

An investigation into how mindfulness practice might improve listening comprehension of English learners in Viet Nam

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of short mindfulness exercises on the listening comprehension of Vietnamese students learning English. Research participants (N = 190) were randomly divided into two groups: the experimental group who received three five-minute mindfulness sessions before listening tests and the control group who received the mindfulness intervention only before the last listening test. The results showed a significant interaction effect between the group variable and test scores, indicating that mindfulness meditation can enhance listening comprehension of the experimental compared to the control group. These findings align with previous studies on the positive effects of mindfulness on listening comprehension of foreign language learners. This study suggests that mindfulness may be a valuable tool not only in education in general but also in language learning and teaching.

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1 Introduction

For over a century, focused attention has been recognized as crucial for learning and a lack of mental focus and training has been found to hinder optimal performance, even for individuals with high levels of skills and knowledge. This gap between potential and actual performance was called the ‘zone of proximal learning’. This disparity is often attributed to a range of cognitive factors, motivational factors and personality traits. While these factors are context-specific and not universally acceptable, mindfulness was proposed as a unifying concept that could explain the underutilisation of skills and expertise.

Mindfulness was defined as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, in other words, simply paying attention to your thoughts and your mind, with acceptance instead of judgement [1]. If the mind wanders, mindfulness practitioners are trained to acknowledge the distraction and intentionally shift

attention back to the present moment without judgement. Recent research has shown that mindfulness can be a valuable tool in education. Multiple research studies and comprehensive analyses have suggested that positive psychology interventions can improve: students’ emotional and social skills, their attitudes and perceptions about themselves and others, as well as their academic performance and accomplishments. For example, a study found that a 10-minute audio-guided practice, which did not require teachers to be the instructors, was still able to significantly improve students’ grades and academic achievements. Another study showed that students who practised mindfulness frequently reported less mind wandering and were better able to focus their attention on a specific task. This potential has been explored in various educational settings, including foreign language learning, with encouraging results. For instance, a study found that university students who underwent an 8-week mindfulness training program

demonstrated improved performance on a standardized language proficiency test, compared to a control group. Similarly, another study revealed that second language learners who practised mindfulness during their lessons showed greater vocabulary retention and better comprehension of the target language. These findings suggest that mindfulness not only helps in fostering a focused and calm learning environment but also directly contributes to the acquisition and mastery of a new language, making it a promising approach in the realm of language education.

Building on this foundation, the present study examines the effect of short mindfulness practice on the listening comprehension of Vietnamese EFL learners. The primary objective is to determine whether participation in three short mindfulness sessions (15 minutes total) immediately before listening tests, can influence language learners' performance. To my knowledge, this is the first study to explore the impact of such a minimal intervention, offering a unique contribution to the field. By isolating the effect of mindfulness, this research aims to determine its potential as a standalone tool for enhancing listening comprehension.

The findings of this study have the potential to deepen our understanding of mindfulness in language learning and have broader educational implications. If brief mindfulness interventions prove effective, they could provide a simple, accessible, and cost-effective way to improve learning outcomes and enhance students' emotional well-being across various disciplines.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Positive Psychology and Mindfulness Intervention

Positive psychology was initially defined as "nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues" [2]. Later, it was redefined as "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" to distinguish it from conventional psychology [2]. Traditional psychology focuses on negatives like mental illness and human limitations, while positive psychology helps people flourish and improve well-being. In foreign language education, it aims to help students maximize potential and learning efficiency.

Research on happiness has led to different views. Some researchers see happiness as a stable trait, while others suggest intentional activities significantly impact happiness [1]. This means people can cultivate happiness through actions like exercising, staying positive, and doing good deeds. Such practices can boost mental and physical health, creativity, focus, and success.

2.2 Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Mindfulness, a part of positive psychology, is defined as paying attention to the present moment without judgment [1]. It includes attention, attitude, and intention. There are two narratives about its origins: one ties it to a 5th-century BCE Buddhist practice to overcome suffering, and the other credits Jon Kabat-Zinn, who adapted it into the secular Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in 1979. MBSR uses techniques like deep breathing to manage stress, and research shows it reduces anxiety and panic disorders [1]. Growing evidence also highlights the positive effects of meditation practices like yoga and transcendental meditation on well-being. Studies suggest regular practice of observing and releasing thoughts and emotions builds self-awareness [1].

2.3 Effect of Positive Psychology Interventions in Education

Mindfulness is a valuable educational practice with many benefits. Promoting well-being and happiness in schools supports optimal learning and can combat depression, increase life satisfaction, and improve outcomes. Positive psychology programs also enhance emotional, interpersonal, and academic skills.

Mindfulness can indirectly improve academic performance, social and psychological skills, and foster a positive classroom atmosphere [4]. Even short mindfulness interventions can raise students' grades [4]. Beyond immediate benefits, mindfulness helps students develop better learning habits and organizational skills. Studies show its positive impact on focus, well-being, and anxiety reduction in students [5]. Though research on mindfulness is still growing, evidence highlights its potential as a valuable tool for academic success, well-being, and positive classroom environments.

2.4. The Potential of Mindfulness Practice to Alleviate General Anxiety and Test Anxiety

Research has shown two types of anxiety: state anxiety, which is temporary, and trait anxiety, which is a stable tendency to experience anxiety in perceived threats. Early research suggested that the observed benefits of meditation might be attributed to relaxation rather than mindfulness itself. However, a subsequent study demonstrated that mindfulness-based interventions can effectively reduce trait anxiety.

Test anxiety can have a negative impact on psychological health, performance, and academic achievement [6]. It can also impair attention control and working memory, but these effects can be counteracted by increased effort and motivation. Mindfulness-based interventions, such as deep breathing exercises, have been found to effectively reduce test anxiety and improve test performance [6]. These exercises are easily learned and applicable, even for young children. Moreover, mindfulness training has been shown to enhance memory, focus and standardised test scores.

Given that anxiety is a major barrier to language learning, the potential of mindfulness interventions to release anxiety is particularly relevant to language learning. This is supported by the research finding that EFL learners who engaged in mindfulness meditation before their classes experienced a significant reduction in anxiety and an improvement in their vocabulary scores.

2.5. Positive Psychology Interventions in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Studies on positive psychology interventions in foreign language education show promising results. Positive emotions enhance language comprehension and acquisition. These interventions are linked to positive self-perceptions, self-efficacy, and motivation in second language learning. Mindfulness increased English proficiency, memory, and positive emotions in Chinese EFL learners [7]. Japanese students practicing mindfulness showed improved German proficiency, with guided meditation benefiting positive feelings and awareness.

Mindfulness serves as a coping mechanism for foreign language anxiety. Higher state mindfulness during English presentations correlated with lower anxiety and

better performance. Higher mindfulness levels linked to reduced foreign language anxiety and increased coping self-efficacy in Iranian EFL students.

Emerging research suggests that mindfulness interventions positively impact listening comprehension. English language learners practicing mindful attention demonstrated better listening comprehension skills. Mindfulness may help learners concentrate more effectively during listening activities. Another study shows incorporating mindfulness into a positive psychology program improved EFL learners' listening scores [14]. These studies indicate mindfulness could mitigate anxiety and emotional obstacles, thus enhancing overall listening performance.

3 Method

3.1 Research Participants

A total number of 190 Vietnamese university students took part in this research. All of them have been learning English as a foreign language and are familiar with the format of the Key English Test (KET). The chosen participants were part of two English classes taught by the same teacher, with the same method and during the same period on alternate days. Moreover, the participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups to ensure no pre-existing differences.

3.2. Materials

Breath-focused mindfulness meditation was chosen for this study as the studies of many educational researchers have found that this practice is particularly applicable in the classroom [12, 13]. Another reason for this is because this kind of meditation is suitable for meditators of all levels including those who have never meditated before. It has been modified to be neutral and not connected with any religion, making it accessible and attractive to a wide range of research participants from various backgrounds. Furthermore, a study has found that children who were instructed to take deep breaths before an exam immediately felt less anxious and had better test results [6]. Therefore, by choosing this type of meditation for this study, the university students who participated in this research could potentially learn a new breath-focused technique to use whenever they need instant stress relief such as before taking an exam.

To conduct the experiment, a five-minute guided breath meditation was selected. It provides research participants with instructions to sit comfortably, take several deep belly breaths, and then breathe normally while observing their breaths and counting each exhalation from one to ten. It is often unavoidable that the meditator's mind may start to wander. If that happens, they are instructed to acknowledge those distractions or thoughts with kindness and start counting from one again. The instructions were in Vietnamese so that the Vietnamese participants could understand exactly what they needed to do during the meditation practice.

With regards to the listening tests, A2-level listening tests were chosen for this study. This is because the test results at the beginning of the course of all of the research participants in this study showed that they were at the A2 level according to the CEFR standard. Therefore, five different A2-level listening tests were randomly selected from the book series called “Key English Test” (KET) published by the University of Cambridge. KET listening tests match the English level of the participants and it also has a high-reliability score of 0.86.

3.3 Design of the Study

The procedure of this research was designed based on a study which examined the effect of a brief meditation

practice on the quiz performance of university students in a human development course [13]. This study employed a between-group experimental design with a waiting control group. Having an active control group helps minimise the 'expectancy effect', also known as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

The procedure of this study is as follows: All participants took two baseline KET listening tests. The experimental group then did the five-minute meditation before three subsequent tests, while the control group took the next two tests without intervention. Lastly, all participants did the meditation before the final test.

3.4. Hypotheses

The study examined whether a brief breath-focused mindfulness practice affects EFL learners' listening test performance. [6] Based on previous research, the hypotheses are:

Null hypothesis (H_0): Brief breath-focused mindfulness meditation has *no impact* on EFL language learners' listening comprehension.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): Brief breath-focused mindfulness meditation has a *positive effect* on EFL language learners' listening comprehension.

4 Empirical Results

4.1 Pre-test vs Post-test

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and results of the independent samples t-test

	Group	Test	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value (sig. 2-tailed)
Pre-test	Control	Test 1	5.41	2.715	-2.940	0.220
	Experimental	Test 1	6.49	2.356		
	Control	Test 2	4.08	2.162	-4.196	0.127
	Experimental	Test 2	5.49	2.462		
Post-test	Control	Test 3	5.27	1.965	-6.964	0.000
	Experimental	Test 3	7.28	2.025		
	Control	Test 4	4.95	2.252	-5.365	0.000
	Experimental	Test 4	7.62	2.043		
	Control	Test 5	7.09	2.674	-3.806	0.000
	Experimental	Test 5	8.37	1.868		

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for both groups (95 participants each). The experimental group performed slightly better on all tests, with the largest difference in Test 3 (7.28 vs 5.27) when the experimental group did the first meditation and the control group did not. High

standard deviations suggest wide skill ranges in both groups. Lower standard deviations for the experimental group from Test 3 onward may indicate more uniform performance.



First, Levene's test for homogeneity of variances needs to be run to check whether the assumption of equal variances is satisfied. This is an important requirement for ANOVA tests later on. The results of Levene's test indicate that variances are homogenous for all of the five listening test scores, which means that such a requirement is met.

Next, an independent samples t-test is performed. The t-values and p-values from the independent sample t-tests are shown in Table 1. With p-values of 0.220 and 0.127 respectively for listening test 1 and test 2, the result of the t-test indicates that there were no significant pre-existing differences in the listening comprehension abilities of the two groups. In other words, the listening comprehension capabilities of research participants in both groups were relatively similar before they received the different experimental conditions. The post-test results (Test 3, Test 4, and Test 5) show a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group. The p-values are all less than 0.001, indicating a statistically significant difference. The mean scores of the experimental group are consistently higher than the control group in the post-test results. For example, in Test 3, the experimental group's mean score is 7.28, while the control group's mean score is 5.27. This difference is statistically significant. These initial findings suggest that the brief breath-focused mindfulness meditation may have a positive effect on the listening comprehension of the experimental group, compared to the control group.

By comparing the different mean scores of both groups, it can be seen that the control group has a slightly higher overall average growth rate of 1.362 compared to the experimental group, which has an average growth rate of 1.211. One potential explanation for why the control group appears to have slightly higher growth rates compared to the experimental group could be the concept of regression to the mean. Since the experimental group started with a higher baseline score on Test 1 compared to the control group, there is a natural tendency for their scores to regress or move closer to the overall mean on subsequent tests. This regression effect may be more pronounced in the experimental group, as their initial scores were higher to begin with. Conversely, the control group had more room for improvement, and their scores may have

increased at a steadier rate without experiencing the same degree of regression. Therefore, the slightly higher growth rates observed in the control group could be partially explained by this statistical phenomenon, rather than being a direct reflection of the effectiveness of the mindfulness intervention. Nonetheless, the key evidence that still supports the effectiveness of the mindfulness practice is the significant interaction effect between the group and test scores, indicating the experimental group performed better overall compared to the control group. Additionally, the experimental group maintained higher absolute scores on the later tests, despite the potentially greater regression effect. Taken together, these findings suggest that the slightly higher growth rates in the control group may be a statistical artifact, while the overall superior performance of the experimental group can still be attributed to the benefits of the mindfulness practice. Finally, Mauchly's Test of Sphericity is performed to examine the assumption of sphericity necessary for the repeated measure ANOVA test later. The test statistic (W) is 0.913 and the p-value is 0.05, right on the borderline of the threshold of significance. This suggests that although the assumption of sphericity is not conclusively met, it is also not violated. However, given the borderline p-value, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction ($\epsilon = 0.959$) can be used to adjust the degrees of freedom so that any potential sphericity violation is accounted for, ensuring that the results of the ANOVA are valid and reliable.

4.2 Main Data Analysis

With the assumptions of equal variances and sphericity met and accounted for, a Repeated Measures ANOVA was performed to test the main hypothesis: whether mindfulness meditation affects EFL learners' listening comprehension. The group variable (control or experimental) serves as the between-subjects factor and the listening test scores serve as the within-subjects factor. The results for the within-subjects effects corroborate the significant main effect of listening: $F(4, 188) = 71.723$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.276$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction). The interaction effect between listening and group was also significant: $F(4, 188) = 1.999$, $p = 0.003 < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.011$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction). The Greenhouse-Geisser correction was chosen to account for any potential violation of the sphericity assumption

explained in the pretest. Therefore, the Repeated Measures ANOVA test shows that the listening performance of research participants in both groups fluctuated across different points in time. Moreover, the interaction effect between the group variable and test scores was statistically significant, suggesting that the meditation practice had a statistically significant impact on the listening comprehension capabilities when comparing the control group and experimental group.

5 Discussion

This study is mainly aimed at examining whether short mindfulness practice could improve Vietnamese EFL learners' listening comprehension. The data analysis above showed that mindfulness intervention may have a positive impact on the listening performance of EFL learners. This result offers robust support for the potential of breath-focused mindfulness meditation to improve the listening comprehension of language learners. The significant interaction effect between the group variable and listening test scores indicates that the experimental group, who received three short mindfulness practice sessions, witnessed a greater enhancement in their listening abilities compared to the control group. This finding aligns with the growing body of research on the benefits of mindfulness interventions in general and in educational settings, most of which have consistently demonstrated positive impacts on various aspects of learners' well-being and academic performance [4]. It also contributes to the relatively new but promising field of positive psychology in language learning, which emphasizes the importance of fostering an environment that supports students' emotional and psychological well-being. Positive psychology, as defined, seeks to understand and promote the conditions that allow individuals to flourish [8]. In the context of language learning, this means focus on focusing on linguistic skills and enhance but also on enhancing students' overall learning experiences through strategies such as mindfulness.

Within the domain of language acquisition, the enhancement of listening comprehension in EFL learners, as seen in this study, can be attributed to several factors. One factor is the practice of mindfulness meditation, which has been shown to

enhance attentional focus, a crucial requirement of effective listening comprehension [5]. By training their minds to remain present and fully engaged in the current moment, learners can better filter out distractions and focus on the auditory input. This aligns with previous studies that have highlighted how mindfulness practices help improve cognitive functions such as attention and memory, thereby facilitating better learning outcomes [4]. Furthermore, the cultivation of a non-judgmental attitude through mindfulness meditation may reduce anxiety and create a more relaxed and open mindset which is conducive to learning [1]. This is particularly relevant in the context of language learning, where anxiety can significantly hinder performance. Given that anxiety has been identified as a significant predictor of second language (L2) listening performance, the reduction of anxiety through mindfulness may play a crucial role in enhancing listening comprehension. This supports the findings in the literature that indicates mindfulness can help learners manage anxiety, thus fostering a more conducive environment for language acquisition.

This study also sheds light on the dynamic nature of listening comprehension, as demonstrated by the significant main effect of listening. The fluctuations in listening performance across time in both groups can be interpreted through the lens of established theories in language acquisition and they highlight the complex interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors that influence listening comprehension. This finding is consistent with Rost's view of L2 listening as a multifaceted process involving semantic, pragmatic, linguistic and psychological processing [14]. This process is not solely a matter of linguistic and study skills, as assumed in traditional testing methods [14]. Rather, it involves complex cognitive and psychological processing, with learners' affective states, such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation playing an important role.

This study's findings also resonate with previous research on the detrimental impact of anxiety on listening performance. The observation that mindfulness meditation could lead to a significant improvement in listening comprehension within the experimental group, surpassing the control group, is consistent with other studies [14]. These studies demonstrated the efficacy of positive psychology



interventions in alleviating anxiety and enhancing educational outcomes. Furthermore, this study builds upon the work of other researchers, who also found significant benefits of mindfulness on language learning and proficiency [7]. The results indicate that the mindfulness intervention not only improved listening skills but also potentially contributed to overall emotional well-being, suggesting a holistic approach to language education that integrates psychological principles with linguistic development. This research has significant implications for the broader field of education. It highlights the applicability of positive psychology frameworks in language learning, emphasizing that creating a supportive and positive learning environment can maximize students' potential. Mindfulness meditation offers a straightforward, cost-effective, and readily accessible method for fostering such an environment. The benefits of mindfulness can extend beyond listening comprehension, potentially impacting other aspects of learning, such as attention, memory, and creative thinking. By promoting emotional regulation and cognitive clarity, mindfulness practices may equip learners with essential skills that contribute to their overall academic success and personal growth.

6 Conclusion

This study investigates the effect of brief mindfulness practice on the listening comprehension of 190 Vietnamese students who are learning English as a foreign language. The results show that breath-focused mindfulness meditation may have a positive effect on listening comprehension and can improve students' listening test scores.

Notwithstanding these promising results, it is crucial to acknowledge the constraints of this study. The sample size was relatively limited and exclusively focused on EFL learners in Viet Nam. In addition, the study only included a brief intervention of three 5-minute mindfulness sessions. Additional research with larger

and more diverse samples as well as longer and more extensive mindfulness interventions is required to determine the extent to which these results can be generalized to other groups of learners and educational settings and the long-term effect of mindfulness exercises on listening comprehension and foreign language acquisition. Additionally, while this research indicates a potential positive relationship between mindfulness meditation and listening comprehension, the study did not explore the underlying mechanisms by which mindfulness meditation improves listening comprehension. Future research could explore potential mediators, such as anxiety reduction, increased attentional focus, or enhanced working memory capacity.

While more research is needed to conclude that mindfulness interventions are effective, this study contributes to the literature on mindfulness and language learning. It provides empirical support for the potential of mindfulness meditation as a tool to enhance language learning. By promoting a state of calmness and focus, mindfulness practices may mitigate anxiety, enhance focus, and ultimately improve listening comprehension. This suggests that integrating mindfulness practices into language curricula could be a promising way to improve learners' language skills and overall well-being. Furthermore, this study highlights the significance of recognizing and addressing the emotional aspects of language learning. By acknowledging and mitigating the detrimental effects of anxiety, teachers can create a more nurturing and effective learning environment for their students to learn and thrive. In addition, this research contributes to the expanding body of evidence advocating for the broader integration of positive psychology interventions such as mindfulness meditation in educational settings. It highlights such interventions' potential to enhance not only academic performance but also cultivate emotional well-being and resilience in learners.

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Nghiên cứu về khả năng cải thiện mức độ nghe hiểu của việc thực hành chánh niệm đối với người học tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt Nghiên cứu này đã điều tra ảnh hưởng của các bài tập chánh niệm ngắn đối với khả năng nghe hiểu tiếng Anh của học sinh Việt Nam. Những người tham gia nghiên cứu (N = 190) được chia ngẫu nhiên thành hai nhóm: nhóm thực nghiệm (được thực hiện ba buổi chánh niệm kéo dài 5 phút trước các bài kiểm tra nghe) và nhóm đối chứng (chỉ được thực hiện chánh niệm trước bài kiểm tra cuối cùng). Kết quả cho thấy có sự tương tác đáng kể giữa nhóm và điểm số bài kiểm tra, cho thấy thiền chánh niệm có tiềm năng cải thiện đáng kể khả năng nghe hiểu của nhóm thực nghiệm so với nhóm đối chứng. Những phát hiện này phù hợp với các nghiên cứu trước đây về tác động tích cực của chánh niệm đối với khả năng nghe hiểu của người học ngoại ngữ. Điều này cho thấy chánh niệm có thể là một công cụ quý giá không chỉ trong giáo dục nói chung mà còn trong việc học và giảng dạy ngôn ngữ nói riêng.

Từ khóa Nghe hiểu, chánh niệm, thiền định, người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, học ngoại ngữ.

