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## **THE CONCEPT OF YOGA IN THE ENGLISH CLASS ROOM**

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### **Abstract**

‘Yoga and meditation have developed into mainstream practices in all professions in all over the world. The students learning system in the world filled with complex physical, psychological and emotional pressures. Some learners are coping with lives stained by poverty, political and social unrest. Other learners have constant learning environments but are personally beset by anxiety, stress, and too much competition. And it’s not only learners who face these challenges but also teachers too. Teachers struggle to balance their personal and professional lives and to cope with heavy teaching loads, overcrowded classrooms, and changing technologies and curriculum. This article looks at one way for especially teachers and students of English to make classrooms emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy. With this approach, learners use their physical and psychological attention to learn, practice, and anchor the language being taught at the same time as they reduce anxiety and help care for mind, body, and spirit.

### **Key-Words**

Yoga, Meditation, English language & literature, teaching, emotions, physical and mental health.

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## INTRODUCTION

Scientists are getting close to proving what yogis have held to be true for centuries. Yoga and meditation can ward off stress and disease. John Denninger, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, is leading a five-year study on how the ancient practices affect genes and brain activity in the chronically stressed. His latest work follows a study he and others published earlier this year showing how so-called mind-body techniques can switch on and off some genes linked to stress and immune function. While hundreds of studies have been conducted on the mental health benefits of yoga and meditation, they have tended to rely on blunt tools like participant questionnaires, as well as heart rate and blood pressure monitoring. Only recently have neuro-imaging and genomics technology used in Denninger's latest studies allowed scientists to measure physiological changes in greater detail. (*Makiko Kitamura, "Harvard Yoga Scientists..."*)

## YOGA

Yoga is a practice that has existed for thousands of years. The word yoga comes from Sanskrit. It means union or bridge, signifying that the practice of yoga brings together the practitioner's body, mind, and spirit. Yoga's exact history and origins are uncertain; however, it is known that yoga came from the East. Yoga consists of hundreds of physical postures, called asanas. These postures, which are held for various periods of time, combined with breathing techniques (pranayama) and meditation (dyana), bring about the goals of a sound body and a quiet, peaceful mind.

Hatha yoga, one of several branches of yoga, is the most widely practiced form of yoga in North America. Given that I am most familiar with Hatha yoga, it is the branch of yoga that I generally refer to in this article. Hatha yoga postures are divided into three types: static asanas, which promote concentration and power; dynamic asanas, which coordinate body movements; and breathing and relaxation asanas, which focus on resting and relaxing the body. When practiced over time, Hatha yoga brings many benefits. The spine becomes supple, and circulation increases in organs, glands, and tissues. The practitioner gains strength, flexibility, endurance, and balance. Also, concentration improves, and feelings of stress and anxiety are reduced.

(*Sivananda, "Yoga Mind...."*)

## MEDITATION

Despite all its popularity, today very few of us truly know what meditation is. Some regard meditation is the mental concentration on something; others consider that we meditate when we imagine something that gives us peace or satisfaction. All these methods are being with one goal to slow down and, eventually, completely stop the incessant activity of our minds. These exercises are not really meditation. They are substitutes for meditation because it is normally very difficult to stop our minds all together. In reality, meditation is a state of thoughtless awareness. It is not an act of doing-it is a state of awareness. We either in this state or we are not, regardless of what we are doing in life. Truly, a man can be in meditation while doing his day's labours as another man can be very

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far from meditation while sitting in a lotus posture on the top of a mountain.

When we take a look at the various explanations of meditation, another thing we often see is that meditation is defined as taking a moment to sit quietly or to ponder. True meditation, however is much more than this. It is a state of profound, deep peace that occurs when the mind is calm and silent, yet completely alert. This is just the begging of an inner transformation that takes us to a higher level of awareness. This enables us to fulfill our true human potential. The problem, of course, is how to achieve this state.

## **SOME KEY POINTS ABOUT MEDITATION**

Meditation can be an effective form of stress reduction and has the potential to improve quality of life and decrease healthcare costs. It is effortless and leads to a state of “thoughtless awareness” in which the excessive stress producing activity of the mind is neutralized without reducing alertness and effectiveness. Authentic meditation enables one to focus on the present moment rather than dwell on the unchangeable past or undetermined future. There is little quality evidence comparing one meditation technique with another or meditation with relaxation techniques. ‘

The theoretical explanation for the effects of meditation and relaxation techniques is that the release of catecholamine and other stress hormones are reduced and parasympathetic activity is increased. Whether meditation involves other unique neurophysiological effects remains to be proven. (*Rama , “Meditation and.....”*)

## **YOGA AND THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

So where does English language teaching and learning intersect with yoga in the classroom? How can use yoga lead to a pleasant environment and effective language learning? One can explore answers for these questions.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) approach to teaching a foreign or second language originally developed in the early 1970s by an American professor of psychology, James Asher, TPR is based on the theory that a learner’s memory is enhanced and aided through association with physical movement. One of the tenets of this theory is that mother tongue language acquisition in very young children occurs when children respond physically to parents’ commands. However, the use of TPR can be adapted to other learners, including older children and adults. The TPR approach to teaching language is primarily concerned (at least initially) with the receptive skill of listening and is linked to physical actions designed to reinforce comprehension of specific key vocabulary and grammar

In later years, this approach was extended successfully to include TPR storytelling, a multi-skills approach to teaching English. A typical classical TPR activity contains oral commands by the teacher, such as “*Open the door,*” “*Stand up,*” and “*Turn around,*” at the same time that he or she models the commands. Language learners then carry out the commands by physically performing the movements while listening to the teacher’s oral commands. With a certain amount of repetition, these basic commands can be assimilated

quite easily by the learners. Accurately reproducing the commands themselves is more gradual. Over time the teacher no longer has to model the physical action or say the commands, and the learners can give them to others. An example of a familiar TPR-type lesson for many English teachers is the chant-like game of “Simon Says,” in which the teacher (a leader) calls out commands to learners to touch or point to different parts of the body. (Rodgers, “Approaches and methods....”)

## **INTEGRATING YOGA INTO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LESSON**

How, when, and for what reasons do teachers appropriately integrate yoga into the language classroom? Teaching English through the practice of yoga can be done for as briefly as a few seconds, a few minutes, or as long as the entire class time. This decision is up to you, the teacher, or the type of program in which you teach.

You may question whether you can sensibly teach yoga if you have large classes. Ideally, teachers would have small groups of students and large, airy rooms with plenty of space to stretch out. Unfortunately, this is not the reality of most classrooms. Here are a few tips for teachers who have large classes and not much room to move but would like to create a harmonious language learning classroom. When you confront such challenges, teach introductory standing and sitting poses (seated in a chair, not on the floor). And you can teach poses that utilize only the shoulders, neck, arms, legs, hands, fingers, or simply the face. Although advanced practitioners of yoga often look like human pretzels when holding a pose, you and your learners can receive the same benefits of strength, flexibility, endurance, balance, concentration, and reduction of stress and anxiety by practicing only fundamental yoga poses. And visualization and guided imagery activities require no room at all, except that of the mind. With careful thought and planning, you can create a harmonious language learning atmosphere in any classroom.

English teachers are aware that their learners need a change of pace during a lesson so that they don’t get bored and begin to tune out. Keeping learners engaged in their language learning requires a range of activities that are enjoyable, imaginative, and fun. This is particularly true of young learners, who enjoy a frequent change of activities. And tasks that involve learners physically and get them up and moving are all the more appreciated (Cameron, L. “Teaching languages.....”)

Another reason to use yoga in the English language classroom is that it can act as a counterbalance to the multiple forms of technology that confront 21st-century language learners, young and old alike. Nowadays it is not uncommon to see young people, and adults, spending hours on social networking sites, talking or texting on mobile phones, or playing computer games. In our observation, spending too much time hooked in to technology and multi-tasking can cause learners to become easily distracted and have difficulty concentrating in class. Teaching simple yoga poses and visualization activities provides a break from technology and helps learners become aware of the present moment, their physical surroundings, and the task at hand—English language learning. (Shin, J. K., “Ten helpful....”)

## **INTRODUCING YOGA IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS**

Although spiritual dimensions can and do exist within the yoga tradition and each of its main branches, it is important to point out that yoga is not a religion. Nothing in this article promotes any particular religious or spiritual path. All the branches of yoga can be practiced by people of any belief system and also by those who do not hold any religious convictions.

## **INTEGRATE YOGA IN LANGUAGE CLASSES**

Yoga postures and visualizations are rich in language. Besides the obvious verbs of action and vocabulary of the parts of the body that have already been mentioned, you can teach many other language elements. Adverbs, repetition of key words, words showing chronological order, vocabulary connoting direction, and many imperatives, all of which are naturally found in teaching and practicing a pose, can be taught. A myriad of lessons can be designed around key vocabulary found in any yoga pose and utilized for teaching, practicing, reviewing, or assessing language.

Yoga postures and visualization exercises, especially in intermediate to advanced language classes, encourage spoken and written language activities about how the body feels and its connection to the mind and emotions. Another language aspect of yoga which can be pedagogically exploited, and at the same time enjoyable and appealing to learners, is the names of postures. When holding yoga asanas, the person in the posture often mentally calls up images of different animals, elements of nature, or simple objects or shapes; just a sampling of names of postures includes Cat, Downward Dog, Cobra, Fish, Eagle, Tree, Mountain, Chair, Table, and Triangle. This somewhat playful aspect of yoga can make it an especially fun activity to do with children. Names of yoga poses also serve for any age group as an anchor for remembering the name of the posture itself and the vocabulary associated with the pose. At the end of this article an introductory but fundamental yoga pose (Mountain Pose) serves as an extended example.

## **DOES TEACHER HAVE TO BE A PRACTITIONER OF YOGA HIMSELF TO USE IT IN ENGLISH LESSONS?**

No, you do not have to be a practitioner of yoga to experiment with it in your English language lessons. But if you are not a practitioner, then a word of caution is in order. Safety, health, and comfort always come first, for you and your learners. Guided imagery, uncomplicated breathing techniques, and the most basic, beginning-level sitting, standing, and lying-down poses are safe to use in your English language lessons. Before you begin, however, know your learners and any health-related problems that could be dangerous to them or prevent them from participating in the physical movements you have decided to teach and practice. This word of warning goes for teachers of all age groups.

However, practicing easy yoga poses is probably less dangerous to one's body than activities in a physical education class or on the playground. If you teach adult learners, it

would be wise to carry out a quick survey to find out if any have health issues before you integrate yoga poses into your lessons.

## **CREATING INTEREST TOWARDS YOGA IN THE ENGLISH CLASS ROOM**

All members of your class should have the option to participate, or not participate, in activities related to yoga. You may have learners in your class who resist on religious and philosophical grounds. Others, in their adolescent years, may be embarrassed to try the postures, especially when yoga is first introduced. Perhaps they will feel foolish and think they look silly or clumsy. Allowing these learners to skip the activity, to only observe, or to join in when they feel comfortable is probably the best approach. However, a few students refusing to participate should not put off your plans for teaching English through yoga. If any of your learners have physical limitations or health issues that prevent them from fully participating, but they want to join in, pose variations and modifications are readily available in the literature and are easy to apply.

## **IMPLEMENT YOGA IN THE ENGLISH CLASS ROOM**

Hundreds of DVDs, videos, websites, books, articles, and activity cards offer the classroom teacher thoughts, activities, drawings, music, and background on yoga and its practice. They provide a sampling of resources that enclose much of what you need to get started in teaching simple yoga activities in your English language classroom. The resources that are cited have practical ideas, many illustrations, and interesting ways to approach the implementation and teaching of yoga in the language classroom. Combined, they give you a place to start. (Walsh, "Yoga in....")

## **CONCLUSION**

With the increased popularity of yoga in the Western world, the number of yoga centers, retreats, and classes, and the number of books and magazines about yoga have grown tremendously. Finding information on yoga, both in hard copy and digitally, has become extremely easy. We have also noticed that using elements of yoga in educational settings in all subject matter, including the language classroom, has gained momentum and become more acceptable. In the last few months, we have presented on the topic of English language learning through yoga at National level workshops. English language teaching professionals of all ages, nationalities, and teaching levels have welcomed this topic and willingly participated. My audiences' warm reception, their curiosity, and their readiness to relate their own experiences with using yoga-like activities in English language teaching prompted me to write this article to share my ideas with a larger number of English language teachers. I believe that integrating yoga poses and visualization techniques into English language classrooms will increase opportunities for language learning and decrease many of the challenges faced by today's teachers and learners alike. By combining the information provided in this article with your own imagination and the belief that your English language learners deserve to learn in environments that are emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy places, you could take the first step towards creating a harmonious language learning environment in your own classroom.

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