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CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

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Summary. This article examines the role of contemplative activities in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), synthesizing theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical implications. Contemplative teaching, characterized by mindfulness, compassion, and integrity, represents a holistic approach that engages learners' cognitive, affective, and somatic dimensions. The review analyzes existing research, finding that while contemplative methods hold theoretical promise, empirical evidence for their effectiveness remains limited. Nevertheless, contemplative activities demonstrate potential for enhancing metacognitive awareness, reducing language anxiety, fostering intercultural competence, and supporting learner identity development. Practical applications across reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are discussed, including contemplative engagement with authentic literature, mindful listening exercises, and reflective journaling.

Keywords: contemplative teaching, EFL, mindfulness, language pedagogy, reflective practice, intercultural competence.

Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has undergone significant pedagogical evolution, moving from grammar-translation methods through communicative approaches toward more holistic, learner-centered paradigms (Pardede, 2011; Wahedi, 2020). Among emerging approaches, contemplative activities – practices rooted in mindfulness, compassion, integrity, and wholeness – have garnered increasing attention as potential tools for enhancing language learning outcomes (Ahmadpour et al., 2022; Byrnes 2012). Contemplative teaching represents a departure from mainstream educational practices that emphasize isolated knowledge transmission, instead foregrounding the development of the whole learner through practices that engage not only the mind but also the heart and body (Ahmadpour et al., 2022). This article synthesizes existing research to examine the role, pedagogical potential, challenges, and implications of contemplative activities in EFL instruction with particular attention to the limited empirical evidence currently available, and their place within contemporary language pedagogy.

The rationale for exploring contemplative approaches in EFL contexts is multifaceted. EFL learners face unique challenges, including limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom (Wahedi, 2020; Zacharias, 2010), anxiety during oral production (Hussain et al., 2019), and the need to navigate

complex identity negotiations when learning a new language (Wadell & Shandor, 2012; Zacharias, 2010). Traditional instructional methods, while effective in certain domains, often fail to address the affective, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions of language learning that are critical for communicative competence (Wahedi, 2020). Contemplative activities offer a promising avenue for addressing these dimensions by fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, learner autonomy, and deeper engagement with the learning process (Pacheco, 2005).

1. Theoretical Rationale for Contemplative Activities in EFL

1.1 Addressing the Whole Learner

A central argument for incorporating contemplative activities in EFL instruction is the recognition that language learning engages the whole person – cognitive, affective, somatic, and social dimensions (Byrnes, 2012). Zacharias (2010, p. 26) argues that “students in any educational settings represent a wide array of social and cultural identities” and that “English language pedagogy continues to subsume these diverse identities into a single linguistic basket labeled non-native speakers”. Contemplative activities offer a means of honoring learners’ multiple identities by creating space for self-reflection and authentic self-expression.

The accommodation of learner identities in the classroom has important consequences for English learners’ language competence (Zacharias, 2010). Contemplative practices such as reflective journaling, guided meditation on personal experiences, and mindful dialogue can help learners explore the relationship between their existing identities and their emerging identity as English speakers. Several studies indicate that successful second language learners are those who are able to maintain their ethnic identity as they adapt to L2 culture (Zacharias, 2010), and contemplative activities may facilitate this integration by promoting self-awareness and acceptance.

1.2 Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

Contemplative activities can serve as powerful tools for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which has been recognized as essential in contemporary EFL education (Alshuaifan, 2021; Snigdha, 2022). ICC empowers language learners with the skills to compare different cultures and raise critical cultural awareness (Alshuaifan, 2021). Snigdha (2022) emphasizes that an objective and unbiased mindset can be developed if the intercultural materials are incorporated to the pedagogy that reflect and represent cultures in a positive and balanced way.

Contemplative practices cultivate precisely the qualities needed for intercultural competence: non-judgmental awareness, empathy, openness to difference, and the capacity to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. Through mindful engagement with cultural texts and practices, EFL learners can develop what Byram’s (1997) ICC model describes as critical cultural awareness – the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures. The contemplative disposition of compassion, identified by Byrnes (2012) as a key feature of contemplative teaching is particularly relevant to intercultural education, as it fosters genuine curiosity about and care for cultural others.

1.3 Supporting Affective Dimensions of Language Learning

The affective dimension of language learning has long been recognized as crucial for successful acquisition. Motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and attitudes toward the target language and its speakers all significantly influence learning outcomes (Horwitz et al., 1986; Hussain et al., 2019). Wadell and Shandor (2012) discuss how changing views on motivation in a globalizing world have led to new understandings of why learners study English, noting the importance of “bicultural identity” and “international posture” for many EFL students’ learning.

Contemplative activities can support the affective dimensions of language learning in several ways. Mindfulness-oriented practices have been shown to reduce anxiety and stress, which are significant barriers to language production, particularly in speaking tasks (Hussain et al., 2019). Body awareness exercises can help learners become more attuned to the physical sensations associated with language anxiety, enabling them to respond more skillfully to these experiences. Loving-kindness meditation and compassion practices can foster positive attitudes toward self and others, reducing the self-criticism that often accompanies language learning errors.

1.4 Developing Metacognitive Awareness

Contemplative activities inherently promote metacognitive awareness –the capacity to observe and regulate one’s own cognitive processes. This metacognitive dimension is directly relevant to language learning, as research has demonstrated the positive effects of metacognitive strategies on language skill development (Chen et al., 2025; Kan et al., 2024). Kan et al. (2024) highlight the positive effect of metacognitive reading strategies for improving English language reading comprehension ability, and Chen et al. (2025) note that incorporating self-regulated learning strategies into strategy instruction can enhance students’ learning performance.

Contemplative practices such as mindful reading, where learners attend carefully to their moment-by-moment experience of processing text, can develop the metacognitive awareness that underlies effective reading strategy use. Similarly, contemplative listening exercises, where learners practice sustained, non-judgmental attention to spoken English, can enhance listening comprehension by training the quality of attention that learners bring to auditory input. The contemplative emphasis on observing one’s own mental processes without judgment aligns closely with the metacognitive monitoring that is central to self-regulated learning (Chen et al., 2025; Kan et al., 2024).

2. Practical Applications of Contemplative Activities in EFL

2.1 Contemplative Reading and Literature-Based Activities

The use of literature in EFL classrooms provides a natural context for contemplative engagement. Pardede (2011) argues that literary works offer authentic material, cultural enrichment, language advancement, and personal growth, and that since the 1980s, literature has found its way back into the teaching of EFL. Contemplative approaches to literature involve slow, attentive reading practices that encourage learners to notice not only linguistic features but also their own emotional and cognitive responses to texts.

Haydanka and Lytvynenko (2024) emphasize that working with an authentic text in class activates the educational activity of students, provides an opportunity to freely express their own opinions, discuss and justify their own position. Contemplative reading practices can deepen this engagement by inviting learners to pause, reflect, and attend to the resonances between the text and their own experience. Similarly, Simon (2022) advocates for the use of fairy tales in EFL classrooms, noting their value in cultural and linguistic contexts. Contemplative engagement with fairy tales might involve guided visualization of story settings, mindful attention to the emotional arc of narratives, and reflective dialogue about the cultural values embedded in stories.

The integration of contemplative practices with literature-based instruction can address multiple learning objectives simultaneously. Authentic literary texts provide rich linguistic input (Haydanka & Lytvynenko, 2024; Pardede, 2011), while contemplative engagement with these texts develops critical thinking, cultural awareness, and personal growth (Haydanka & Lytvynenko, 2024; Simon, 2022). This combination is particularly powerful because it honors the wholeness that contemplative teaching seeks to cultivate, engaging learners’ cognitive, affective, and imaginative capacities in an integrated manner.

2.2 Contemplative Listening and Speaking Activities

Speaking skill development presents particular challenges in EFL contexts, as learners must manage cognitive, linguistic, and affective demands simultaneously. Ahmadpour et al. (2022, p. 2) note that “it is a very difficult task to acquire communicative competence in the language classroom which has a balanced attention to fluency and accuracy, making learners ready for the unsettled contexts in which they will have to communicate”. Contemplative activities can address these challenges by helping learners develop the quality of presence and attention that supports more authentic communication.

Contemplative listening exercises, such as mindful listening to recorded speech, partner listening with full attention, and silent reflection before responding, can develop deep listening skills that are foundational to communicative competence. These practices align with the interactionist perspective on language learning, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful interaction for language development (Leslie, 2021). Leslie (2021) found that primary EFL learners used a variety of strategies to support their partner’s language production during oral interaction, and contemplative listening practices can enhance the quality of attention that learners bring to these interactions.

Contemplative speaking activities might include mindful speech practices, where learners attend carefully to the process of formulating and articulating their thoughts in English; contemplative dialogue, where partners take turns speaking and listening with full attention; and reflective monologue, where learners speak about personally meaningful topics after a period of silent reflection. These practices can help address the anxiety that many EFL learners experience during speaking tasks (Hussain et al., 2019) by cultivating a non-judgmental awareness of the speaking process.

2.3 Contemplative Writing Activities

Writing in a foreign language involves complex cognitive processes that can benefit from contemplative attention. Călinescu (2024) explores the internal complexity of EFL writing at the tertiary level, noting that in the early stages of language acquisition, most EFL learners rely heavily on System 2 thinking as the act of writing in a new language demands conscious effort, meticulous translation and analytical processing. Contemplative writing practices can help learners navigate this complexity by developing a more relaxed, focused state of mind that facilitates the flow of ideas.

Contemplative writing activities in EFL classrooms might include freewriting after meditation, where learners write continuously in English following a brief mindfulness exercise; reflective journaling, where learners record their observations about their language learning process; and contemplative response writing, where learners compose thoughtful responses to literary texts or cultural experiences after a period of silent reflection. These practices can support the development of self-regulated learning strategies in writing (Chen et al., 2025) while also fostering the personal growth that is a key benefit of literature use in language education (Pardede, 2011).

2.4 Integration with Technology-Enhanced Learning

The integration of contemplative activities with technology-enhanced learning represents an emerging area of interest. While ICT has been shown to have a transformative impact on learner attitudes and engagement in EFL contexts (Sulaeman et al., 2024; Jameer & Lakshmi Narra, 2024), the combination of contemplative practices with digital tools offers unique possibilities. For example, guided meditation apps can be used to prepare learners for language learning activities, while digital journaling platforms can support contemplative writing practices (Sulaeman et al., 2024; Jameer & Lakshmi Narra, 2024).

However, this integration must be approached thoughtfully, as the constant stimulation associated with technology use may work against the stillness and focused attention that contemplative practices seek to cultivate. Sulaeman et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of vigilant monitoring and instruction by educators to ensure responsible ICT utilization, and this caution is particularly relevant when combining technology with contemplative approaches. The goal should be to use technology in ways that support rather than undermine the contemplative qualities of presence, attention, and wholeness.

Conclusion

Contemplative activities represent a promising but underexplored dimension of EFL pedagogy. Grounded in principles of wholeness, mindfulness, compassion, and integrity (Byrnes, 2012), these practices offer a means of addressing the affective, cultural, and metacognitive dimensions of language learning that are often neglected in traditional instruction. While the limited empirical evidence available suggests that contemplative approaches may not be immediately effective in all EFL contexts (Ahmadpour et al., 2022), the theoretical rationale for their use is compelling, drawing support from research on reflective teaching (Pacheco, 2005), intercultural competence (Alshuaifan, 2021; Snigdha, 2022), learner identity (Wadell & Shandor, 2012; Zacharias, 2010), metacognitive strategies (Chen et al., 2025; Kan et al., 2024), and literature-based instruction (Haydanka & Lytvynenko, 2024; Pardede, 2011; Simon, 2022).

The successful integration of contemplative activities into EFL instruction requires careful attention to cultural context, gradual implementation, integration with established pedagogical approaches, and adequate teacher preparation. As the field of EFL teaching continues to evolve in response to the demands of globalization and the recognition of learners as whole persons with multiple identities and complex motivations (Wadell & Shandor, 2012; Zacharias, 2010), contemplative activities offer a valuable complement to existing pedagogical tools. Future research should build on the limited existing evidence base to

develop a more nuanced understanding of when, how, and for whom contemplative activities can enhance the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

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