilities and perspectives of their students rather than having a clear-cut perspective or conclusion on them. This would eventually benefit the teacher both professionally and personally in the long run.

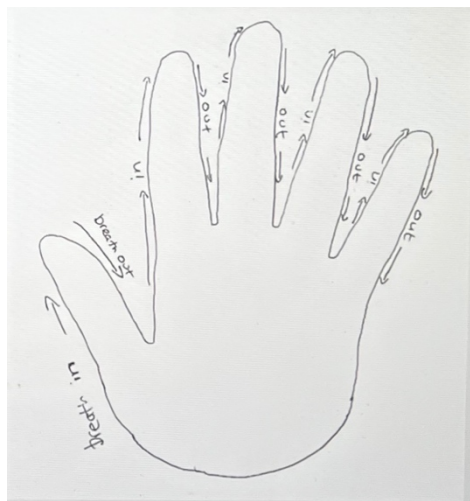
Afterwards, it was explained why mindfulness is needed in educational contexts. In the future, students, including our children, will need to know how to pay attention, how to concentrate, how to listen, how to learn, and how to have healthy relationships with themselves – including their thoughts and emotions – and with others. Making mindfulness a habitual part of life could contribute these to both students and teachers:

- being able to pay attention
- focus and concentration
- curiosity
- observation without judgment
- acceptance and self-compassion
- stress management
- performance and productivity
- managing busy lives

The speakers started to offer some practical ideas for language teachers to implement mindfulness in their classrooms:

1- Three deep breaths before the exams: this could be a practice to eliminate anxiety and notice the emotions in the body.

2- Finger breathing: this is to create a positive environment, encouraging students to express how they are “really” feeling today with an emotions meter and to check in regularly throughout the day:



3- A mindful walk to practice noticing: this helps students learn to “notice”, improving focus and concentration and focus on the present moment. The example activities for this could be *scavenger hunt* or *mindful walk*. Teachers may ask them to notice things they see on their walk / things they have not seen or noticed before.

4- Grateful moment / focusing on small positives: asking students to write down what they are grateful for in their lives, which could be placed anonymously in a class poster in one of the class corners.

5- Smile time: you may take a mindful moment in your class and ask people to be a pair and ask them just to smile at each other. Regular smiling changes your class’s mood and creates an opportunity for your students to have good feelings for each other.

The speakers moved to the topic of *fixed* and *growth mindset* by Carol Dweck. People with fixed mindsets tend to believe that their intelligence is fixed at birth, and they cannot do much to change it. On the other hand, people with growth mindsets believe that their talents, abilities, and intelligence can be developed through hard work and effective strategies. In the light of this, Dweck

(2016) mentioned that people with a growth mindset achieve more in school, and later in life. To promote growth mindsets, the speakers suggested a practical activity to implement in classrooms:

Building confidence: these are some sample worksheets to build confidence and, in this way, promote growth mindsets:

Changing Negative Thinking into Positive

Don't let negative thoughts control how you think about yourself. If you find yourself having negative thoughts about yourself or others, **CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK!** It may be difficult at first but you can do it with practice. Read these statements every day to learn how to change negative thoughts into positive ones.

| Negative Thought | To | Positive Thought |
|-------------------------|----|-------------------------|
| I'm a failure | | I am learning |
| I am different or weird | | I am unique |
| I am ugly | | I love how I look |
| I wish | | I'm going to... |
| I'm bad at this | | I need more practice |
| This is a problem | | I accept this challenge |
| I am boring | | I am consistent |
| Nothing is going right | | I'm grateful for... |
| I can't | | I can |
| I have no time | | I will make time |

3 Things I Love About Myself & Why

You have so many great qualities, talents, and skills. When you love something about yourself, you need to know why so you can remind yourself, and continue to build your confidence.

- 1 I love _____
because _____
- 2 I love _____
because _____
- 3 I love _____
because _____

This suggests that, rather than having statements like “I cannot do this”, it would be better to reword it this way: “I cannot do this **yet**”. This is a nice suggestion to take into consideration when preparing our LP self-checklists in order to promote *growth mindset* as well.

The concept of growth mindset could also be applied in assessment as well according to the speakers’ session. They suggested that a growth mindset can help students’ approach to exams as well. It can help them see test or exam results as useful information and feedback with which to inform future learning and growth. In this way, it may help them foster the mind of “opportunities” not “mistakes”. Taking these into consideration, Pearson developed some ways to encourage it:

Monitor progress and learn: this extract is from one of their young learners’ coursebooks and shows the learners that they are on the right path and their effort is being rewarded:



Finally, they moved on to talk about exam anxiety. They listed some factors affecting performance in language tests:

- anxieties over second language use
- worry about performance
- an overly formal testing environment
- unfamiliar content and format of assessment
- general well-being

Mindfulness could help with exams as well considering how it contributes aspects such as *focus and concentration, stress management, open-mindedness, control and calm*, etc. to individuals. In addition to this, they mentioned that it is important to create a stress-free testing environment. This may include name-to-picture matching, story-writing, participating in a conversation, or in a group speaking conducted while they are busy completing an activity like a board game. Furthermore, they introduced the idea of making the exams more student-friendly by adding phrases like “good luck and have fun!”. To give an example, they mentioned that in Pearson exams, listening parts start with a motivational message and the speaker has a gentle voice:

Good luck and have fun!

Listening part of the exam starts with a motivational message and the speaker has a gentle voice

Example: What does Bill want?

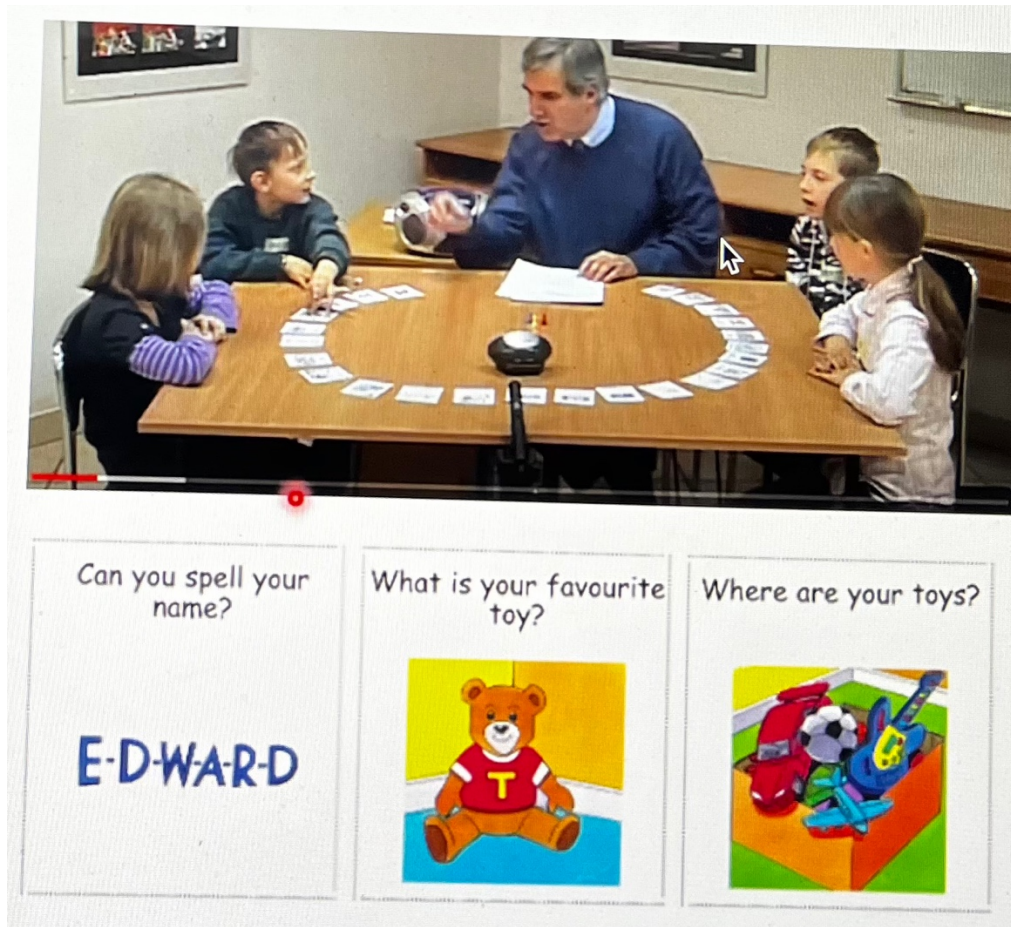
1. Where is Liu?

2. What is Liu buying for tonight?

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Another example they are actively doing is “rewarding effort & achievement”. In the young learners tests they conduct, every student participating gets at least two stars. They claim that no one is left out at the awards ceremony, and everyone is celebrated.

A final example to give of stress-free assessment is their speaking exams. They do this with the help of a board game, again with young learners. They claim that this is a reassuring environment with classmates. One of the unique traits of this test is its speaking format, which is not a traditional T-S conversation but a board game in which a group of students interact together and the examiner is making observations, making the task communicative and realistic:



References:

- Dweck, C. (2016, January 13). What having a “Growth Mindset” actually means. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your mind to face stress, pain, and illness. New York: Dell.