

## A Mindful Gratitude Exercise for the English Classroom

by **MONICA FLORES ROJAS**

How are you feeling today? How have you been feeling in the past few weeks or months?

These questions are in many cases taken for granted as we go on with our day, with our lives, and, of course, with our classes. However, what if these questions could lead to more than we can envision? Identifying our emotional state as well as our students' is crucial so that we can help them with their learning process more effectively. This is why it's essential to build a safe atmosphere where our students feel supported to learn. A variety of techniques and strategies is being implemented by English teachers around the world to achieve this goal in the classroom every day.

In my professional experience, one of the most powerful and effective among these strategies is mindfulness, which provides an enormous palette of practical exercises that can be used in the classroom. Eisler (2019) defines mindfulness as the simple act of paying attention and noticing and being present in whatever you are doing. When you are being actively mindful, you are noticing the world around you, as well as your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and movements, and the effect(s) you have on others around you. According to Jensen (2008), incorporating breathing exercises can help students experience mindfulness, being conscious of the present moment.

More specifically, one of the palette of exercises offered by mindfulness is “gratitude practice.” In the past decade, gratitude has been shown to improve people’s well-being. Duckworth and Bono (2022) state that grateful people are happier and more fulfilled; being grateful helps them to be more mindful, too. Current times are especially disturbing, as we have been facing a global pandemic for more than three years. Facundo Manes (2021), an eminent Argentinian neuroscientist, warns society about the long-term psychological impact that the pandemic is having, particularly on young people. Manes states that it is important to go beyond offering psychiatric and mental-health services in hospitals; he suggests that citizens be provided with comprehensive information and tools that can help them manage anxiety, stress, and angst. This is why we, as teachers, have the duty to equip ourselves with adequate tools to help students reach mental balance while they also continue enhancing their linguistic skills.

The teaching technique described below is based on mindfulness—and more specifically on gratitude practice, which can not only have a positive impact on students’ well-being, but also generate an opportunity to learn the lexicon to express gratitude in English. This activity is for intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced students.

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### **PART I: IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS (10 TO 15 MINUTES)**

To start this activity, ask students the following question:

*How have you been feeling?*

You can show the question on a screen, write it on the board, or bring a poster with the question. After this, show a menu of emojis or pictures; below each of them, the related emotion in English should be clearly written. (You can search for a menu of emojis or pictures on the internet.) If time allows, you can also prepare pictures of yourself expressing the given emotion, or you can use <https://www.pexels.com/>, where you can download and use pictures for free. Figure 1 gives examples of the vocabulary that can be learned and used in the activity; other terms are possible, depending on the English ability of your students.

Give students time to explore the emojis or pictures and words. The visuals will help them understand new vocabulary, but check in with them if a particular word is difficult for them to understand. Provide examples and definitions. For instance, suppose a student asks, "What does *overwhelmed* mean?"

You can provide examples related to this particular student's experiences or to the entire group's context (an example might be having a lot of homework to do, studying for difficult tests, and dealing with a problem that a friend or family member has—all at the same time). This will lead the student to fully understand the word's meaning. You can also suggest that the student ask this question to another student, so they can help each other figure out the meaning of this word and others they may not know.

Make sure everybody knows the meaning of *grateful*. The definition offered by Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online is "feeling or showing thanks because somebody has done something kind for you or has done as you asked" (Oxford University Press 2022).

After you have given students enough time to explore the menu of visuals and words, ask them to write down their answer to the first question you asked: "How have you been feeling?" They can pick more than one emotion, but you should ask them to write down a complete sentence so they can also review the use of the present perfect continuous tense and, possibly, vocabulary they have just learned.

good happy great wonderful curious positive fantastic grateful optimistic determined	confused anxious worried annoyed overwhelmed	frustrated sad emotional down irritated heartbroken
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**Figure 1. Examples of emotion-related vocabulary that can be used in the activity**

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**Choose one thing, one person, or one experience you are grateful for. Focus on only that thing, person, or experience.**

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After your students have written their answers, ask them to work in pairs and share their answers with each other. Encourage them to explain why they have been feeling this particular way. Doing so will provide an expansion to this vocabulary stage. Finally, ask for volunteers to share their answers orally with the entire group. You will notice that many will be eager to share their answers now that they have learned the appropriate vocabulary to verbalize how they have been feeling, and because they have had the opportunity to practice their answers in pairs. This stage is essential since it helps students understand how they have been feeling and connect it to new lexicon. These are examples of what students have shared in my class:

1. In the past two weeks, I have been feeling *down* because my pet got lost.
2. In the past month, I have been feeling *overwhelmed* because I have had a lot of homework.
3. In the past 60 days, I have been feeling *positive* because I found a job.

Whether they have been feeling a positive or negative emotion, pinpointing this is crucial in order for them to be in a more reflective and mindful state, which will push them to be more open to learning. Additionally, this first stage will serve as a diagnostic on the impact that this mindful gratitude exercise can have on students' mental and emotional states.

**PART II: A MINDFUL GRATITUDE EXERCISE  
(5 TO 10 MINUTES)**

Dr. Robert Emmons of the University of California, Davis has conducted research showing that expressing gratitude heals, energizes, and transforms lives (Emmons 2010). Gratitude also has the

power to generate enthusiasm, alertness, and connection to others. Now that students have identified how they have been feeling in the past few weeks or months, they are ready to complete a gratitude exercise. If students have been feeling negative emotions, this exercise will help them get back to a happier state. If they have been feeling positive emotions, the exercise can reinforce those emotions.

Ask students to follow the next steps. Explain that they will be hearing instructions and that the language will be in the imperative form, so they need to listen attentively and follow the instructions:

**Step 1:** Sit comfortably in a chair but keep a good posture.

**Step 2:** Put your feet on the floor.

**Step 3:** Put your hands in your lap with your palms facing up.

**Step 4:** Close your eyes.

**Step 5:** Inhale and exhale three times.

**Step 6:** Choose one thing, one person, or one experience you are grateful for. Focus on only that thing, person, or experience. Visualize it, smell it, touch it, and sense how this thing, person, or experience made you feel or makes you feel now. (This will also be connected to the vocabulary they have just learned.)

**Step 7:** Inhale and exhale three times.

**Step 8:** Open your eyes whenever you are ready.

After the mindful gratitude exercise has been completed, ask students to share whether this brief exercise has in any way changed how they have been feeling. In my experience,

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more than 70 percent of students report they feel better after this mindful gratitude exercise because they have realized they are grateful for at least one thing, person, or experience in their lives.

### PART III: "I'M GRATEFUL ..." (10 TO 15 MINUTES)

To wrap up this activity, write "I'm grateful to ..." and "I'm grateful for ..." on the board, or have these ready on a screen or a poster. Explain that the word *grateful* has two possible prepositional collocations: *to* and *for*. Provide examples so that students can notice the difference in usage:

- "I'm grateful *to* my mother because she has always been there to support me."
- "I'm grateful *for* all the flowers in my garden because they make me feel happy every day."
- "I'm grateful *to* my teachers *for* their patience."

Next, ask students to complete either one of these statements with the one thing, person, or experience they chose during the gratitude practice. Ask them to expand the writing by explaining why they are grateful for (or to) that thing, person, or experience. For instance, a student might write, "I'm grateful for my dog because he always cheers me up when I'm down. I adopted him when I was volunteering in an animal shelter. His name is Axel, and he's the most beautiful dog in the world."

You can ask students to pair up and read to each other what they have written, then ask for volunteers to share what they have written with the entire group. I wouldn't suggest

forcing them to do so because in some cases, what they have written is related to their private lives. However, in my experience, there will always be some students who will be happy to share what they wrote; if the teacher has been working with students for a long period of time, trust has already been built. Alternatively, students can write their "I'm grateful ..." statements on a sticky note and post them on a poster entitled "Gratitude Poster." After all students have finished the exercise, they can read what has been added to the poster.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

In these stressful times, practicing mindfulness, and more specifically completing gratitude exercises, is paramount. Students will improve their level of happiness and well-being by doing this mindful gratitude exercise, which will support their learning process enormously. Moreover, they will learn the lexicon related to their emotional state as well as how to verbalize gratitude in English, helping them develop their linguistic skills.

You can read some students' comments below. Remember to be grateful and present!

### STUDENTS' COMMENTS (VERBATIM)

"Mindfulness more than a technique, for me, it's a lifestyle that I do once a week. I feel that it pushes me to give the importance needed to what I experience **in the present**, it helped me **connect more** with what I was doing in a determined moment, to control my emotions as my thoughts, to be able to accept them and not repress them, understanding that they are part of the moment but that they don't define me, it **helped me to concentrate more** and to live here and now." – S.

“The mindfulness training **helped me** a lot in class. I’d never done something like that before. ... We used to do these exercises every Wednesday and I think they helped me and all my classmates to **be more concentrated and relaxed.**” – N.

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