

Using meditation in the classroom

by Clare Bassett (Yoga with Clare & YTTC)

Would you ever try to teach someone who wasn't there? Stupid question? But have you ever found yourself struggling to get your students' attention and then struggling to hold their attention? Often we blame the task we have chosen, the textbook, or if we having a bad day, the students themselves. It never really helps to blame our students. You know this problem from the other side if you have ever sat in a class or a conference and found yourself struggling to pay attention because your mind is busy playing re-runs of a conversation you had at lunchtime or working out whether or not you should take that extra class in the evenings, or whether or not the plot of the film you watched last night made sense. It is very difficult to concentrate, never mind be open to learning something new, when we are not really mentally or emotionally present and focused.

The opposite is also true, when we feel settled, centred and fully present we can take in new and difficult concepts, we can manage much more difficult tasks. I believe one of our jobs as teachers is to make learning as easy as it can be. This is not the same as making the tasks easy, challenging but achievable task are far more engaging and effective at getting us learning than tasks that are too easy for us. However before we start our difficult task we need to be warmed up and ready to go and before we get warmed up we need to be present, and not just physically present sitting at our desk but also mentally and emotionally present. By using a simple meditation technique at the start of the class you can hugely increase the mental and emotional presence of your students making your job far easier and giving you a far higher chance of engaging them and helping them to retain whatever the day's lesson is.

What is meditation?

There are a lot of misconceptions around meditation so I will start with what it is not.

It's not waste of time.

First of all it doesn't take much time. You can choose to do five minutes, three minutes or just one minute and it will still make a difference. You will also save time not having to repeat yourself or get side-tracked with distractions. Your students will have time to mentally and emotionally let go of whatever is going on that they are bringing into the classroom with them, so they can be more present and aware and get more out of the rest of the class.

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It is not you telling your students to doss off.

Yes, they are 'doing nothing' but they are doing it in a very focused way. Meditation is very simple but it is not always easy. There is effort involved. It requires focus, patience and attentiveness.

It is not just for monks on remote hills or hippies trying to find themselves.

Anyone can do meditation. You don't need to sit on a mountain, take a vow of celibacy or even like incense. Anyone can do meditation and often the people with the busiest, least monastic lifestyles are the ones who benefit most from taking a few moments out.

Meditation is not achieved by sitting still and not thinking.

Staying still in a comfortable position is a good starting point for meditation because it allows us to focus inward. Getting the body still is far easier for most than stilling the mind. Trying to block out thoughts or just not think is not a very effective way of bringing yourself into a state of inner silence. It is similar to the idea of trying to relax. Trying and relaxing are opposites so rather than trying to relax we allow our bodies to be comfortable and observe them relax and it is similar with the mind. Instead of trying to stop thinking we allow the thoughts to come and go, and watch the thoughts, so we become mindful of the thoughts and take a step back from the thoughts. If we are lucky, and with practice, the thoughts slow down and we can start to rest into the spaces between the thoughts. Then the stillness of body and mind arise, by creating time and space and being receptive, focused and alert. Just like we like our students to be.



As well as having taught ELT for many years Clare is a yoga and mediation teacher and a yoga teacher trainer.

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Meditation is more like defragmenting your hard drive. We wait for updates on our computers and smart phones all the time to allow them to function better. We take time out and pay money to service our cars. Think of it as doing something similar for the mind and think of how lovely it is to teach minds that are running smoothly with space and focus for learning.

You can find a lovely simple mindfulness meditation called the mountain meditation and that is by Jon Kabat Zinn and involves visualising a mountain and then bringing it in so you become the mountain. It creates a lovely sense of stillness. There are also great meditations from Thich Nhat Hahn, some of which include gentle movement and can be found on Youtube. One example is to sit quietly and focus on the breathe. Inhale relaxation and smile as you exhale. Try it yourself three minutes of that will lift a bad mood. However I find probably the best starting point for beginners is the body scan, like the one I have included below. You can simply read it out in class and once you are familiar with it you can adapt it to suit different levels by adding levels of detail (eg. including the names of the bones for your advanced students). I would recommend allowing the students to have the meditation just as meditation and resist the urge to exploit the text too much for grammar or meaning. As a paired practice for reading out loud to each other it would be very nice though. The idea is that it is a very positive experience where there is no competition or sense of having to achieve a goal. It just is more of a break in the flow.



Meditation Script for use in classes

Body scan meditations are common in yoga and mindfulness practices. Here is my own preferred version which I developed for using with people who are sitting in chairs. For other meditation scripts, and to learn more about the practice, see *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Hyperion 1994).

We are going to do a short meditation today. Don't worry if you don't understand every word I say, try to follow the gist and enjoy the meditation. I want you to start by making sure you are comfortable in your chairs. Take a moment to moving bags or jackets that might be in the way. Uncross your legs and arms and place your feet flat on the ground and sit nice and tall supported by your chair. Everyone ok? Now gently close your eyes. (You may want to tell them at this stage that anyone who does not want to participate is free to sit quietly and observe but should stay quiet and still so as not to disturb the others)

Rotation of consciousness

I want you to start by bringing your awareness into your feet, right down into your toes. Without moving your toes see if you can feel them in your shoes.

Now bring your awareness into the soles of your feet. The right foot, the left foot, both feet, the ankles, right ankle and left ankle, both ankles, the calves, the right calf, the left calf, both calves, the knees, right and left, the thighs, the right thigh and the left thigh, the full weight of your legs resting down.

Bring your awareness to the parts of the body in contact with the chair, the thighs the back of the hips. Now see if you can feel your spine, your tailbone, the back of the hips, the back of the waist, the back of the ribcage the back of the shoulders, the space between the shoulders, the back of the neck, the top of your head. Feel yourself lovely and tall in your chair.

Watching the thoughts

Now take a moment to watch you thoughts. What am I thinking about now? Maybe you have thoughts of things that happened this morning? Maybe you have thoughts about what you are going to do after class, or next weekend. Maybe you are thinking about home or people who are far away or maybe you are thinking about your homework. Often we think about things from the past or the future or we imagine things that never happened. Right now letting those thoughts come in without stopping them.

Trying to just to watch them. Trying not to follow the thoughts. If you find yourself following a thought that is a good thing. It is a chance to come back to watching the thoughts. Now letting go of that practice.

Watching the breath

Bring your awareness to the breath. Without trying to change it just watch the breath coming and going. Your breath is always there. If you still find your thoughts coming in, let them come but keep bringing your awareness back to the breath.

Feel the inhale and the exhale. Feel the breath come in and go out. You may notice that when you watch your breath it starts to get slower, slower and deeper.

You may not notice anything change and that is fine as well. Just keep watching the breath. Some breaths might be longer, some not as deep, just following the rhythm of the breath. We are going to keep watching the breath for 30 seconds or so.

Closing the meditation

Watching the breath, with your eyes close be aware of the sounds you can hear around the room. The sound of my voice. Bring your awareness back into this classroom. Monday morning's English lesson. (You can put in the days topic here if you like.)

Gently bring your head down and slowly open your eyes now bringing your focus back into the room. Everyone ok? I hope you enjoyed that short meditation