

PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA DO RIO DE JANEIRO



PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO LATO SENSU EM LÍNGUA INGLESA

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**WHY IS MY PRIVATE STUDENT SO ANXIOUS? A MINDFULNESS-BASED
STUDY AND AN EXPLORATORY WORK FOR UNDERSTANDING**

RIO DE JANEIRO

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Monografia apresentada ao
programa de Pós-Graduação em
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“It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

Mauro, Mariana; Montedonio, Regina (Advisor). Why is my private student so anxious? A mindfulness-based study and an exploratory work for understanding. Rio de Janeiro, 2020. Monograph – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

ABSTRACT

Learning a new language is a huge challenge. When students think about tests and exams, they generally feel stressed and anxious. This research aims to understand the reason why a private student follows this pattern, even when s/he knows there won't be any formal evaluations. This monograph attempts to understand the anxiety that sets in the language learning process. To that end, the teacher and the student decided to work together as researcher and co-researcher respectively, using Mindfulness practices and the seven principles of Exploratory Practice to bring awareness to the learning environment. The Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) were chosen prioritizing the understanding of the quality of life in the classroom. As an Exploratory work, this monograph does not analyze a solution to the puzzle but an understanding of the anxiety that develops in the teaching/learning environment.

Keywords: Exploratory Practice, Mindfulness, ESL, Teaching, Understanding.

Mauro, Mariana; Montedonio, Regina (Advisor). Por que minha aluna particular é tão ansiosa? Um estudo baseado em *Mindfulness* e Prática Exploratória. Rio de Janeiro, 2020. Monograph – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

RESUMO

Aprender uma nova língua é um enorme desafio. Quando alunos pensam em testes e provas, eles geralmente ficam ansiosos e estressados. Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo entender o motivo pelo qual um aluno particular segue este padrão, mesmo quando ele/ela sabe que não será avaliado (a) formalmente. Essa monografia tenta entender a ansiedade que é criada no processo de aprendizagem de uma língua. Para isso, professora e aluna trabalharam juntas como pesquisadora e co-pesquisadora respectivamente, usando práticas de *Mindfulness* e os sete princípios da Prática Exploratória para trazer consciência ao ambiente de aprendizado. As Atividades Pedagógicas com Potencial Exploratório (APPE) foram escolhidas priorizando o entendimento de qualidade de vida na sala de aula. Como um trabalho de Prática Exploratória, essa monografia não visa encontrar uma solução para o problema, mas quer refletir sobre a ansiedade que é desenvolvida no ambiente de aprendizagem e ensino.

Palavras-chaves: Prática Exploratória, *Mindfulness*, Inglês como segunda língua, Ensino, Entendimento.

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1) INTRODUCTION: PRESENTING THE PUZZLE

In the four years I worked as an English teacher in a private course in Rio de Janeiro, I could realize how anxious and stressed about learning a new language my students were. Their fear of evaluations and exams also called my attention over the years, mainly because I remember how much I suffered from this same problem when I was a young learner. I worked with adults who, in general, had decided to study English because of their jobs.

Time changed, but my puzzle continued. When I stopped working in that private course, I decided to give private classes to a friend of mine, Thais Carvas¹, who suffers from the same problems: anxiety and stress.

My main goal in this work is to understand why she is anxious in the process of learning a second language. The idea is to use Mindfulness practices² to see if her pattern can be understood.

Thais is 28 years old. She is a very communicative person when she is speaking Portuguese, her native language. She lives by herself, works in a publishing house, and generally does some freelance work to increase her income. She is white, middle-class, and highly educated. Her academic background was in Social Communication at UFRJ, and she did a graduate course in Public Policies in Confronting Violence Against Women at PUC. She wants to study English because she is going to spend a month in Canada next year.

I chose to use specific Mindfulness practices in the teaching process because of my practice and the example that I had when I was taking Language Studies I at PUC. Since I started practicing mindfulness meditation, I have been more aware of my body and my attitudes. When my group was studying Language Studies I, we had some guided meditations. Those helped me a lot to control my anxiety and my fear of being evaluated.

In September, I went to an Educational Forum in Bienal do Livro, where I had the opportunity to listen to José Pacheco, the mind behind the big success of Escola da Ponte, in

¹ She asked me to use her real name in this monograph.

² These practices are explained in Chapter 3.

Portugal, and many other educational projects. Pacheco gave the audience his e-mail for further questions, and I sent him a message asking his opinion about meditation and Mindfulness in second language learning. He scheduled a chat with me via Skype, which happened in the same month.

I explained my questions about my students' stress and fear of exams. He said that exams were not evaluations. Besides that, he questioned me about why students need to do exams and why they need to be in a classroom. According to him, meditation is essential to the process of self-learning. However, he warned me not to use meditation in order to calm my students down because this would be a palliative measure. He added that if they did not have exams or classes, they would not be anxious at all.

He suggested that I used meditation, but not in the classroom. When he said that it was not a good idea to use Mindfulness practices as a solution, he helped me to understand that I can't use those practices as a solution to the problem of anxiety. However, I could use them as a tool to understand my puzzle.

Besides, the Theory of Multiple Intelligences³ helped me to understand why I wanted to talk about this role of anxiety in my final paper. Howard Gardner came up with the theory that people have something like different computers inside their minds, which work with eight abilities. Those abilities were: musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Traditional schools work with logical-mathematical and verbal-linguistic abilities. When students are successful in these or one of these, they are considered intelligent. However, there is much more knowledge beyond that. In this paper, I intend to work with interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. Intrapersonal, because my goal is to help my student to understand her feelings and emotions. Interpersonal, because I want to develop my empathy as a teacher and understand my student's path and struggles. I can also help my student develop "empathically" as a reflective and exploratory learner.

³ Based on his talk in UFRGS in 2009.

It is worth remembering what Paulo Freire says in “Pedagogy of Autonomy”. A teacher is not someone who transfers knowledge.

The very first of these types of knowledge, indispensable from the beginning to the teacher (that is, to the teacher who considers him or herself to be an agent in the production of knowledge), is that to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge. (FREIRE, 1996, p.30)

Worried about my role as a teacher in the process of understanding my student's struggles, I think that using some Mindfulness practices can help her to focus on the present. These practices can also help her to be more aware of her feelings and to understand her struggles.

At a time when today's youth are facing increased stress levels, mental health challenges, mood disorders, health issues related to nutrition and exercise, and many other challenges to their well-being, yoga and Mindfulness are practices that can positively impact our young people. (COOK-COTTONE, C. P. 2017, p. ix)

This research aims to understand my student's anxiety in the process of learning a new language. The reading materials used as a framework for this research will be presented in the next chapter.

This paper will be divided into five parts: Introduction: presenting the puzzle, Literature Review, Methodology, Discussion & Analysis, and Conclusion. At the end of the paper, there will be some Appendixes with extra materials that should be included in this research for further comprehension about the discussions reflected here.

2) LITERATURE REVIEW

This work was based on three Epistemological areas: Exploratory Practice, Teaching a foreign language, and Mindfulness. I chose the first area to explore a new approach in the relationship researcher/researched (ALLWRIGHT, 2019). Based on the idea of Exploratory Practice, I invited my student to be a co-researcher. Thus, in this monograph, we will be both practitioners. Dick Allwright, Inês Miller, Ralph Bannell, Assia Slimani-Rolls, and Richard Kiely will be used as reference in this part.

In Exploratory Practice, the focus is not on identifying a pedagogic problem and finding a solution for it. The idea is to develop an understanding of the problem (ALLWRIGHT, 2019). This idea of problem-solving was a challenge when I began to think about the concept of research because this approach was new to me. In addition, the intention to develop an understanding of the topic at hand is closely related to awareness, a key element in Mindfulness.

It is essential to say that as my student is considered a co-researcher, she assumes an active role as a practitioner of learning, as Slimani-Rolls and Kiely explained.

Teachers always have a lead role in classrooms and can determine what is done by instructing students. In EP, however, they involve the students as active participants, as practitioners of learning, who contribute to understanding possibilities and opportunities in the classroom.
(SLIMANI-ROLLS & KIELY, 2019, p.7)

Based on this idea, Thais has an essential role in this research because she is trying to understand our puzzle with me. She knows what I am trying to understand and she is always helping me.

In order to conduct this research, the seven principles of EP (ALLWRIGHT, HANKS, 2019) were considered goals. Although each principle has a number, it does not mean that one is more important than the other.

Principle 1: 'Quality of life' for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for practitioner research in our field.
Principle 2: Working primarily to understand the 'quality of life' as it is experienced by language learners and teachers is more important than, and logically prior to, seeking in any way to improve it.

Principle 3: Everybody needs to be involved in the work for understanding.
 Principle 4: The work needs to serve to bring people together.
 Principle 5: The work needs to be conducted in a spirit of mutual development.
 Principle 6: Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise.
 Principle 7: Integrating the work for understanding fully into existing curricular practices is a way of minimizing the burden and maximizing sustainability.
 (ALLWRIGHT & HANKS, 2009, p. 149-154)

This research aims at understanding the quality of life in the classroom through awareness. The idea is not to improve the quality of life but to observe and understand the quality of life of her environment. As my student is a co-researcher, we are both involved in working for understanding. The goal is that both of us develop our individual and shared understanding of the learning process. In order to do so, this work does not have an end because it is a continuous effort. It is all about starting to pay attention to the classroom environment without looking for problem-solving. Besides, this work has to be sustainable to minimize any burden that could exist inside a classroom. The understanding process takes place during our classes. This is not just the subject of research, she has a leading role because she is my co-researcher.

Exploratory Practice is related to teaching because you can research at the same time that you are teaching. This approach helps teachers not to burn themselves as they probably would if they were conducting qualitative research.

A basic belief underlying Exploratory Practice is the integration of pedagogy and research through the use of pedagogic activities that can be used as investigative tools. Working within this framework, teachers select and adapt familiar activities (grammar exercises, word-association games, role-plays, stories, letters, etc.) that can help them obtain information (data) related to the puzzle being investigated.
 (MILLER & BANNELL, 1998, p. 4)

Due to this belief, EP was the big preset of mind of this research. It is essential to say that it is not a methodology but a way of life. The same idea can be applied in Mindfulness. After all, according to Kabat Zinn (2017), Mindfulness is not a methodology, but an art of living and a way of being. Talking about teaching, the main focus of this work is on Paulo Freire's, bell hooks⁴, and José Pacheco's work.

⁴ She uses her name without capital letters.

As my student is considered a practitioner research, she has a leading role in this paper. As a teacher, I am not a holder of knowledge since Freire argues that teaching is not about the transferring of knowledge. Pacheco's work was essential to understand how a teacher can help students become autonomous. Throughout the learning process, my student has the opportunity to develop herself as a practitioner, and I can also develop myself as a researcher. Therefore, their work complements the idea of being sustainable, one principle of EP.

Talking about pedagogy, Freire and bell hooks have something in common: the belief in the pedagogy of hope. hooks quotes Freire to explain that teachers need to stimulate their students to think critically in order to change systems of domination.

“In the last twenty years, educators who have dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism have created a pedagogy of hope” (hooks, bell, 2003, p. xiv).

This idea of not reinforcing “systems of domination” and engaging students to think critically helped me to define the topics⁵ discussed in class with my private student. bell hooks continues to explain what she means by the pedagogy of hope, what I have considered my moto in class. “Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers we enter the classroom with hope. (hooks, bell, 2013)”

It is worth mentioning that Exploratory Practice and hooks understand that the process of learning also happens beyond the classroom, which is connected to the art of Mindfulness, in other words, live the present with awareness. “To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety” (hooks, bell, 2003). Furthermore, she talks about the importance of conversations as a pillar for democratic educators. As I was giving conversation classes to my private student, this was an excellent opportunity to share knowledge and learn from my student’s perspective.

⁵ The list of the topics is in Appendix 1, page 33.

At the end of her book, bell hooks talks about Mindfulness itself and how it helped her in life. “The practice of mindfulness has helped me balance my passion for thinking, for processing—this passion that is the catalyst for ecstatic teaching—with a passion for silence, for the present moment” (hooks, bell, 2013). She explains that we have problems to live our present moment because we tend to think about our future. However, the present time is the only one that is real and the only one in which we have power to do something. For her and for me, it is possible to share this understanding with students. With small practices, it is possible to help them trust the present.

Talking about the present, teachers need to stay in the moment, to be present while they are giving classes, especially to see their students as human beings, people that come from different backgrounds and have different prior knowledge. It’s essential to listen to students and try to understand their points of views. Each student can have a type of difficulty, and teachers need to understand that. Pacheco (2003), for example, regrets that so many teachers still believe that pedagogy is an art where you teach everything to everybody in the same way. On the other hand, he supports that it is necessary to create conditions for those who want to make a different school, more fraternal, and dignified.

Based on Pacheco’s ideas, I tried to create classes where my student could feel embraced and heard. Our topics were based on her life and her interests, in an attempt to make her feel special and unique.

Although people know it is important to remain in the present, they generally think that being “multitask” is good. Due to this matter, Mindfulness becomes something crucial to have in mind, especially when we usually forget our emotional needs because of different reasons. It is common to see anxious and stressful students repeating that they cannot learn English or any other subject. That is why Mindfulness will be discussed in this research according to the views of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2017), a well-known researcher and Mindfulness teacher, Ellen J. Langer (2018), and Catherine Cook-Cottone (2017). After reading “*Atenção Plena para iniciantes*” (KABAT-ZINN, 2017), “*Atenção Plena: como praticar Mindfulness em todas as áreas de sua vida*” (LANGER, 2018), and “*Mindfulness and Yoga in Schools : A Guide for Teachers and Practitioners*” (COOK-COTTONE, 2017), my idea was to use some Mindfulness practices to understand our puzzle. However, these exercises will only be done if the student agrees to do it because it is her decision, not my requirement.

Kabat-Zinn (2017) supports that Mindfulness exists when your attention stays at the present moment without judgment. He reminds us of the importance of breathing, saying that we only value this function when we have a cold, and cannot breathe normally. The author also supports that we generally put ourselves in an automatic pilot mode, in which we live only to check off a list. Besides, he says that there is no right way to meditate, our mind is like the sea, and our thoughts are like waves. As they come and go, we cannot judge our mind for the way it works.

The idea is to develop a beginner's mind perspective, from where everything is new for you. This approach makes you open to meditation, for example. Another concept that he uses is that Mindfulness needs to be lived daily. We can only cultivate this way of living by practicing every day. It is worth mentioning that he creates a Mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which is used at Massachusetts Medical School in the United States. Many patients said that this program helped them to live and that they were very grateful for it. The use of Mindfulness in the health context has scientific evidence as he supports in "Mindfulness for beginners"⁶. In this book, he argues that Mindfulness can be used in different settings and he talks especially about education, which is my main focus in this research.

For Langer (2018), also a very important name in the field, Mindfulness is defined by the process of noticing new things, which is the same idea of developing a beginner's mind. Even though a person knows a lot about a topic, it's essential to consider himself/herself a beginner, and not an expert. With a beginner's mind, this person is able to notice new things easily, because he/she does not think that he/she knows all about this topic. Langer says that in our daily life, we do not notice what we are doing unless there is a problem as throwing our socks in the garbage instead of putting them in the hamper. Another idea that is worth mentioning is that you should not think that everything belongs to a strict category. It is essential to have an open mind and think, for example, that a door is not just a door, but a wooden piece. This way of thinking helps people to reframe situations. Losing a job can be a sad and challenging situation, but you can always look at the bright sight, and this is a good exercise for our mind.

⁶ The edition used in this paper was in Portuguese. However, the title was translated here as the English-edition.

In the next chapter I will talk about the methodology used in this research, trying to understand my student's anxiety in the process of learning a new language.

3) METHODOLOGY

This Chapter will be divided into two parts: Exploratory Practice (EP), the mindset I will apply to this monograph and Mindfulness Practices. It is worth mentioning that Exploratory Practice and Mindfulness are ways of life and not just methodologies.

3.1) EXPLORATORY PRACTICE

In Exploratory Practice, there is an integration between pedagogy and research through a procedure called a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA) (MILLER, BANNELL, 1998). In other words, teachers need to adapt activities in a way that they can obtain information about their puzzle. They can also prepare a new procedure to understand the puzzle better. Using PEPA is a way of researching without burning out teachers because they do this activity at the same time they are teaching without having to do something after class. Teachers can also create PERAs (Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activities) to understand their puzzles. PEPAs and PERAs help students and teachers to believe in themselves and to be more confident about their own work.

PEPAs are therefore, proposed as familiar procedures that teachers can exploit to achieve deeper understanding of the classroom dynamic, and importantly for our purposes, gain insights into their own tacit reasoning as teachers, and use these insights to develop their professional practice.
(SLIMANI-ROLLS & KIELY, 2019, p. 41)

In order to understand my puzzle, I developed a PEPA to do with my student. In this exercise, which I called the “if I were you” challenge, she had to write four keywords that reminded her of her concerns. At the same time, I had to do the same. Then, she would read one, and I would formulate an “if I were you” sentence with a possible solution. Afterwards, she had to create her sentences with my concerns. The idea here is to understand what makes

us anxious and worried. The results and analysis of this PEPA will be presented in Chapter 4.

It is also worth mentioning that as Slimani-Rolls and Kiely said, EP proposes that teachers work with these activities during the classes. The idea is to analyze and reflect on regular practices as the puzzle that the teachers and the students are working on. As my student and I are trying to understand anxiety, the aim of the activities is to help us understand our puzzle better.

3.2) MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

After I talked about my research with José Pacheco, some of my strategies have changed. I decided that I would not use meditation and Mindfulness practices as part of my class as I intended to. Instead, I would think about exercises using these practices and ask my student if she would like to do it. It is essential to say that each activity can be also understood as a PEPA because they can help us to reflect on our puzzle.

In this paper, I will use some exercises to bring awareness to the moment. In order to do so, it is crucial to explain that mindfulness meditation and Mindfulness itself are different concepts, as Tony Schwartz (2014) explained. While the former proposes a specific kind of meditation where you set time to do the exercise, the latter is about a way of life, where you become truly aware of your everyday life. My goal is to use exercises to help my student understand what she can do to be aware of her feelings. However, it is her own choice to bring awareness to her everyday life. In a nutshell, it is up to her to understand that she can develop awareness in her life.

In this section, it is essential to mention that there have been many studies about the relation between Mindfulness and levels of anxiety. In order to illustrate some of the main aspects of these findings, it is important to talk about some of those researches. Jon Kabat-Zinn (et al., 1992) searched about the Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Program in the treatment of anxiety disorders. The target public was patients with a generalized anxiety disorder or panic disorder with or without agoraphobia, and the age ranged from 26 to 64 years. The results showed that the program could reduce the symptoms of the diseases, even

three years after the research in a 3-month follow-up. It is worth mentioning that some of the patients took medicine in the long run for their treatment, and this was not changed during the study. The group that received medication showed a similar symptom reduction when compared to those ones who did not receive the medicine.

As the authors explain, the patients were more aware of their feelings and emotions, and this awareness helped them to understand that people need to let their feelings go, without judgment.

Patients who are able to identify anxious thoughts as thoughts, rather than as 'reality,' report that this alone helps reduce their anxiety and increases their ability to encounter anxiety-producing situations more effectively (KABAT-ZIN, Jon, et al., 1992, p. 942).

James Beauchemin (et al., 2014) also showed that Mindfulness decreased a state of anxiety among students with learning difficulties (LD). The target public was students from high school in a private residential school in Vermont who have a primary diagnosis of LD, and the age ranged from 13 to 18. The study also pointed out that children with LD generally have increased levels of anxiety. After a five-week mindfulness meditation intervention, the results showed that the students could improve their self-focus of attention, decrease their levels of anxiety, and promote social skills and academic outcomes.

Although I will use some exercises with my student, it is worth remembering that Mindfulness goes beyond meditation. As Regina Montedonio defined in a workshop⁷ at PUC-Rio, Mindfulness is a science of consciousness and an art of living. It is a way of being that needed to be embodied in our lives. The exercises will be presented to my student as a simple way to understand a concept which has a great amount of scientific evidence. Thus, this was the way that I found to show my student how people can apply Mindfulness in their everyday lives, while practicing English.

⁷ Regina Montedonio presented a workshop called "*Educação, Foco e Realidade*" on October 24th, at PUC-Rio.

All the exercises using Mindfulness Practices were based on “Mindfulness and Yoga in Schools: A Guide for Teachers and Practitioners” by Catherine Cook-Cottone (2017). As the target students of this book were kids, I made some adaptations to my class. The exercises were: Calm Jar, Grateful Journal, Mind-O-Meter, Learning How to Breathe, Body Scan and Meditating Pebble. Each exercise is going to be explained below.

Calm Jar⁸:

After seeing some tutorials, I made a jar with water, glue, glitter, and blue food coloring. The idea of this exercise is to ask my student to pay attention to the Jar as I shake it. She is going to see the glitter slowly fall to the bottom of the Jar. This Calm Jar is a metaphor for our life, and this has to be explained to her. Our mind is like a jar full of concerns, worries, and thoughts. Every time we get anxious, our mind gets lost, like when we shake the Jar. Concerns, worries, and thoughts are all mixed up. At this time, we have to remember to breathe and wait for things to settle down. After explaining this practice, it is essential to ask her to share in English how her experience with the Calm Jar was.

Grateful Journal⁹:

At the end of each class, Thais is going to be invited to write a sentence with "I am grateful for...". This exercise is about her experience of an entire day and not of the English Class. The goal is to bring some reflection about her positive experiences of the day.

Mind-O-Meter¹⁰:

During any moment of class, my student is going to be invited to measure her focus. “The mind-o-meter is a tool for self-awareness and self-regulation” (COOK-COTTONE, C. P, 2017, p. 148). This exercise came from Greenland (2010), and as he suggested, it will be used as a way to check how her attention and focus are. I will show her the printed version of the meter, and she has to point out how she is feeling at that moment. This exercise helps

⁸ A picture of the Calm Jar is available in Appendix 2, page 34.

⁹ The sentences written on the Grateful Journal were available in Appendix 3, page 35.

¹⁰ The printed version of the Mind-O-Meter is available on Appendix 4, page 36.

to understand if it is a good time for a breathing exercise or any other Mindfulness practice to bring her focus back to the moment.

Learning How to Breathe:

My student will be invited to close her eyes and to put her finger in front of her face. She will imagine that this is a magic finger that can be a candle and a flower at the same time. She will smell the flower and blow the candle for some minutes. It is a way to use a simple vocabulary about breathing instead of using expressions like inhale and exhale, which are less didactical and more mechanical. After this exercise, it will be an excellent time to ask her how she feels about it and how her awareness of breathing was.

Body Scan:

As my student is sitting on a chair, I will ask her to feel the connection of her feet to the floor and to be aware of her legs, hip, and all her body. I will also ask her to notice how sitting in the chair feels. Then it is an excellent time to bring her awareness of her spine and belly. And then, shoulders, arms, and hands. Then, the idea is to ask the student to share how it was like and if she could stay focused.

Meditating Pebble

The student will think that she is a little pebble, which will be tossed into a river. After that, I will describe how it feels to be a pebble in that situation. Pebbles like water and as the water is at a cool temperature, she will feel calmness and happiness. She will safely sink without effort. It is important to remember that because she is a pebble, she is free. Then, she has neither work to do nor deadlines to be worried about. She can just watch and float down to the bottom of the river. Once she reaches the riverbed, she is in a special place to relax. She can let go of everything and can breathe peacefully. After this listening activity, it is essential to ask her how the experience was.

4) DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

We had classes for eight weeks. Our sessions started on September 23rd and ended on November 20th. In our first meeting, we established that we would have two classes each week, one via Skype on Mondays and the other face-to-face on Wednesdays. All the arrangements were made with my student. They were not a formal request. At the end, we had to postpone two classes, because she had some personal problems.

From the beginning, I started writing about some points of her behavior in a journal, which she did not have access to until the end of the research. At the same time, I was paying attention to our class, I was writing down some keywords in my notebook to remember important things that happened during our time together. It was the way I found to monitor my student.

In our first class, she stopped talking several times because she wanted to use specific words that she could not remember. Every time she got lost in her thoughts, she started playing with her hair and started looking to the ceiling. When we finished our class, I asked her what she thought about our time together. My student asked me if she could speak in Portuguese and then started to tell me that she enjoyed it, although Thais was insecure about making mistakes and anxious because she stopped all the time to think about how she could say what she wanted to say. At the same time, she started complaining about her work and even said she was afraid of speaking because she did not know if she could make a pause in her work problems to pay attention to our conversation.

In order to help me understand her and Thais to understand herself, I asked Thais to write a paragraph about herself and the role of anxiety in her life. I said that she could choose in which language she would write to feel more comfortable. After choosing Portuguese, she wrote the following: "My name is Thais, and I am a Content Coordinator at Curso Ênfase. My work demand is intense. So, sometimes, I get nervous about the accumulation of

functions. In my personal life, I am used to being funny and communicative, but I feel anxiety in some moments of the day, generally when I need to solve problems.”¹¹

In our following class, I prepared a PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity) and a Mindfulness exercise to do with her if she was willing to. After we talked a lot about our topic and saw some related vocabulary, I was ready to do the PEPA. As we were talking about if clauses, my activity was an "if I were you" challenge. She would write four keywords on a piece of paper that reminded her of some of her concerns and fears. At the same time, I would do the same. She would explain to me what the topic was, and I had to create an “if I were you” sentence with a “solution” to her problem. Then, she would create sentences with “solutions” to my concerns.

My decision to include myself in the PEPA happened because Thais and I are practitioners of learning and teaching. As we are both researchers, we are in this path together. Therefore, my student is not a number in quantitative research. This pedagogic activity was significant to this paper because I could realize that half of our concerns were the same. She talked about problems in her work, health issues, lack of money, and being single for a long time. My problems were being unemployed, fear of not being in a long-term relationship, fear of writing my monograph about student’s anxiety and Mindfulness, and low self-esteem related to my age. We also had a great time doing this exercise because we realized together that we suffered from almost the same “pain”.

This PEPA was the turning point of this research. I was not expecting that Thais and I would have almost the same concerns. After this activity, I could realize that our puzzle was not only about her anxiety, but mine too. It was interesting to discuss this activity with Thais because she was not expecting this result either. Then, I remember that I’ve always consider myself an anxious person. However, when we study Mindfulness, we understand that anxiety is not something that defines you. If we stop thinking that we are anxious and try to understand that we are just feeling anxiety at the moment, we change the way we see

¹¹ The author of this paper translated this passage. She wrote: “Meu nome é Thais, e eu sou Coordenadora de Conteúdo no Curso Ênfase. Minha demanda de trabalho é bem intensa, então, às vezes, eu fico nervosa com o acúmulo de função. Na minha vida pessoal eu costumo ser divertida e comunicativa, mas sinto ansiedade em alguns momentos do dia, geralmente quando preciso resolver problemas.

ourselves. In other words, if we think that we are anxious, there is nothing that we can do to change who we are. However, if we think that we are just feeling anxiety at the moment, we know that this sensation is going to come and go, it is just a matter of pausing, breathing, and putting judgment aside.

After the PEPA, I asked her if she would like to do a Mindfulness Practice, and she said she would love to because she was stressed all the time. Then, I showed her the Calm Jar¹² that I had made. I chose to use blue food coloring because it is well known that this color represents calmness in chromotherapy. As soon as I got the Calm Jar from my backpack, Thais said that it made her sleepy. I was surprised by her reaction because I did not even explain the meaning of that. Then, I talked about the metaphor of the Calm Jar, telling her that our mind is like the Jar, full of concerns, fears, and anxiety that are represented by the glitter. Every time we are facing nervousness or anxiety, our mind gets messy like when we shake the Jar. This is exactly the time when we need to remember to pause and breathe until all glitter (or concerns) settles down. Thais was mesmerized by the experience. Although she was very energetic during the class, she yawned several times while looking at the Calm Jar. According to her, it calmed her down. She also said that she wanted one in her workspace.

It is worth mentioning that the metaphor represented by the Calm Jar was very similar to what we discussed after the PEPA. When we are anxious, it is the right time to apply the metaphor. We need to give some time to our mind until our concerns settle down.

In our following class, I introduced the Grateful Journal and asked her if she would agree to do it from that moment on. It is worth mentioning that every time she was invited to do a Mindfulness practice, I took part in the exercise with her. All sentences created for this exercise were in English and they are available in Appendix 3, page 35.

¹² Read about this exercise on page 19.

The aim of the Grateful Journal was to remember that there is always something good in our lives even in bad days. The idea was to practice this positive way of living. It was amazing to realize that we could actually smile after writing in the Grateful Journal.

After that, she was introduced to the printed version of Mind-O-Meter¹³. The first time I asked about her ability to focus, she said it was moderate. Mine, on the other hand, was high. Then, I explained the concept of Learning How to Breathe¹⁴. She did the exercise, and when I asked what she thought while "smelling the flower and blowing the candle", she said "nothing". She could entirely focus on her breathing.

In our following class, when I asked her if she would like to try a Mindfulness practice, she agreed excitedly and said: "I love Mindfulness exercises". Her excitement to do the activity called my attention mainly because she had never tried any meditation or Mindfulness exercises before our classes. Our next challenge was a body scan exercise. Although this body scan took less than a minute, this practice was very difficult for her. She said that it was challenging to turn off her working problems in order to pay attention to the scanning.

On this day, she pointed out in our Mind-O-Meter that her attention was moderate. On the other hand, my level of focus was high, and my body scan experience was all right. When she was talking about how hard it was to focus on the body scan, she said that it probably happened because it took less than a minute. For her, she needed more time to concentrate. Although I understood her point, I explained that, in general, it is more challenging to do a longer practice when you are a beginner. After all, she had never done any meditation or Mindfulness exercise before. However, she said something that called my attention. After we finished our exercise, she told me that she did the Learning How to Breathe exercise the day before in her workspace when she was very stressed about working problems. When I asked if it helped her, she said that it was a great tool to calm her down. In a nutshell, she applied the Calm Jar metaphor in her own life. When her mind "shook"

¹³ Read about this exercise on page 19.

¹⁴ Read about this exercise on page 20.

(following the metaphor) with all the concerns and fears, she stopped and remembered to breathe.

In class number seven, we talked about books, and after half an hour of speaking, I asked her to point out how her attention in the Mind-O-Meter was. At this time, it was moderate because, as she explained, she was very stressed because of her job. On the other hand, my attention was high. With 15 minutes left before the end of our class, I asked her if she would like to try a new body scan exercise. She agreed with it and also remembered how difficult it was the last time that we did it.

At this time, I brought a recorded body scan by Michelle Duval¹⁵. I explained that this audio lasted sixteen minutes, and we would try to listen only for the first three minutes. To my surprise, we were very relaxed during this exercise, and when I stopped the audio, I told her that we were able to do it for six minutes, although I felt that we could go on listening. Then, I asked her to talk about her experience and to talk about her level of attention based on the Mind-O-Meter. Thais said that she felt relaxed and focused on the audio, and she highlighted that Duval has a calm voice that helped her to concentrate. My student also noted that her attention had increased from moderate to high, and that she had not noticed that we had listened to the audio for six minutes. It was an excellent exercise for me as well, but I kept the same level of attention and relaxation as before.

In the following class, Thais said that she taught the Learning How to Breathe exercise to a co-worker. It was not the first time that she was applying Mindfulness practices in her daily life. Because of that, I was really excited about her new attitudes. Although she was always open to trying new things during class, I had my doubts if she would apply these exercises in her routine. As the class topic was about learning a new language, we talked about her anxiety and her fear of being judged when she speaks English.

Thais said that she felt anxious and nervous while speaking English because she could not express her ideas completely. She also said that she felt judged when she needed

¹⁵ Available on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/track/7DtIWpQFHLKSfyy3mKr8Sg?si=kXhcwY-TRiCHtrIUtgZDOA>

to speak English. Although she highlighted that she does not feel judged by me, my student said that she always thinks people are laughing about her speaking skills in English. I could really relate to that, and I told her that I felt the same when I was a young learner. However, I was pleased to realize that we were creating a safe space where she could feel comfortable with making mistakes.

My student told me interesting things in our following class. She said that her attention and focus stayed high, based on our Mind-O-Meter, during the whole class. However, she explained that it was because she left her work early, arrived home, relaxed for some minutes and ate a snack. Generally, she would go straight to class and she would say her attention was moderate or even low. At this time, I did an exercise with her and her reaction called my attention. It was a puzzle which my student needed to solve (LANGER, 2018). I said that a rich man knocked in her door and offered her a million dollars for a piece of wood three feet by seven feet. Then, I asked her where she could find this thing. In a minute, she said she would give him her door. When I first read this challenge, I could not think about a solution. That is why I was really impressed with Thais' answer. Then, we talked about the importance of having a beginner's mind, which is very important in Mindfulness.

It was interesting to see that it was difficult to me to apply the beginner's mind idea. I thought I had read a lot about Mindfulness. I remember that I felt frustrated when I read the challenge and couldn't solve it. When Thais solved it, I was mesmerized because I could really understand the idea. It was amazing to share this finding with my student, and she was happy to see that she could achieve something that I was not able to.

We had a great English class and at the end of our session, I invited her to do the Grateful Journal and another guided meditation by Michelle Duval with me. Thais said that this audio was more difficult to understand than the other. However, after talking about the meditation, I could see that she really understood the whole idea, although she had some trouble with some words. She was so focused on the words that did not know that she could not realize that she understood the whole audio.

On November 6th, Thais was very happy to talk about gender roles, which was the class topic¹⁶. Although she said her attention was high, mine was not. Something that called my attention was that I could realize that this time I was tired, because of my busy schedule. Generally, her busy life was her justification for her lack of focus and attention. However, I was in her place at that time. After writing on our Grateful Journal, we listened another guided meditation by Michelle Duvall. Our exercise lasted seven minutes and when I stopped the audio, I realized that my student was sleeping. When we talked about the audio, she said that Michelle's voice really calmed her down. On the other hand, Thais was bothered again by the fact that she could not understand every word of what she was saying. My student thought that she fell asleep because of Duvall's voice together with the fact that she could not understand every word. I checked again if she could understand the idea of the audio and she could. As I realized that these specific guided meditations were not working with her, and that they could be causing more anxiety about her knowledge not just of English, but of herself, I decided not to use them anymore.

After some classes, we ended up creating a routine with the same Mindfulness practices with the Mind-O-Meter, Learning How to Breathe exercise and Grateful Journal. In order to do something more challenging, I invited her to read two poems (one in Portuguese and one in English), stop midway through and try to be the poet herself, by writing some lines before continuing. This idea came from a workshop given by Regina Montedonio¹⁷. I chose "*Autopsicografia*" by Fernando Pessoa and "Forever – is composed of Nows" by Emily Dickinson because of their topics: the role of a poet and the importance of the present.

Although Thais was scared of her abilities to continue a poem even in Portuguese, she agreed to do it. At the end of the exercise¹⁸, she said that she really enjoyed it, even though it was tough to predict the poem. I wrote my own version too. It was interesting to see how a poem can be understood in different ways. In the first poem, Thais wrote how the poet was just pretending to love someone, while I wrote that he was lying about his pain

¹⁶ All topics are listed in Appendix 1, page 33.

¹⁷ Regina Montedonio presented a workshop called "Educação, Foco e Realidade" on October 24th, 2019 at PUC-Rio.

¹⁸ This exercise is in Appendix 5, page 37.

because what he thought it was pain was, in fact, love. In the second poem, we both wrote about living in the present. However, Thais talked about the future, while I stayed focused in the present time. After this task, we talked about our individual focus. Thais was happy to realize that she could stay in the moment during the activity and I was proud of myself too. We are not experienced poets, but it is always good to have a beginner's mind anyway.

In another class, when we were both on the medium scale of the Mind-O-Meter, Thais explained that it was because of her hurry to arrive home on time. As I was recovering from pharyngitis, I had some trouble to stay focused. However, we both had a good conversation and a good class. When I invited her to do the Learning How to Breathe with me, Thais surprised me, saying, "I really need to blow the candle today." Our routine was helping her to deal with some feelings of overwhelming anxiety. Once more, she reinforced that she was using this practice in her workspace.

The Mind-O-Meter was always very useful, because we were bringing awareness to the moment. It is very easy to let your thoughts fly away, especially if you are tired or bored. When we bring awareness to the reasons that make our thoughts fly away, we can actually understand why we cannot concentrate. Every time that we used the Mind-O-Meter, I could understand my concerns better and this tool helped me to concentrate more.

Thais, on the other hand, loved the Learning How to Breathe. According to her, this activity was simple and very pleasant. When she said "I really need to blow the candle today", I realized that she really understood that Mindfulness was not just about exercises, but it is a way of living. My student was applying our practices in her daily life with and without noticing. I was very happy to see that even though my aim was not to find a solution to her anxiety, she was understanding her feelings and concerns better. I was in the same path, trying hard to live the moment not just in class, but in my personal life. Every day was a new challenge to be mindful, however we both knew how important was to put our judgment aside.

Our focus was high when we had a class during a holiday. My student said that although she had a stomachache, she was very relaxed because she slept all day. Even though I had worked before our class, I was also relaxed, because my schedule was not so full as on

a working day. We had a pleasant class about dreams, and during our Grateful Journal moment, I realized that Thais was really grateful for her family because this topic was always in her writing. She had not realized that she had already written about it, but added that she really misses them every day. Her family is from Nova Iguaçu, and she lives by herself in Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, they do not see each other as frequently as she would like.

In our last class, I asked her to write a small paragraph about our time together, in the language she would feel more comfortable with. She wrote in Portuguese: “I really liked our classes. Thinking and speaking in English have always caused me a lot of anxiety because of the fear of making a mistake. However, this anxiety has decreased little by little. Our classroom has become a welcoming space where I did not feel judged at all. I will take the Mindfulness exercises with me for my daily life! Classes must offer learning moments without judgment. I also really like the fact that our topics were all related to the themes of my life. Those classes were a great experience!”¹⁹. After eight weeks, we were delighted with the result of our sessions.

¹⁹ The author of this paper translated this passage. She wrote: “Gostei muito das aulas. Pensar e falar em inglês sempre me causou muita ansiedade por conta do medo de errar, e essa ansiedade foi diminuindo aos poucos. As aulas se tornaram espaços de acolhimento e eu não me sentia julgada. Os exercícios de Mindfulness, eu estou levando para vida! Acho importante que as aulas proporcionem momentos de aprendizagem sem julgamento. Também gostei muito de perceber que as aulas tinham conexão com temas da minha vida. Ótima experiência!”

5) CONCLUSION

When I decided to research on the anxiety of students in the process of learning a second language, I was not expecting to find so many things about my student and also about myself. I started this research with preconceived ideas, and during each step of this research, I could see I was mistaken in the beginning. One of the things that I understood after this research is that we need to be humble and to have the courage to face the challenge of working to understand.

As my student is my real friend, I knew many things about her. I chose the topics to be discussed in our classes based on what I knew about her. Every material that we used was chosen considering her likes and dislikes. However, I was not expecting that she would like our Mindfulness practices (Calm Jar, Mind-O-Meter, Grateful Journal, and Learning How to Breathe) because I thought she was skeptical about the idea of using Mindfulness in class.

It was a real challenge for me to bear in mind that my goal here was just to understand the puzzle about my student's anxiety, instead of solving it. Studying the principles of Exploratory Practice (ALLWRIGHT & HANKS, 2009) was crucial to this process of learning. I can now see the importance of reflecting and exploring the "quality of life" in the classroom and the need to involve your students in the research. "Sustainability" was a key concept while using PEPAs to minimize any burden. Furthermore, the rise of a "spirit of mutual development" was also significant to enrich the understandings of "quality of life" in the classroom.

During our PEPAs, I could realize something that I had forgotten since the beginning: I have always considered myself an anxious person, especially as a student. However, I was so immersed in understanding my student's anxiety that I forgot this information. When I saw that we shared almost the same concerns in the "if I were challenge", it was like a bell ringing inside my mind saying that I could not forget myself and my previous experiences. I was able to understand her feeling of being judged when she speaks English because I had the same concern when I was a student. However, I had not thought about my fears and my anxiety when I chose this topic.

Thais was always saying to me how much she enjoyed our time together, especially our Mindfulness practices. Every time she said that, I thought that she was just encouraging me to keep working on my research. However, she started texting me or calling me to say that she had had a terrible day and she was practicing our Mindfulness exercises. I was astonished to hear that because, in my mind, she would never apply these practices in her daily life. It was a real pleasure to be wrong.

After we stopped having classes, she called me to say that she was trying some quick meditations with mantras. I had never talked to her about this kind of meditation, but she was reading and researching about mantras and different types of meditation.

Even though my aim was not to solve her anxiety, I was delighted to see that the classes and this research eventually helped her to understand more about her feelings. I can say the same about myself. Looking back, it is hard to believe that I did not notice how afraid and anxious I was during this period. I cried so many times, thinking I was not good enough to conduct this kind of research that it is hard to believe that I did not pay attention to my levels of anxiety. However, after the first bell rang reminding me that I had so much in common with my student, I decided to pause and breathe - the same advice I was always giving her.

When the meditation audios by Michelle Duval were not working well with Thais, I decided to pause and reflect if it was wise to continue using them or if it was better to admit that it was not a good idea and simply choose another strategy. Now, I can see that it was crucial to this activity. We are not always right, and again, we have to be humble and recognize our mistakes. Instead of judging ourselves, we need to change what needs to be changed.

It is worth mentioning that this research does not end at all, although we do not have classes anymore. This is a wide field of research, and I am thrilled and proud to realize that I could contribute with some reflections. As a lot of questions remain unanswered, I can say that this work is just a starting point of something bigger I could study in-depth later, maybe in a Master's program.

Studying this topic was an enriching experience. It gave me some excellent opportunities in life. I was not expecting, for example, that my initial concerns in the “if I were you challenge” would be solved by the end of this paper, by coincidence or not.

It was significant to see that I could connect every book or article that I read with my research. Now I know a little bit more about anxiety, Mindfulness, teaching, and Exploratory Practice. However, as I praise a beginner’s mind, this knowledge is not complete, and it will never be because there is always something new to be learned. As I type these words, I am looking at my Calm Jar as a reminder that we always need to breathe.

6) APPENDIX

6.1) APPENDIX 1

List of the topics discussed in class and some extra materials used in class.

- Trips
- Learning a new language
- Pressures of being a student
- Food
- First dates (Song – “Look what you made me do” by Taylor Swift)
- First impressions
- Making friends
- Mourning routines
- Feminism (Reading – “We should all be feminists” (2012) by Chimamanda Adichie – pages 3 and 4. Song – “The man” by Taylor Swift.)
- Gender roles (Song – “We need to calm down” by Taylor Swift)
- Dreams
- Talking about your past
- Halloween
- Empathy
- Celebrities (Reading: “There’s an App that fills your texts with Taylor Swift Lyrics” – Available on <https://people.com/celebrity/taytext-app-fills-your-texts-with-taylor-swift-lyrics/>)
- Books (Song – “Love Story” by Taylor Swift)

6.2) APPENDIX 2

The Calm Jar was made of water, glue, glitter, and blue food coloring.



6.3) APPENDIX 3

These are the sentences produced in the Grateful Journal:

| THAIS' SENTENCES: | MARIANA'S SENTENCES |
|--|--|
| I am grateful for my memories. | I am grateful for my family. |
| I am grateful for being with my best friend. | I am grateful for the support that my friends gave me yesterday. |
| I am grateful for my family. | I am grateful for my life. |
| I am grateful for God's plans. | I am grateful for my new student. |
| I am grateful for knowing the truth. | I am grateful for my friend. |
| I am grateful for the compliments that I received yesterday. | I am grateful for my classes. |
| I am grateful for having a job. | I am grateful for my life. |
| I am grateful for my good ideas. | I am grateful for my research. |
| I am grateful for my holiday. | I am grateful for my health. |
| I am grateful for my home. | I am grateful for my holiday. |
| I am grateful for my family. | I am grateful for my mind. |
| I am grateful for my medicines. | I am grateful for my Halloween party. |
| I am grateful for my friend's baby. | I am grateful for my new opportunities. |
| I am grateful for my home. | I am grateful for my classes. |
| I am grateful for my friend. | I am grateful for my new student. |

6.4) APPENDIX 4

A printed version of the Mind-O-Meter used in class.

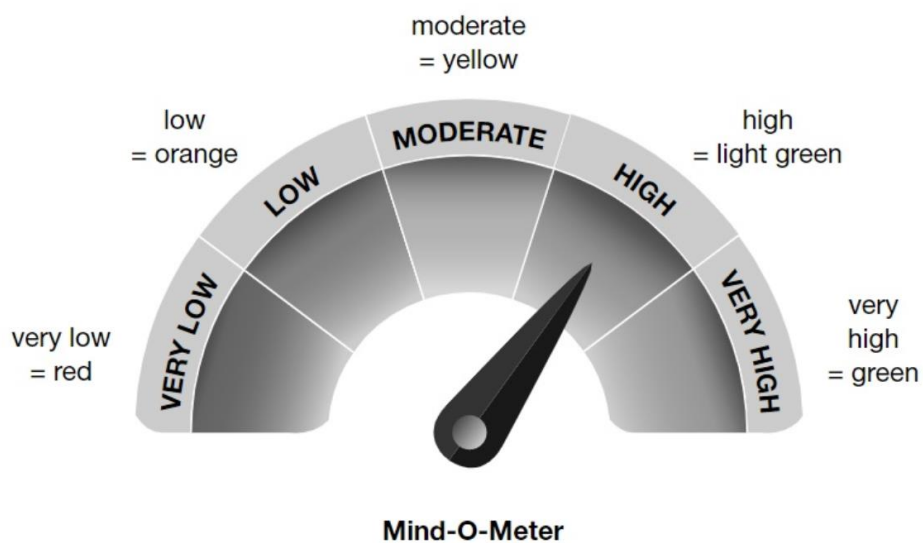


FIGURE 7.4 Mind-O-Meter.

Source: Adapted from Greenland (2010).

6.5) APPENDIX 5

The original stanzas are in black, while our production is in red. These two texts were chosen because of their topics: the role of a poet and the importance of the present.

| THAIS' VERSION | MARIANA'S VERSION |
|--|---|
| <u>Autopsicografia</u> O poeta é um fingidor. Finge tão completamente Que chega a fingir que é dor A dor que deveras sente. O poeta finge que ama, Quando na verdade, ele só engana. E assim nas calhas de roda Gira, a entreter a razão. Esse comboio de corda Que se chama coração. (Adapted from “Autopsicografia” by Fernando Pessoa) | <u>Autopsicografia</u> O poeta é um fingidor. Finge tão completamente Que chega a fingir que é dor A dor que deveras sente. O poeta mente, Não é dor, Mas amor, o que ele verdadeiramente sente. E assim nas calhas de roda Gira, a entreter a razão. Esse comboio de corda Que se chama coração. (Adapted from “Autopsicografia” by Fernando Pessoa) |
| <u>Forever – is composed of nows</u> Forever – is composed of Nows– ‘Tis not a different time – Except for Infiniteness – And Latitude of Home – | <u>Forever – is composed of nows</u> Forever – is composed of Nows– ‘Tis not a different time – Except for Infiniteness – And Latitude of Home – |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>From this – experienced Here – Remove the Dates – to These – Let Months dissolve in further Months – And Years – exhale in Years –</p> <p>When we're living in the present We are feeling our future And writing our own sentence.</p> <p>Without Debate – or Pause – Or Celebrated Days – No different Our Years would be From Anno Dominies –</p> <p>(Adaptaded from “The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited” by R. W. Franklin - Harvard University Press, 1999)</p> | <p>From this – experienced Here – Remove the Dates – to These – Let Months dissolve in further Months – And Years – exhale in Years –</p> <p>We are living the present, Forgetting about the years. We are here and now, Making our own time.</p> <p>Without Debate – or Pause – Or Celebrated Days – No different Our Years would be From Anno Dominies –</p> <p>(Adaptaded from “The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited” by R. W. Franklin - Harvard University Press, 1999)</p> |
|---|--|

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