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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Honors Thesis

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MINDFULNESS

INTERVENTIONS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

by
Lauren Smith

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Linguistics Department
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Advisor: Mark Tanner

Honors Coordinator: Don Chapman

ABSTRACT

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MINDFULNESS
INTERVENTIONS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Lauren Smith
Linguistics Department
Bachelor of Arts

Mindfulness has received increased attention in recent years in educational contexts as a tool to help students mitigate negative emotions, enhance resilience, and improve academic performance (Dawson et al., 2020; Galante et al., 2018). Although interventions teaching principles of mindfulness have flourished in elementary schools and university contexts (Felver et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019), limited research has looked at the effects of mindfulness interventions in ESL (English as a Second Language) educational contexts. This thesis details a study investigating student perceptions of the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions in an Intensive English Program (IEP) for non-matriculated university students over the course of one semester of instruction. The interventions were carried out once a week for 13 weeks through a 65-minute lesson. Each lesson elaborated on a principle of mindfulness related to students' experience learning a language in a foreign country, such as cultural mindfulness and self-compassion. A total of 107 students and 6 teachers in eight different ESL classes participated. Students' English proficiency ranged from Intermediate Low to Intermediate High based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The intervention was carried out completely in English, and was integrated into the students' regular English curriculum. Teachers were given the flexibility to decide how to best incorporate the mindfulness lessons into their class.

To determine the perceived effects of mindfulness lessons, focus group interviews were held during week 13 of the semester with the participating classes where students were asked about their experiences with the mindfulness lessons. The qualitative interview comments were analyzed following a phenomenological approach (Groenewald, 2004) in an effort to understand how students perceived their learning experience. The qualitative comments suggest that students' overall reaction to the mindfulness intervention was positive, highlighting benefits to both their emotional "toolbox" and their classroom experience. The results, however, also indicated that some students were not without reservations to whether or not the mindfulness intervention was effective. The study also provides implications of this research for incorporating mindfulness instruction into the ESL classroom.

Keywords: mindfulness, intervention, ESL, EFL, perceptions

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Introduction

To many in our current age, the term "mindfulness" might conjure an image of seated meditation, an orange-clad monk, or difficult yoga positions. In a modern world where demands for our attention abound, it is not difficult to understand why it may seem that this concept of mindfulness can only be achieved by those who dedicate their life to achieving it. However, researchers' rapid growth of interest in mindfulness in recent years has expanded the understanding of mindfulness from being an exclusive experience for the spiritually enlightened to a universally applicable practice. Mindfulness and mindfulness interventions represent a flourishing interest in the fields of medicine, psychology, neuroscience, healthcare, education, business leadership, and other major societal institutions (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Indeed, this originally Eastern concept has had an almost mystical hold over modern society, exciting promises of physical and emotional benefits even in secular circumstances.

The concept of mindfulness is an ancient one. Since the teachings of the Buddha in the fifth century BC, Buddhist tradition has taught principles of mindfulness for 2,500 years, encouraging "presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 86). The Pali word *sati* was a technical term used by Buddhists to describe this state of awareness, meaning 'recollection, memory, or thinking upon'. It was first approximated to 'mindfulness' by Pali scholar T. W. Rhys Davids in the late 19th century (Gethin, 2011, p. 263). The term mindfulness still has strong connections to Buddhist practice, but contemporary applications have grown far outside religious contexts, so much so that it can be difficult to pin down all of its uses with a single definition.

What is Mindfulness?

Present-day Buddhist scholars' exploration of this question has led to a general consensus of the characteristics of mindfulness, without reaching an exact definition. Awareness of the present moment is the first key feature of mindfulness, and it must be noted that in Buddhist tradition, this awareness is the core of being human. We are constantly aware of our present moment to some degree, but the consistent practice of mindfulness is seen as the way to the alleviation of human suffering as outlined in the teachings of the Buddha. Contemporary scholars have described the Buddhist practice of mindfulness as a 'lucid awareness' (Bodhi, 2011) from moment to moment, including extended focus on a singular stimulus, be it memory, experience, or a familiar object (Kang & Whittingham, 2010). Observation and open acceptance of ongoing events are other central characteristics of the Buddhist perspective of mindfulness (Creswell, 2017; Quaglia et al., 2015). However, this tradition also posits that open acceptance is also joined by a level of evaluation, discerning which thoughts are wise and later taking action (Quaglia et al., 2015). There are no set guides for achieving mindfulness, and its intensity can vary from light and effortless to heavy and intentional.

Contemporary psychology has taken a particular interest in mindfulness in recent years as interactions between Eastern and Western ideologies have grown, receiving especial attention from clinicians. Therapies incorporating elements of mindfulness inspired by Buddhist tradition have abounded, although it may be argued that mindfulness as originally defined by millennia of Buddhist tradition, including enlightenment and compassion for all beings, is lost in translation when blended with Western empirical practice (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Definitions vary across the

profession, and particularly in the field of clinical psychology, characteristics are chosen to simplify the incorporation of mindfulness into therapeutic interventions. Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness finds inspiration in Buddhism, describing it as non-judgmental, moment-to-moment attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; 2015), and has served as a basis for various therapies based in mindfulness. Other defining characteristics of mindfulness in the field of clinical psychology include mindfulness as a metacognitive, self-regulatory, and acceptance skill (Brown et al., 2007).

Shapiro et al. (2006) created three 'axioms' of mindfulness in an attempt to not only define the widely debated term, but also delineate essential aspects of its practice: intention, attention, and attitude. Intention refers to the purpose with which one approaches mindfulness practice, be it stress relief, improved health, or combating anxiety. Attention is perhaps the most obvious axiom, indicating the direction of attention that characterizes Buddhist meditation techniques and cognitive self-regulation as designated in psychology. The final axiom, attitude, involves bringing an attitude of openness, kindness, and 'non-striving' to the practice of mindfulness. The development of these three principles endeavors to provide a theoretical construct to allow clinical psychologists to determine "whether and how mindfulness affects change and transformation" (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 374). This model for mindfulness gives a simple, yet applicable outline for those seeking to develop mindfulness curriculum.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 and can be considered the birth of interest in mindfulness practice in clinical psychology (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). An eight-week course incorporating mindfulness practice, was implemented at the Stress Reduction Clinic associated with the University

of Massachusetts Medical Center. The program was unique in that it did not teach mindfulness through the lens of Buddhism, but instead developed skills of mindfulness to help combat the stress and illness hospital patients were facing, using techniques from yoga to meditation, and avoiding the dogmatic terminology that is not easily understood outside of those familiar with Buddhist tradition (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). MBSR was successful in improving patients' recovery experience, and has formed the foundation of the rapid, interdisciplinary expansion of mindfulness that continues to this day.

Mindfulness Interventions

Secular interest in mindfulness-based therapies and intervention programs began with the development of MBSR, and this interest has only grown exponentially since the late 1990s (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Within the realm of clinical psychology, various mindfulness-based interventions have been developed for treating different psychological ailments, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), designed to help patients struggling with depression (Segal et al., 2002). MBCT was determined to be successful in helping patients prevent relapsing into depressive episodes and stands with MBSR as the two widely accepted interventions whose focus is entirely on developing mindfulness that have been successfully empirically tested (Creswell, 2017; Ma & Teasdale, 2004). Other programs developed for clinical psychology purposes that supplement principles of mindfulness into a larger treatment include acceptance and commitment therapy and dialectical behavior therapy (Melbourne Academic Mindfulness Interest Group, 2006).

The proliferation of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in the discipline of psychology has led to primarily positive results. In a comprehensive review of

mindfulness interventions, Creswell (2017) evaluates the effects of randomized control trials (RCT) of mindfulness-related interventions. Findings from this extensive review conclude that RCT mindfulness interventions "can improve mental and physical health, cognitive and affective factors, and interpersonal outcomes" (Creswell, 2017, p. 508). While Creswell's review gives evidence for the positive effects of mindfulness interventions, the reviewed studies present limitations to extending such optimistic results to all mindfulness interventions. According to Creswell, RCT mindfulness interventions have primarily occurred in psychological and medical circumstances, such as hospitals and clinics, and other areas (such as schools and workplaces) that could benefit from mindfulness-based research have lacked high-quality studies that are free from methodological limitations.

That is not to say other areas have an absence of research focused on mindfulness interventions, however. Mindfulness has become a topic of interest for the workplace, especially as working conditions have become increasingly more fast-paced behind the wake of globalization, in turn aggravating employee stress levels and mental health concerns (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017). Although RCT mindfulness interventions may not be as prominent in the workplace as in clinical situations, a variety of research has been conducted looking at the effects of mindfulness-based interventions on employees. Michaelsen et al. (2023) completed an exhaustive review of 91 studies investigating mindfulness interventions in the workplace. The review found that mindfulness interventions in the workplace not only positively affected participants' mindfulness and well-being levels, but also had a small to medium effect on job satisfaction, work engagement, burnout, mental and physical health, and other job-related outcomes. These

effects held true for short-term follow-up assessment, but not for long-term follow-up assessment. Michaelsen et al. (2023) call for further research seeking in-depth, high-quality data related to specific mindfulness enhancing practices.

Mindfulness interventions have also gained popularity in contexts outside of disciplines traditionally associated with psychology and business. Mothers who participate in MBIs have been shown to experience decreased prenatal stress (Zhang et al., 2023) and reduced anxiety and depression during pregnancy (Lucena et al., 2020). Koppel et al. (2019) found that mindfulness interventions may help to prevent distracted driving and therefore improve road safety. MBIs have also been found to increase athletes' performance, flow, and other psychological outcomes (Sparks & Ring, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). While this expansion of mindfulness interventions into such a copious assortment of disciplines may flood academia with glowing reviews of the effectiveness of mindfulness, such positive conclusions must be viewed cautiously while encouraging a greater push for higher-quality data from carefully designed studies (Creswell, 2017).

MBIs in Education

As the research surrounding mindfulness-based interventions has wielded consistently positive results, the field of education has taken particular interest in MBIs. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) reference the mechanisms of mindfulness outlined by Shapiro et al. (2006) to assert the potential benefits of teaching mindfulness strategies to K-12 students due to high levels of stress in children and adolescents. University students have also shown increased levels of psychological distress, seeking out school-provided counseling services more each year (Williams et al., 2015). However, similar to other disciplines, while MBIs in education have demonstrated great promise in enhancing

learning and teaching, further research is needed incorporating more rigorous designs and measures to determine the validity of these results (Roeser, 2014).

MBIs have been increasingly carried out in K-12 contexts within the last decade and have proved to be both feasible and effective in improving both psychological and educational outcomes in school settings (Felver et al., 2016). Various studies have found specific benefits of MBIs in K-12 contexts to include enhanced resilience for ethnically diverse students (Felver et al., 2019), better quarterly grades and classroom behavior (Bakosh et al., 2016), and improved mental health (Carsley et al., 2018; Sapthiang, 2019). MBIs have also had similar effects when implemented in university settings with students, effective in preventing depressive symptoms (Ma et al., 2019), increasing well-being (Dawson et al., 2020), and strengthening resilience in the face of academic stress (Galante et al., 2018). However, it is important to note that interventions carried out in public schools as well in universities often rely on self-reported data from their participants, whose bias may play into such positive results (Dawson et al., 2020). Whether or not MBIs in educational settings are truly as effective as studies claim, it is clear that they do benefit students to some extent.

Students are not the only subjects of MBIs in the field of education. Teachers have also been a large focus of integrating mindfulness intervention in schools. Educators across all levels of education face unique challenges to their mental health, experiencing high levels of stress, burnout, social and emotional demands, and low job satisfaction (McCarthy, 2019; Roeser et al., 2012). These difficulties can lead to decreased teacher performance in the classroom, in turn affecting student engagement and learning (Roeser et al., 2012). The high-stress nature of many teaching jobs has led educational

organizations to implement MBIs as a way to help teachers cope with their work-related challenges.

Taylor et al. (2015) used mixed methods following the implementation of an MBI for public school teachers to evaluate any reduction in their stress and found that teachers' tendency to forgive and view colleagues and students in a more generous light was increased throughout the intervention, as well as a slight reduction in their stress. Emerson et al. (2017) found that MBIs for teachers of children aged 5–18 years showed the greatest promise in increasing teachers' ability to regulate their emotions, therefore mitigating stress. In a review of research surrounding MBIs for in-service teachers, Hwang et al. (2017) found that such studies are conducted not only with the motive of increasing teacher well-being, but also increasing teacher performance in the classroom. Early career teachers in Germany were found to have better classroom management and teaching performance as results of decreased teacher stress and increased job satisfaction following the implementation of an MBI during their training (Beuchel, 2022). Hwang et al. (2017) also confirms that benefits of MBIs for teachers include increased psychological health and well-being.

MBIs in an ESL/EFL Context

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), subsets of the field of education, have also begun to take interest in mindfulness practice. The last decade in second language acquisition (SLA) research has seen a shift from a framework that originally limited language learning to a cognitive effort to both a cognitive and emotional experience (Shao et al., 2019; Swain, 2013). ESL/EFL students, as well as any student of a foreign language, face unique emotional

challenges. Excitement, pride, despair, shame, frustration, and anxiety have been identified to be some, but not all, of the prominent emotions experienced while learning a language (Bown & White, 2010; Pishghadam et al., 2016; Plonsky et al., 2022). With this change in ideology has come an increased focus on emotion and an increase in research regarding positive psychology and mindfulness with the ESL/EFL context (Dewaele et al., 2019).

As a way to help students cope with emotional challenges and improve their experience learning a language, mindfulness and its instruction have formed a part of this increased interest in emotion within SLA research. Students of English who demonstrate high levels of mindfulness are shown to have less anxiety related to the language (Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Ersanlı & Ünal, 2020; Shen, 2022). As a reflection of these findings, MBIs in recent years within ESL and EFL contexts have primarily been conducted with a focus on improving language performance and reducing foreign language anxiety (Koçali & Asik, 2022). Results from such studies have shown that MBIs might reduce language anxiety as well as improve language achievement (Moghadam et al., 2022). However, it bears mentioning that various studies of MBIs and ESL/EFL learners have not found significant positive results (Azizi & Kralik, 2020; Stringer & Looney, 2021).

MBIs in the ESL/EFL context are a fairly recent development and more research is needed to determine their effects beyond language anxiety and language improvement.

Perceptions of MBIs

Most of the research surrounding mindfulness and MBIs has focused primarily on the benefits and effects of mindfulness practice. These effects, such as reduced anxiety or

increased mindfulness, are most often determined through self-reporting surveys in which participants respond to questions or statements using a Likert scale. Very little research, however, has investigated participants' general perceptions toward MBIs. In the realm of medicine, Wrapson et al. (2022) found that stroke survivors who participated in a six-week mindfulness course saw the training as beneficial in helping to reduce stress and giving patients coping strategies to navigate their emotions while in the recovery process. In a study focused on ethnic and racial minorities, Spears et al. (2017) held focus groups for treatment-seeking participants, of which 91% were African American, who had participated in a mindfulness intervention. Findings from the focus groups include perceptions of mindfulness as a way to improve mental and physical health.

Within pedagogical research, limited studies have investigated student and teacher perceptions of mindfulness. Wigelsworth & Quinn (2020) interviewed teachers to identify their understanding of MBIs and found that although many teachers demonstrated limited knowledge as to what mindfulness is, they had generally positive feelings towards implementing mindfulness in the classroom. Bamber & Schneider (2022) reviewed qualitative studies considering college students' perceptions of MBIs and found that students viewed the interventions as generally helpful. Students also saw the mindfulness instruction as a coping mechanism that allowed them to handle stress, manage their mental health, and succeed academically as well as professionally. Understanding participant perceptions of MBIs is crucial to understanding their effectiveness and future implementation.

Research Questions

Considering the increasing emergence of MBIs in the context of ESL/EFL and a lack of research of students' perceptions of such, this study endeavors to answer the following questions regarding the ESL students' perceptions of an MBI integrated into their language classroom:

1. How do students perceive mindfulness?

2. What are students' reactions to having a mindfulness curriculum integrated into an ESL classroom?

3. What feedback did students provide after participating in 13 weeks of mindfulness lessons?

4. What recommendations do ESL/EFL students have for future implementation of mindfulness instruction in a language classroom?

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted at the English Language Center, an intensive English program (IEP) at Brigham Young University. Of a total of 168 students enrolled in the center, 107 students participated in the study, including 51 male and 56 female students of varying nationalities and native languages (see Tables 1 and 2). A total of 48.6% of the participants were L1 Spanish speakers from 12 different countries in Central and South America. A total of 20.6% of the participants spoke Japanese as their native language. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 years old and had an average age of 24.63 years (SD = 7.17). Participants also ranged in English language proficiency as measured on the ACTFL proficiency scale with 39 students at the intermediate-low level, 29 students at

the intermediate-mid level, and 39 students at the intermediate-high level (see Table 3).
Student proficiency was determined through Language Achievement Tests (LATs), a
placement test administrated by the English Language Center. As per the university's
Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations, students were able to choose whether or
not their data was collected and used in this study. Every student agreed to participate.
No control group was used, as the purpose of data collection was to assess students'
reactions to the mindfulness curriculum and the design was qualitative and not
comparative. Mindfulness interventions were integrated into eight listening and speaking
classes at the intermediate level.

Table 1

Students' Nationalities

Nationality	Count
Argentinian	2
Bolivian	2
Brazilian	4
Chilean	8
Colombian	3
Congolese	5
Costa Rican	1
Dominican	3
Ecuadorian	7
El Salvadorian	1
Guatemalan	1
Honduran	3
Iraqi	1
Ivorian	1
Japanese	22
Korean	9
Mexican	13
Mongolian	1
Nigerian	1
Panamanian	1
Peruvian	8
Russian	3
Syrian	1
Taiwanese	4
Ukrainian	1
USA Citizen	1
Total	**107**

Table 2

Students' Native Languages

Native Language	Count
Arabic	2
Chinese	4
English	1
French	7
Japanese	22
Korean	9
Mongolian	1
Portuguese	4
Russian	3
Spanish	53
Ukrainian	1
Total	**107**

Table 3

Students' English Language Proficiency Levels

ACTFL Proficiency Level	Count
Intermediate Low	39
Intermediate Mid	29
Intermediate High	39
Total	**107**

Instruments

Qualitative data was collected at the end of the semester by means of focus groups held during instruction hours with the class present. Focus groups were held at the conclusion of the study to gain feedback on students' experiences. The focus group interviews were led by researchers who were all active participants in a Psychology of Language Learning research group. These researchers were given instructions on how to lead focus groups, such as eliciting more details when students give vague answers and encouraging all students to participate. The following five opened questions were asked.

1. *How was your overall experience with the mindfulness lessons this semester?*

2. *Were there any lessons that stood out to you? Why?*

3. *How well do you feel that the mindfulness lessons connected with learning English?*

4. *This semester we had mindfulness lessons once a week. How do you feel about the frequency of the lessons?*

5. *How could the lessons be improved?*

All student participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and were given time to think of their responses. Student responses were recorded and later transcribed to allow for analysis.

Curriculum

The curriculum used for the mindfulness intervention in this study is found in *Positive Psychology in the Classroom* (Phillips et al., 2022), a book of lessons plans on three areas of positive psychology: PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement), characters strengths, and mindfulness. The mindfulness curriculum includes thirteen lesson topics (see Table 4 for a full list of topics) based on Shauna Shapiro's research defining the three axioms of mindfulness (attitude, attention, and intention) as well as her book *Good Morning, I Love You: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Practices to Rewire Your Brain for Calm, Clarity, and Joy* (Shapiro, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2006). While the intention of using mindfulness to improve language learning was present in each lesson, attitude and attention varied depending on the topic. For example, in the lesson titled Self-Compassion, students were taught how to direct their attention to themselves with a compassionate and open attitude.

In the lesson Mindful People, students' attention was drawn to mindless habits, such as overeating or endless browsing, with an attitude of non-judgment and curiosity.

Table 4

List of Mindfulness Lesson Topics

Mindfulness lesson topics
● Overview of Mindfulness
● Mindful People
● Responding to Disappointments
● Perfectionism
● The Five Senses
● Connecting to the Past
● Self-Compassion
● Perspective
● Handling Strong Emotions
● Mindful Academic Relationships
● Mindful Learning
● Cultural Mindfulness
● Selective Attention

The lessons were designed to last 65 minutes, consistent with the length of existing classes at the ELC, and they were taught every week for thirteen weeks. No particular thought to the order of lessons was given, although the nature of first lesson, Mindfulness Overview, lent itself to being taught first as a way of orienting the students to the array of lessons. In order to better facilitate the integration of the lessons into classes with varying proficiencies and language learning objectives, two lessons were

created for each of the thirteen topics. One lesson was designed for students at the intermediate-low proficiency, and the other for students at the intermediate-high proficiency. Although lessons did not have great differences from one proficiency level to another, but for the lower level of proficiency, more scaffolding and modeling, as well as simpler media were used on occasion. For example, the lesson Perfectionism began with an activity in which the students responded to the speaking prompt "Describe a big mistake you made in the past." In the intermediate-low proficiency lesson, students were provided greater support on how to respond to this prompt, with questions like "When, why, and where did the mistake happen?" as well as an example response to help students prepare a response. The higher proficiency lesson did not provide such support.

After being designed, lessons were made available to the general public on edtechbooks.org, an open educational resource website. A sample lesson is given in the Appendix. All lessons can be found at the following web address: https://edtechbooks.org/PositivePsychologyintheClassroom/mindfulness.

In the Fall semester of 2021, these mindfulness lessons were piloted in Listening and Speaking classes at the English Language Center. Informal feedback was then received after their implementation from teachers and in end-of-semester evaluations. These lessons were then revised by members of the Psychology of Language Learning Research Group to better account for the participants' circumstance as ESL students based on student feedback that the mindfulness lessons felt irrelevant to the ESL classroom. For example, instead of teaching mindful acceptance of mistakes in general, the lesson on Perfectionism was edited to focus specifically on mistakes made while learning a language. Language learning outcomes such as supporting ideas and opinions

with facts, examples, and reasons, as well as mindfulness outcomes such as using grounding techniques to counter anxiety or identifying how to approach a problematic situation mindfully, were used to help guide each lesson.

Lessons typically consisted of a warmup/review activity to activate prior knowledge, an overview of the mindfulness principle being taught, three to six practice activities, a homework challenge, and daily follow-up activities. Activities in the lessons involved practicing speaking, listening, writing, reading, and vocabulary skills and used materials such as videos and audio clips to enrich the discussion of the mindfulness topic. The daily follow-up activities typically consisted of class, group, or partner discussions on what students were doing to practice the principle outside of class, or about videos and/or quotes related to the mindfulness topic. For example, after the lesson topic of perfectionism, a sample five-minute activity included presenting an ancient Chinese proverb: "Failure is the mother of success." Students discussed what they thought this quote meant, then shared an experience of when they found success and the failure they experienced to get there.

Procedures

Teachers who gave the mindfulness lessons in their classes were all experienced educators who had completed or were in the process of completing a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). A one-hour training on how to implement the lessons was given as part of the teachers' pre-semester orientation. This training involved an explanation of expectations for teaching the lessons, as well as physically participating in a sample activity from the mindfulness curriculum.

Teachers did not have to teach the lessons in any particular order and were encouraged to teach the lesson topic that most closely matched the proficiency level of their students, adapting the lesson if necessary. Flexibility was allotted to the instructors to teach the lessons how they best saw fit, such as teaching the lesson that aligned with the language learning objectives they were focusing on in a particular week or dividing the 65-minute lesson into four parts taught throughout the week (e.g. four 15-minute lesson segments taught each day class was held). No data was collected on which teachers decided to teach the mindfulness topics for a full lesson and which teachers decided to break them into parts throughout the week.

Qualitative Analysis

Recordings of the focus groups were transcribed using Amberscript, an AI transcription service. The recorded videos and their auto-generated transcripts were afterwards edited to separate student and teacher responses and then corrected for spelling and content accuracy. A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data. Phenomenology focuses on exploring the lived experiences of participants of a research study. Phenomenological data analysis entails bracketing, delineation, clustering, and summarization (Groenewald, 2004) which steps will be elaborated on hereafter.

The first step in data analysis is bracketing, which involves consciously suspending judgment and distancing oneself from personal reality. This enables a focused examination of the experiences of the individuals being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers conducting the analysis employed bracketing to ignore assumptions about the interviewees and delve into the essence of their described experiences.

The next part of the phenomenological data analysis is delineation. Delineation involves an initial exploration of the data, extracting insightful words and phrases (also known as units or codes) that embody the observed phenomenon. Researchers delineate comments made during the collection of qualitative data, creating a unit for each new idea expressed. Following delineating the comments into individual codes, researchers then complete the next step of clustering. During clustering, researchers group codes and their associated data into clusters or categories. This process may be repeated until a reasonable number of principal categories appear. Researchers then summarize the categories or clusters. Summarization involves linking these categories, themes, or clusters to present a holistic understanding of the data. It provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of the participants.

The data was independently coded by two researchers, with the codes primarily derived from the participants' responses. For instance, when an interviewee stated, "I like mindfulness lessons, but sometimes there [sic] repeat some things in the lessons," this response was coded as "repetitive." After coding all the participants' interview responses, the researchers proceeded to group the codes into specific clusters, categories, and themes. For example, the codes "self-compassion" and "perfectionism" were categorized as "personal growth." This was still done independently by the two researchers.

Next, the researchers connected the themes and created an overall summary of the student's perceptions regarding their experience with mindfulness throughout the semester. The researchers independently analyzed the data, then met together to collaborate and share their individual analyses. Although researchers differed slightly in their own delineations of participant comments, discussion and negotiation allowed them

to reach a consensus on the data summary and identify salient themes that emerged from the responses. This dialogue between researchers was crucial to eliminate personal bias and ensure the dependability of the qualitative analysis.

Results

A total of 584 comments from the transcripts of focus groups were analyzed and interpreted using a phenomenological approach to the qualitative data collected as described previously. After clustering the units derived from these comments, researchers identified five principal themes (see Table 5) that summarized the students' stated perceptions of the mindfulness interventions. These themes included challenges students faced, the helpful nature of the lessons, personal growth, connecting with others, and mindfulness curriculum.

Table 5

List of Salient Themes from Focus Groups

Themes from focus groups
● Challenges
● Helpfulness
● Personal Growth
● Connecting with Others
● Curriculum

Theme 1: Challenges

One salient theme that emerged from the analysis was challenges. This theme encapsulates comments students made expressing personal challenges, as well as comments that identified mindfulness as a potential tool for coping with those challenges.

Types of challenges mentioned ranged from personal problems to specific struggles with language learning (see Table 6). For example, students frequently talked about the personal challenges they faced throughout the time mindfulness lessons were given. Student did not give reasons as to what the cause of these challenges were, but it is clear students were facing a variety of obstacles, saying the semester was "difficult" and "stressful" for personal reasons. For example, one student mentioned having health problems. Another shared that it was his first semester learning English and referenced his struggles with understanding and speaking.

Accompanying these comments about general stress were comments about the difficulties of the skills involved in learning a language. One student mentioned, "I feel so nervous when I need [sic] presentation in front of the class." Another student described feeling "very frustrated because it's very difficult" while learning English, particularly listening and speaking. Such responses were frequently, but not all the time, prompted by the questions "how was your overall experience with the mindfulness lessons this semester?" and "how well do you feel that the mindfulness lessons connected with learning English?"

Table 6

Example Student Comments About Challenges

General challenges	*The mindfulness lessons have helped me a lot this semester because I have been through some health issues.*
	I remember when we started this semester it was so stressful for me.
	I like these classes because in this semester it was difficult for me, because of personal problems.
	And it applies to me, like right now and at this time, because I'm so tired, I just want to finish this semester
Language learning challenges	*Sometimes we feel stressed with that English and sometimes we need to take out everything that is in our minds.*
	So sometimes I was afraid and scared about speaking English, and sometimes I said I can't improve.
	I was really like, I couldn't speak with other people because I was afraid to say something wrong.
	We have been through a lot of things and we are learning English.

Note: Grammar in participants' responses was edited for clarity.

Theme 2: Helpfulness

Accompanying the theme of challenges, students frequently commented on the helpful nature of the mindfulness lessons. Statements associated with this theme of helpfulness ranged from general assertions, such as "it is helpful," to specific examples like "it was really good practice to learn something like in college." Types of comments within this category focused on a variety of benefits: focusing on the present moment, expressing emotions, coping with stress, relaxation, and improving English (see Table 7). Overlap between these subcategories is frequent in many comments, for example, a student mentioning focus and improving English in the same comment.

Table 7

Example Student Comments About Helpfulness

Focusing	*I had a good experience with mindfulness because this helps me to be more focused in my thoughts and in myself too.*
	Mindfulness helps me to concentrate and focus on just one thing and pay attention to what I'm doing.
	I can be more focused on the things I am doing because normally I think about work, family, or what I'm going to do after class, but mindfulness helps me with that.
Emotional Awareness	*Now I can express my feelings more, my bad and good feelings.*
	At the end of the day, before we go home, we can do an analysis of ourselves, how we feel, how are we doing?
	We are aware of our feelings and how we are feeling with English, and how I can deal with that because I'm trying to speak, but I feel bad or I feel insecure.
Coping With Stress	*And also to apply after situations that we can feel stressed about.*
	It is stressful but I have a way to go through it.
	We learned more about how to be less stressed, to be more focused and meditate.
Relaxation	*It helps us to try to relax and prepare our mind and our body to learn some new ones in our class.*
	For me it was some of my favorite classes because it was a time to relax.
	It helps you to keep calm and helps you to be aware and sometimes to make decisions.
Improving English	*To take learning English step by step and be relaxed.*
	Those activities helped us to improve our listening and speaking abilities.
	Mindfulness helps me to concentrate and get the main points and the major details of a reading passage.

Note: Grammar in participants' responses was edited for clarity.

Although student attitudes towards mindfulness lessons were generally positive, it is important to note that not all students viewed the mindfulness lessons as beneficial. While comments describing the positive effects of mindfulness lessons were present in all eight classes, comments expressing doubts about the relevance and helpfulness of mindfulness in an ESL classroom were only made in four classes. No personal information was attached to comments, so it is unknown what these students' demographics were. However, negative comments usually focused on the lack of academic content or failing to see the value of mindfulness in an ESL classroom, which suggests that some students thought mindfulness instruction was not relevant to their own personal experiences. One student said, "For me, those activities weren't helpful," while another student described the lessons as "unclear," questioning "How can I understand that I need [mindfulness]? Why do I need it?"

More comments that did not see the mindfulness lessons as helpful were made. However, statements reflecting positive attitudes towards mindfulness were distributed through various classes, while negative attitudes were concentrated in two classes taught by the same teacher. Students shared how this teacher choose to teach the mindfulness lessons at the end of the week and often did not get to finish the content. This method of teaching the lessons might have affected students' participation and experience with the mindfulness curriculum.

Theme 3: Personal Growth

While not all students found the mindfulness lessons to be effective, another principal theme that strongly occurred throughout participant comments was personal growth. This theme encompasses comments made about changes students made to their

perspectives and behaviors throughout the semester, such as self-compassion, accepting

reality and mistakes, and application of mindfulness techniques (see Table 8).

Table 8

Example Student Comments About Personal Growth

Self-Compassion	*I need to understand that I'm not perfect and I need self-compassion because I'm always being compassionate with everyone, but not me.*
	I can be patient with me and accept me, like I'm good.
	I needed that class to not be too hard on myself while I learn English.
Accepting Reality	*We have to accept some times when everything is not right, but keep working on this and improve it.*
	Making a mistake is not a bad thing. It's one of the ways to success.
	Obviously, we're going to make mistakes, but we're just trying and we remind ourselves just to keep trying because we're learning.
Application of Mindfulness Techniques	*One of the mindfulness lessons was first you take one minute to breathe and focus like your purpose and then start.*
	For example, when we start our class sometimes, we start with a prayer or sometimes we start with meditation, and that helps us to learn English.
	We can focus on our senses, we can forget all around and we can feel better.

Note: Grammar in participants' responses was edited for clarity.

Theme 4: Connecting with Others

Student comments about their experience with the mindfulness lessons not only

focused on personal growth, but also on improved connections with others. Connecting

with others inside and outside the classroom throughout participation in the mindfulness

lessons was another principal theme in participant comments. Students remarked about class discussions and how they facilitated sharing personal experiences and learning about their fellow classmates. Increased empathy towards others, particularly towards different cultures, was another key aspect of participants' perceived improved connection with others (see Table 9).

Table 9

Example Student Comments About Connecting With Others

Class Discussions	*We had the opportunity to share a song from our country. It was nice to share.*
	I think mindfulness classes are good because we were in pairs and we had time to look for the question and talk and express our ideas.
	Mindfulness lessons have more organization so it feels more friendly and then more closer.
Increased Empathy	*Sometimes we realize the difference and we feel the difference with each other, but we need to have respect for each other.*
	I learned how to not be rude with people because I don't know their feelings. I don't know what they think about it.
	You should understand the other person's perspective or be in their shoes.

Note: Grammar in participants' responses was edited for clarity.

Theme 5: Curriculum

Due to the nature of the interview questions, mindfulness curriculum strengths and weaknesses were perhaps the most salient theme that emerged in focus groups. Questions three, four, and five asked in the focus groups focused on the particular mindfulness curriculum used for this study: 1) how students perceived the usefulness of

the lessons as they related to their English language learning curriculum, 2) how frequently they should be taught, and 3) in what ways the lessons could be improved.

Comments specific to the mindfulness curriculum varied greatly, but centered on the topics of lesson duration, deeper application of content, vocabulary, and connection to English language learning (see Table 10). In regard to the frequency of the lessons, some participants expressed that the lessons were too short and more time was needed to deepen their understanding of mindfulness. Other students believed that the lessons needed to be shorter and allow for more English instruction time. No consensus was identified between student opinions on the effectiveness of the frequency of the lessons.

It did seem, however, from the students' comments that allowing teachers the flexibility to choose whether to teach a 65-minute lesson one day a week or break it up throughout the week was well-received by the students. While in four classes it was mentioned that they liked that their teacher gave the mindfulness classes at the beginning of the week, students in two other? classes mentioned how their teacher changed the day of mindfulness instruction from Monday to Thursday halfway through the semester. These classes were the only classes that gave positive comments about teaching the lessons at the end of the week. From this, it can be concluded that allowing teachers the flexibility to teach these lessons when teachers deem it best in response to their classes' interests and needs is an important consideration.

While general attitudes towards the mindfulness curriculum were that it was helpful and encouraged personal growth, a substantial number of comments were made encouraging the making of the curriculum more interesting. Suggestions to achieve this included making the instruction "deeper", spending more time on each topic and

providing material students could access outside of class if they were interested. Once again, however, students were not in complete consensus about what constituted deeper content, as some students shared they struggled to understand mindfulness as it was presented to them in the current curriculum.

Perhaps the most prevalent idea shared by students related to the theme of curriculum was vocabulary. Several students mentioned the value of the new vocabulary they learned during the mindfulness lessons, particularly words related to emotions and daily life. There were students in lower proficiency level classes though who commented that the vocabulary was difficult to understand, while higher proficiency classes claimed that the vocabulary was too easy. Across all levels, attitudes about the relevance of the vocabulary varied. Some students stated that they were able to use the vocabulary outside of class, but other students said the vocabulary was too specific to use anywhere but in class.

Overall, most students did view the mindfulness curriculum to be connected with learning English objectives, reasoning that learning new vocabulary, listening to media, and class discussion helped them improve their English. Not all students, however, agreed with this statement, saying that the focus on mindfulness felt disconnected from learning English and wasn't related to language objectives. Approximately one to three students per class of 14-16 students (maybe put percent here?) voiced such reservations.

Table 10

Example Student Comments About Curriculum

Duration of Lessons	*Once a week is good because we can practice the whole week.*
	Once a week isn't enough time to really learn a lot or to really practice what mindfulness is.
	I think I want shorter lessons.
Deeper Application	*How can we put mindfulness in the real world? Not only like getting the knowledge, and not knowing what to do with it.*
	Talking about mindfulness, I think we needed to have deeper lessons.
	It should be more deep. Maybe not change the topic every week.
Vocabulary	*Sometimes I couldn't understand those, like, vocabularies.*
	We learn new vocabulary and it's not just like academic words, but words that are for our lives.
	Usually the vocabulary or the videos or the audios were kind of basic.
Connection to English Language Learning	*We could still learn English and learn mindfulness at the same time.*
	I think it wasn't really connected to English. We are talking about mindfulness or we are talking about language.
	Mindfulness lessons were connected to English because we focus on learning English and spoken English and thinking in English.

Note: Grammar in participants' responses was edited for clarity.

Discussion

The data presented suggests that ESL students perceive mindfulness as a helpful way to cope with personal challenges. This is in line with Bamber & Schneider's (2022) findings that university students perceive mindfulness interventions as beneficial and describe them as a coping mechanism for managing stress and anxiety. Student perceptions of mindfulness as a way to navigate personal challenges also reflects the axiom of intention laid out by Shapiro et al. (2006). Mindfulness interventions must take into account the intention that participants bring to their practice, whether it is improved relationships or mental health. In this study, students' intentions for mindfulness largely focused on reducing stress and anxiety relevant to their language learning experience. The prevalence of comments regarding personal challenges and how the mindfulness lessons helped learners to face them suggests that when the intention behind mindfulness interventions coincides with participants' individual intentions, the curriculum is viewed as effective.

The results also suggest that ESL students who participate in mindfulness interventions generally experience personal growth as well as improved interactions with others. Given the nature of this mindfulness intervention in an ESL Listening and Speaking classroom, much of the curriculum included discussion questions and topics about cultural issues, allowing for both individual reflection and learning from others. It appears that such discussions and topics have a profound impact on most participants, changing their perspectives of themselves and others. Increased self-compassion, awareness of self and others, and accepting imperfection were some of the most prevalent changes mentioned in this study.

There were a small number of participants, however, who did not have a positive experience with the mindfulness interventions. Concerns mentioned included that the curriculum was not connected to their language learning experience and that they saw no clear need for mindfulness instruction. Apprehensive comments were scattered throughout the classes' focus group feedback, but were most prevalent in two classes that were taught by the same teacher. Although no data was collected from the teachers, the concentration of negative comments in classes taught by the same teacher might suggest that teacher variables impact student perceptions of mindfulness interventions. Teacher variables might include the teacher's perceptions of the mindfulness curriculum and its value to students learning English as a second language, possible negative attitudes a teacher may have about implementing additional material into an already full curriculum, and possibly the need for additional teacher training to help them see the value of mindfulness instruction for students' mental and physical well-being.

In terms of suggestions for the mindfulness curriculum, feedback from students was varied and no consensus was identified. Although students' opinions on how frequent the lessons were and when they should be taught differed, students generally seemed to positively respond to their teachers' decision of when to teach the lessons. From this it can be concluded that allowing teachers the flexibility to incorporate the mindfulness curriculum based on the needs of their class is crucial to its successful implementation.

One of the largest areas of consensus among students was that the curriculum was connected to students' English language learning experience. Although some students disagreed, the large positive response to integrated mindfulness instruction into the ESL

classroom is encouraging, given that students dedicated almost a quarter of an individual class period's time to mindfulness discussions and activities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. While focus groups allowed students to discuss with peers and remember mindfulness lessons taught throughout the semester, issues with focus groups as outlined by Smithson (2000) were occasionally present. One such limitation was having a student dominate the conversation or some students not participate at all. While researchers conducting the focus groups were instructed in methods to help avoid this, to get more personal responses in future research it is suggested that an individual survey be completed prior to convening the focus group discussions.

Teacher training and understanding of mindfulness was another limitation in this study. After the training given in the first week, teachers were given the materials and flexibility to teach them as they best saw fit. No measurement of teacher excitement or understanding of mindfulness was taken, and no observations of the mindfulness lessons being instructed were made. Given the research of Wigelsworth & Quinn (2020) who interviewed teachers about their perceptions of mindfulness and discovered that teacher understandings of mindfulness varied, teacher perceptions might have affected the instruction of mindfulness in the classroom and hence students' perceptions. Suggestions for future research include assessing teachers' viewpoints and excitement about teaching mindfulness at the beginning of instruction as well as their perceived benefits of the lessons midway through the semester and again at the end of the semester. Observations

of the mindfulness instruction throughout the semester would also provide additional insights into how the lesson instruction was presented and received.

Given that not all students felt that the time in mindfulness lessons was well spent, another area for further research is further probing of the differences in students' perceptions of the mindfulness lessons and accompanying activities. No personal data was taken from focus groups, so only differences in proficiency level and teacher were identifiable. Feedback about specific activities in the lessons was also not taken. Future research might seek to briefly collect data after each lesson to identify student responses to particular activities. Another potential area for greater investigation is whether native culture or language is correlated with the way students view mindfulness instruction. Additionally, the content of the mindfulness lessons used may have affected student perceptions, and implementing student suggestions to make the mindfulness content deeper and providing more materials for use outside of the classroom might change students' perceptions. Furthermore, proficiency level may have affected how students viewed the lessons, as the more advanced students in this study tended to express comments indicating they felt the content and vocabulary was easy.

Conclusion

Student perceptions of mindfulness-based interventions in the ESL classroom are generally positive, with variation. Based on the students' comments, it appears that not all students will "buy in" to the purpose of the mindfulness lessons and the personal benefits that they can provide the students. Some students perceived them as irrelevant or boring. These attitudes may be connected with teacher buy-in and student proficiency. However, the majority of students saw great value in the lessons because they felt the lessons

provided them with skills for their 'emotional toolbox', such as using meditation techniques before an important test or personal growth through increased self-compassion. These results indicate that there are still further areas to explore with mindfulness instruction. Areas may include cultural differences in perceptions of mindfulness, teacher excitement and understanding affecting mindfulness instruction, and more quantitative analysis of the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions in the ESL classroom.

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Appendix

Sample lesson plan

Lesson plan for Perfectionism - Intermediate Low

Lesson Information

Positive Psychology Learning Outcomes

Students will...

1. recognize the value of mistakes in language learning
2. identify the three types of perfectionism
3. identify ways to combat perfectionism
4. create goals to respond to mistakes positively as a class

Language Learning Outcomes

Students will...

1. listen for specific information.
2. actively participate in conversations through proper responses.
3. narrate/describe in past tense about a personal experience.

Materials Needed

- Failure - Meet the Robinsons - Keep Moving Forward
- Ease Perfectionism: Managing Our Own High Expectations

Overview

Perfectionism is having unrealistic expectations and thinking and feeling negatively when those expectations are not met. In other words, perfectionism is like a toxic game of Spot the Difference. We may compare ourselves to a picture of how we think we should be and identify all the ways we fail to measure up. This way of thinking is dangerous and destructive. Tell students that today we will talk about perfectionism.

Activate Background Knowledge

Ask students to discuss the following questions with a partner. Before they begin to discuss, model possible answers for students.

- Describe a big mistake you made in the past. Think about the following questions as you brainstorm your answer.
    - **When**, **why**, and **where** did the mistake happen?
    - **How** did the incident start? **Who** was/were involved?
    - **What** happened? **What** result(s) did the mistake have? **What** did you learn from this mistake?

- *Ex. In my elementary school, we did in-class speed math competitions once per month. I had never lost in this competition. This time, as usual, I was the first one to complete. However, since I was careless, the numeral number 6 looked like a 0 on my paper. My teacher marked that wrong despite my effort of explaining to her that it was 6. She let the second student win that competition. That was the first time I lost in a math competition.*

    - Have you ever repeated this mistake?

- *Ex. No, I now make sure all my answers are neatly written.*

    - Share with the class that many will say no because of "fear of embarrassment."
    - Define the word *embarrassment* (noun).

- *Ex. a feeling of self-consciousness, shame, or awkwardness.*

- Explain the different forms of the following words.
    - *Embarrassed* (adj): *Ex. feeling or showing embarrassment.*
    - *Embarrassing* (adj): *Ex. causing embarrassment.*

Explain to students that being aware of our mistakes and accepting them can help us improve our language abilities.

Activity 1: Speaking

Everyone makes mistakes learning a language. Sometimes mistakes can make us feel embarrassed, but it's good to look at our mistakes positively instead of negatively. Read the following statement with your students:

"Making mistakes is the best way to learn a language because it's the best way to learn, period." (Lyons, 2018, para. 3) [Link]

After reading the statement, ask students to discuss the following questions with a partner. Focus on how mistakes help you learn and grow as you think of these mistakes.

- Do mistakes help you learn?
- Think of mistakes you have made while speaking English.
- How do you feel when you make mistakes?
- Can the other person still understand you when you make mistakes?
- How do other people respond to your mistakes?
- What do you learn from mistakes?

Activity 2: Speaking

Explain to students that perfectionism (wanting and working toward being perfect) is especially dangerous in language learning. Ask students to list negative effects of perfectionism at school in pairs or in groups of three.

Then, introduce the following ways in which perfectionism can bring you down (retrieved from: https://edtechbooks.org/-BRIB).

- Impossible goals
  - Perfectionists tend to set goals that are too high, which makes them fail.
- Delaying or postponing to do something
  - Perfectionism often leads to procrastination. You feel like you can't start a project until you've looked up more sources, interviewed more people, and come up with the greatest introduction of all time. The pressure of making things perfect keeps you from getting started.
- Making you feel sad and nervous
  - Research shows that perfectionism fuels mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.
- Negative thinking
  - All or nothing thinking
  - Seeing only the bad or the mistake in a situation
  - Focusing too much on the outcome instead of the process

Activity 3: Listening

Show the clip "Ease Perfectionism: Managing Our Own High Expectations." Before watching the clip, ask students to brainstorm ways we can fight against perfectionism. List the methods on the board.

[Ease Perfectionism: Managing Our Own High Expectations](#)

https://edtechbooks.org/-TrRA

Ask students to see if the list mentioned by Dora matches with theirs on the board. Emphasize that one way to fight against perfectionism is to be "resilient," which means "not giving up after failing." When we fail, we keep going.

Activity 4: Listening/Speaking

Show the clip below from the movie "Meet the Robinsons." Some background information about this clip is that Lewis has been working on a new invention to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and is about to show his family. Unfortunately, it fails. Before watching the clip, ask students to predict what the movie would be about by answering the following questions:

- What do you think Lewis' family said when his invention exploded?
- What does it mean to keep moving forward?

[Failure - Meet the Robinsons - Keep Moving Forward](#)

https://youtu.be/V3UqEps1r5E

After watching the video, ask them to respond to the following questions with the same group.

- What did they say when Lewis's invention exploded?
- What does it mean to keep moving forward?
- Do you think Lewis would behave differently if his family did not react to his mistake this way? Why or why not?

Activity 5: Speaking

In our classroom, we should be celebrating mistakes. Encouraging others/yourself when they/you make mistakes is a "mindful" way to fight perfectionism. You don't need to feel embarrassed if you say the wrong thing.

- Have you ever been encouraged to keep going after making a mistake or failing? How did you feel?
- How can we celebrate each other's mistakes in class?

We can now set some class goals together for how the teacher/students will respond when another student makes a mistake (e.g. don't laugh, say encouraging phrases, "good job!." "it's ok to make a mistake," etc.)

Homework

Research at least three highly successful people who failed before succeeding. What were they trying to accomplish? What and how many mistakes did they make before succeeding? What had they learned throughout the process? Be prepared to share the stories of these people with the class.

Follow Up

Tuesday:

Report on the three highly successful people they have done research on with the class.

Wednesday:

Discussion question: An ancient Chinese proverb says, "Failure is the mother of success." What does this quote mean to you? Think of an experience where you would not have succeeded without the mistakes you made before. Describe that experience to a partner.

Thursday:

Follow up on the students' experience on responding to their friends or classmates' mistakes.

- How did you feel when you responded positively to others' mistakes?
- How did your classmates feel when you gave them a positive response?
- Have you also seen a change in accepting your own mistakes?