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MINDFULNESS LEVEL OF PREP SCHOOL LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study was conducted to investigate mindfulness levels of prep school learners who learn English as foreign language in higher education. The study group composed of 214 students. The students are all preparatory school students at a university from different departments. In this quantitative study, the participants were expected to share some demographic information (gender, language proficiency, and where they have spent most of their life) and answer the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Özyesil et al., 2011). The study revealed that the study group's mindfulness level was above moderate. Furthermore, no relationship was found between academic achievement, gender, and where they have spent most of their life. The study concluded that EFL learners can benefit from mindfulness enhancing activities, and implementing mindfulness practices into foreign language teaching could be effective, and facilitate language learning.

Key Words: Mindfulness, EFL learners, language proficiency, anxiety

ÜNİVERSİTE HAZIRLIK ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN BİLİNÇLİ FARKINDALIK DÜZEYİ

Özet

Bu çalışma, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen üniversite hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin bilinçli farkındalık düzeylerini araştırmak için yapılmıştır. Çalışma grubu, 214 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Öğrenciler, üniversite hazırlık sınıfı öğrencileridir ve hazırlık eğitiminden sonra çeşitli bölümlerde eğitimlerine devam edecektir. Bu nicel çalışmada, katılımcılardan bazı demografik bilgileri (cinsiyet, dil yeterliliği ve hayatlarının çoğunu nerede geçirdikleri) paylaşımları ve Bilinçli Farkındalık Ölçeği'ni (Özyesil ve diğer., 2011) yanıtlamaları beklenmektedir. Çalışma, öğrencilerin bilinçli farkındalık düzeyinin orta seviyenin üzerinde olduğunu saptamıştır. Bu çalışmada, akademik başarı, cinsiyet ve katılımcıların hayatlarının çoğunu nerede geçirdikleri ile bilinçli farkındalık düzeyleri arasında bir ilişki bulunamamıştır. Çalışma, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin bilinçli farkındalığı artırıcı etkinliklerden yararlanabilecekleri ve bilinçli farkındalık etkinliklerinin, yabancı dil öğretimine uygulanmasının etkili olabileceği ve dil öğrenimini kolaylaştırabileceği sonucuna varmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bilinçli Farkındalık, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenler, dil yeterliliği, kaygı

Introduction

Mindfulness is an increased awareness of and attention to current reality (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Being mindful can be effective to be successful in many skills and education as awareness and attention are two of the musts of learning. In learning English as a foreign language, mindfulness can enhance the performance of the learner as it lowers anxiety, increases self-judgment, self-consciousness, and self-preoccupation (Andersen & Coussoule, 1980; Burton et al., 2013). In many language classrooms, the teacher is still at the center: they present the subject, they give examples, and they explain everything students need. On the other hand, students listen to the teacher, follow the instructions the teacher gives, memorize vocabulary, etc. What is common in all these examples is that students are passive. They passively get the input that is transmitted by their teachers like a banking system (Freire, 2000). They do not pay attention to mindfulness which is awareness and attention. Also, for some students, language classrooms lead to anxiety and they may even develop a fear. Thanks to mindfulness, the psychological barrier to language learning can be eliminated as a person who knows himself with his strengths and weaknesses are always more successful to deal with problems than people who have lost their directions. Thus, it might be a good idea to include mindfulness in language education.

Although mindfulness is new in positive sciences, it dates back to early Buddhism meditation in around the 2500s. It is based on Eastern philosophy, however, today it is not just related to meditation and it is included in many societies. Mindfulness is “not just about meditation; it is also a way of living with awareness” (Hassed, C. Chambers, 2015, p. 7). Jon Kabat Zin introduced mindfulness to Western literature in 1979 via Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (Bodhi, 2013). According to him, mindfulness can be defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Bodhi, 2013) In Kabat’s definition, there are some important points. Firstly, it is an active process. Secondly, the focus is not past or future; just the time we are in. Lastly, it is necessary to be nonjudgmental, acceptance is necessary. Germer et al. (2005) elaborate on what mindfulness is by adding eight dimensions to mindfulness. It needs to be present – centered, awareness, nonjudgmental, intentional, active, nonverbal, exploratory, and liberating. So far, we have mentioned what mindful is. On the other hand, it is also necessary to stress what it is not to get a better understanding of mindfulness. Siegel, Germer, and Olendzki (2009) highlight the most common misunderstandings about mindfulness:

- It is not having a blank mind; instead, mindfulness makes the mind be more aware.
- It is not being emotionless; instead, mindfulness leads to recognizing more feelings.
- It is not a withdrawal from life; instead, mindfulness increases brightly life experiences.
- It is not looking for euphoria; instead, mindfulness does not reject unpleasant moments.
- It is not running of pain; instead, mindfulness improves individuals’ ability to tolerate pain.

There are a lot of studies which show how being mindful is important and has an effect on people’s life. There are studies (Çelikler, 2017; Green & Bieling, 2012; Nyklíček et al., 2013) which show that mindfulness affects psychological functioning and wellbeing positively. Also, many studies show that cultivating mindfulness reduces stress (Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). In addition to stress, Balci (2018) found out that the study group in her research had positive changes in self-perception, resilience, and emotional intelligence scores after they got a mindfulness program.

According to Langer (1997), creativity, being open to creation, current ideas, and being aware of multiple perspectives are the characteristics of a mindful person. For this reason, it is almost clear to see how mindfulness is connected to education. Ellen Langer is a professor at

Harvard University who has done a lot of interdisciplinary studies related to mindfulness, including education. She stresses five components for Langerian's mindful learning. They are the creation of new categories, openness to novelty, awareness of multiple perspectives, alertness to distinctions, and orientation in the present (Langer, E, 1989; Langer, 1997). The creation of new categories is the active information processing proceeding in the brain (Langer, 1989: 138). Openness to novelty means welcoming new information as fresh or novel, and it helps to be more open to uncertainty. The third one is the awareness of multiple perspectives. As it can be understood from its name, it helps learners to be more sensitive and less discriminative. Alertness to distinctions and openness to novelty look similar and it is "drawing conscious distinctions and allocating new places for brand new information allowing a person to build ideas" (Öz, 2017: 36). The last one is orientation in the present, and as explained before, it is not past not future, just now. When these components are taken into consideration in education settings, the rate of education success can increase.

It is possible to find international and local studies on mindfulness in the education field. Vonderheyde (2017) investigated the relationship between mindfulness and stress among college students. In the study, mindfulness and stress were negatively correlated. Including mindfulness in all levels of education had positive results in many studies (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schoeberlein, 2009)

Langerian's mindful learning shed a light on how significant mindfulness is in teaching English as a foreign language. The creation of new categories, as the first component of Langerian's mindful learning, requires being sensitive to various contexts. An example related to this can be the use of "could" in English. Students first learn its past ability function. Later on, other functions of "could" are introduced: request, possibility, etc. If the learner is sensitive to changing contexts, s/he will be more successful user of "could". The second component is the openness to novelty. Normally that unknown leads to anxiety, and anxiety is one of the important factors which may lead to failure in language classrooms. If the learner is open to learning new things, if s/he does not close himself or herself to unknown, the process can be easier. A new language means a new person or perspective, so it is vital to be open to novelties while learning a language. The third component is the awareness of multiple perspectives. The awareness of multiple perspectives increases learners' tolerance towards different perspectives, people, and ideas. Also, it diminishes stereotypes which are quite common in language classrooms. Language learning includes both linguistic and communicative competence as Hymes (1972) suggests. To illustrate, imagine an EFL learner who has certain negative attitudes towards Indian people. This student thinks that the best culture is his culture, and Indian culture is difficult to understand which means that he finds some traditions illogical and inappropriate. If this student encounters an Indian guy, or if he goes to India, he will use English to communicate, and probably he will be unsuccessful in communication as he has stereotypes and prejudices in his mind. He will not be able to behave appropriately, which is a requirement for successful communication. If learners of English have the awareness of multiple perspectives, they will be tolerant, and automatically learn new things and be more successful. The fourth component is alertness to distinctions. A language learner learns new things every single day, and the skill of being able to categorize is necessary. For example, if different genres of writing are considered, a learner who writes a letter to a friend, a learner who writes an e-mail to his professor needs to use different styles. Being mindful in using English helps the learner to be informal or formal and use the language appropriately. The last component is orientation in the present. Many of the students have negative memories related to language learning. They may have encountered inefficient teachers, or they may have failed in some language subjects. On the other hand, some students may have a worry related to the future. They may think that they will never be able to learn English. In these cases, learners do not take responsibility and they are stuck in the past or future. To be able to learn English effectively, it is necessary to focus on time and concentrate on

the tasks of the moment. People can only change the future by paying attention to and dealing with now. It is true in every aspect of life including language learning.

In terms of academic achievement in language learning, mindfulness can be effective in being more successful. One of the important factors in academic success of cognition. Less than 40% of academic achievement can be attributed to cognition (Maqsud, 1993). Other factors are related to psychological, behavioral, and social factors. Mindfulness is hypothesised as one of the predictors for success (Franco et al., 2011) because as Cabellero et al. suggested in 2019, it is a capacity which might support both cognitive and social-emotional abilities of students. In the literature, it has not been popular for a long time, but the reason for this might be the fact that because mindfulness generally indirectly affects academic success. Many studies (Beauchemin et al., 2008; Caldwell et al., 2010; Flook et al., 2010; Tierry, Bryant, Nobles, & Norris, 2016) also show that mindfulness indirectly affect academic achievement. Thus, mindfulness looks like an important factor in learning a foreign language and it has been investigated recently in some other studies. For example, Öz (2017) investigated the relationship between mindfulness and speaking performances of 29 EFL students. She revealed that the mindfulness program she applied to experimental group decreased students' speaking anxiety and increased willingness to communicate in foreign language. In a similar study, Wang and Liu (2016) carried out a research to investigate how the use of mindfulness affected college English as a foreign language. In a case study, they concluded that through mindfulness practices, the EFL students built a learning community; generated new thoughts and became aware of their thinking; learned from others, reflected, and thought critically. There are more studies (Azizi et al., 2020; Khany et al., 2013) that show that mindfulness is effective in language learning.

The aim of the Study

In this study, we investigated the mindfulness levels of prep school students and how the mindfulness levels of students may change in terms of psychosocial variables. The present study mainly attempts to find out answers to the questions below:

1. What is the mindfulness level of prep school students at university?
2. Does the level of mindfulness vary according to language proficiency? (elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels)
3. Does the level of mindfulness vary according to gender?
4. Does the level of mindfulness vary according to the place where the participants have spent most of their life? (city vs. rural areas)

Methodology

Research Design

The study aims to understand the mindfulness levels of university students who study at prep schools. Also, whether language proficiency, gender, and where the students have spent most of their life affect their mindfulness levels has been investigated. In this study, a descriptive survey research design has been utilized. Descriptive survey means "asking the same set of questions (often prepared in the form of a written questionnaire or ability test) of a large number of individuals either by mail, by telephone, or in person" (Fraenkel et al., 2012: 12). We got our data through google forms for this study. Our data have been collected quantitatively.

Study Group

In the study, convenience sampling has been used. The study group composes of students who study at a university in the west part of the country. They are all students in the School of Foreign Languages in 2020-2021. There are 214 students in the study group. What they all have in common is that they are learning English as a foreign language in the preparatory schools at universities. Their departments show variety. These students took a placement test

and were assigned to classes before the term started. There are three basic levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate. As a criterion for their language proficiency, their classes were taken into consideration. As can be seen in Table 1, there were 104 female and 110 male students. Also, in terms of language proficiency, 60 students were in elementary classes, 83 students were in pre-intermediate classes, and 72 of them were in intermediate classes. 15 of the students have lived most of their lives in rural areas, whereas 199 of them have lived in cities.

Table 1.

The demographic information of study group

		N	%
Gender	Female	104	48,5
	Male	110	51,4
Language Proficiency	Elementary	60	28
	Pre-intermediate	82	38,3
	Intermediate	72	33,6
Where they have lived most of their lives	Rural areas	15	7
	City	199	93

Data Collection Tools

The study group was administered a survey package which includes demographic information form and the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The demographic information form includes three questions. The first question is about their gender. The second question asks for their proficiency level. As state before, the criterion is their classes which were formed at the beginning of the term in terms of the placement test they took. The last question is related to where they have spent most of their life. Whether it is a city or a rural area such as a village was asked. Also, MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003) was administered in the study. The scale consists of 15 items. It is a 6-point Likert scale that changes from “almost always” to “almost never”. The scale includes questions such as “I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until some time later.” and “I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until some time later”. MAAS measures awareness of instant experiences of everyday life. If a participant gets a higher score from the scale, it means that his/her mindfulness level is higher. The scale’s reliability coefficient is .92, and its internal reliability is .81 (Brown & Ryan, 2003). In our study, translated version of the scale was used. There were elementary level students. There could have been misunderstandings if the scale had been administered in English. Thus, the study group got the scale in their mother tongue, Turkish. MAAS was adapted to Turkish by Özyeşil et al. (2011), and necessary permission was taken (Appendix 1). The internal coefficient consistency of the scale was .80, and test-retest reliability after three-weeks was .86. Furthermore, in our study, Cronbach’s Alpha was .80.

Data Collection Procedure

Necessary permissions from the ethics committee were taken before sending the scale to participants. In the 2020-2021 education period, because of COVID-19, all the education was online, not face to face. For this reason, it was impossible to reach students physically. Google forms were administered and the scale and the demographic information form were sent online. In the form, it was explained that it was voluntary to complete the questions, and answering the questions functioned as their consent to be a part of the study.

Data Analysis

The researchers used SPSS 25 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Software program for data analysis. For comparing the variables “gender” and “where they have spent

most of their life” with mindfulness levels, independent samples t-tests were preferred. Besides, for comparing academic achievement with mindfulness ANOVA was used. ANOVA as a parametric statistical test as was administered because the results showed normal distribution. Besides, Cronbach’s Alpha was found .80. in this study.

Findings

The findings of the study will be explained in the light of the research questions.

What is the mindfulness level of prep school students at university?

The highest score that can be taken in MAAS is 85, and the lowest score is 15. The mean score of the scores of the 214 participants got in this study is 54.62. The standard deviation is 10,91.

Table 2.

The mean scores of study group in terms of mindfulness levels.

	N	M	SD
Total	214	54.62	10.91

Does the level of mindfulness vary according to language proficiency? (elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels)

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean scores of the three different groups are similar regarding their mindfulness levels. The mean scores of the groups are between 53 and 56. In addition, it is clear from Table 4 that there is no statistical difference among the three groups, and their mindfulness levels are similar ($p=.88 > .05$).

Table 3.

The mindfulness levels of study group by academic achievement

	N	M	SD
Elementary	60	53.86	11.75
Pre-intermediate	82	53.95	11.06
Intermediate	72	56.01	9.97
Total	21	54.62	10.94

Table 4.

The relationship between mindfulness levels and academic achievement

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Between Groups	210.61	2	105.3	.41
Within Groups	25139.72	211	119.14	
Total	25350.34	213		

Does the level of mindfulness vary according to gender?

In Table 5, the mean score of females is 53.7 and the mean score of males is 55.46. Also, it appears that mindfulness levels of females and males do not differ significantly as the p-value is .41, which is more than .05.

Table 5.

The mindfulness levels of the study group by gender

Gender	N	M	SD	Sig.(2-Tailed)
Female	104	53.70	11.94	.41

Male	110	55.49	9.8
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Does the level of mindfulness vary according to the place where the participants have spent most of their lives? (city vs. rural areas)

As seen in Table 6, the mean score for mindfulness level of participants who live in rural areas is 56.73. On the other hand, the mean score for mindfulness level of participants who live in cities is 54.46. People who live in rural areas have higher levels of mindfulness levels compared to people living in cities. However, the difference is not meaningful ($p=.47 > .05$).

Table 6.

The mindfulness levels of the study group by where they have spent most of their lives

Life spent in	N	M	SD	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Rural areas	15	56.73	11.52	.47
City	199	54.46	10.87	

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate mindfulness level of prep school students in higher education. Whether there is a relationship between mindfulness and academic achievement was another focus in the study. Besides, two demographic variables (gender and where people have spent most of their life) were investigated in terms of mindfulness levels. The results obtained from this study will be discussed in the next paragraphs in light of the related studies in the literature.

What is the mindfulness level of prep school students at university?

Related to the mindfulness scores of the participants, the study showed that the study group's mindfulness level was more than average. They had slightly above moderate mindfulness levels with a mean score of 54.62 out of 85. The participants in the study are university students and they have certain characteristics. Firstly, they had a satisfactory academic background. Being a university student is a kind of success. Also, the participants in this study are teenagers; they are not kids anymore. Several studies (Alispahic & Hasanbegovic-Anic, 2017; Mahlo & Windsor, 2020) show that age can be a determining factor in mindfulness levels. Thus in our study, the mindfulness levels of the participants were satisfactory. In a similar vein, Acar (2019) conducted a study with psychological counselor candidates and found out moderate levels of mindfulness in her study. However, in another study conducted by Özyeşil (2012), Turkish university students' level of mindfulness was lower than American university students'. She discussed collectivism vs. individualism. Markus et al. (1996) say that autonomy is valued in individualist cultures, not in collectivist cultures. The reason why the study group did not have a high score of mindfulness can be related to cultural issues as well.

Does the level of mindfulness vary according to language proficiency? (elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels)

The results of the study showed that participants did not show variety in mindfulness scores although they had different language proficiency levels. Similarly, in a study conducted in the context of the English Education Study Program of Sriwijaya University, there was no correlation between mindfulness and academic performance (Ulivia, 2020). In another study, Brausch (2011) measured mindfulness with the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale and compared it with the Grade Point Average (GPA) scores of the participants. The results revealed that mindfulness and GPAs did not have a correlation. However, there are also contradictory studies (Coo & Escartin, 2018; Franco et al., 2011; Mrazek et al., 2013) which show a positive relationship between mindfulness and academic success. These studies base their findings on mindfulness interventions. In our study, there was no intervention. It might be one reason for the

conflicting results. Also, in these studies, academic success is indirectly enhanced. For example, anxiety decreased through mindfulness intervention, and it affected academic success positively in the study of Franco et al. (2011).

Does the level of mindfulness vary according to gender?

In the prevailing study, although males had higher scores average of mindfulness than females, it was concluded that there was no statistical difference between mindful scores and gender. Thus, gender did not have an effect on the mindfulness levels of the study group. In the literature, there are some local studies (Acar, 2019; Gürdal, 2019; Koçali, 2020; Yayla & İkiz, 2017) and international studies (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Masuda & Tully, 2012) with similar results. Personal factors such as personality types and backgrounds of the study group might be more effective than gender in the study. On the other hand, there are some studies (Bakioğlu, 2017; Lilja et al., 2011; Price, 2016) in which gender was related to mindfulness. In Lilja et al.'s study, women scored higher than men, but they suggested that the age factor might have influenced the results.

Does the level of mindfulness vary according to the place where the participants have spent most of their life? (city vs. rural areas)

The study clarified that where the participants have lived most of their life did not affect their mindfulness levels. Gieger et al. (2018) stated that mindfulness is conceptualized as connectedness to nature. The researchers thought that people living in rural areas might have higher mindfulness. The study showed that they had more; however, the difference was not significant. The number of participants who lived in rural areas was limited. This might be the reason for the unexpected results. On the other hand, there are many studies (Barbaro & Pickett, 2016; Howell et al., 2011; Richardson & Sheffield, 2015) which show a positive correlation between studied the relationship between nature connectedness and mindfulness. In another study (Aspy & Proeve, 2017; Hamann & Ivtzan, 2016), participants had nature intervention, and at the end of the intervention, the experimental group showed significant increases in mindfulness compared to ones in the control group.

Conclusion

The study was carried out to get an understanding about the mindfulness level of prep school students at university. For this purpose, 214 students took part in the study. They were expected to give demographic information (gender, language proficiency, and where they have spent most of their life) and answer the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Özyesil et al., 2011). The results of the study showed that the study group's mindfulness level was above moderate. Also, there was no relationship between academic achievement, gender, and where they have spent most of their life. Also, it can be concluded from the studies mentioned above and from the related literature, mindfulness trainings should be integrated into language learning. As learners have more awareness, they can be better learners. Directly or indirectly, mindfulness levels of the students might have an impact on EFL learning. Thus, it can be efficient to implement activities which promote mindfulness levels of students.

Recommendations

The results of the studies and related literature emphasize the effectiveness of mindfulness in education. Social-emotional characteristics of students can be boosted through mindfulness activities while teaching English to them. This may indirectly affect students' academic outcomes. Thus, it is advisable to teachers, policy makers, curriculum developers, and other stakeholders to take the effectiveness of mindfulness into consideration. As Koçali (2020) suggests, integrating mindfulness into language teaching is not a big deal. Adding relaxing music to your lessons (Önem & Ergenç, 2013) or using lavender scent (Önem, 2015) may consider implementing mindfulness practices can be a good but easy start.

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