

Unraveling EFL Educators' Perspectives on work related stress and Mindfulness Practices in Costa Rica

Desentrañando las perspectivas de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre el estrés laboral y las prácticas de mindfulness en Costa Rica

Desvendando as perspectivas dos educadores de EFL sobre o estresse relacionado ao trabalho e as práticas de mindfulness na Costa Rica

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Abstract: Occupational stress is a serious issue among EFL teachers, associated with the excess of teaching-related tasks and daily interaction with students who are not always engaged. This descriptive, cross-sectional study intended to understand better the educators' self-perception of their own stress levels and their knowledge about mindfulness techniques. The partakers were required to complete two digital questionnaires: a Foreign Language Teaching Anxiety Scale (FLTAS) adapted from Aydin and Ustuk (2020) and a survey about mindfulness. A total of 47 active EFL teachers completed the first, but only 23 did the second one. The findings confirmed by both instruments, show that teachers perceive low levels of stress in their lives; the elements that scored higher as stressors were those related to student participation and engagement, and the element that scored lower as a stress trigger was the use of English in the class. This research could provide important contributions for educational institutions seeking to support teacher wellbeing, teacher training programs looking to incorporate stress management strategies, EFL educators themselves who might benefit from mindfulness approaches and researchers exploring the effectiveness of mindfulness in educational settings.

Keywords: *well-being*, mental stress, second language teaching, resilience, perception.

Resumen: El estrés laboral constituye un problema serio entre los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), asociado al exceso de tareas relacionadas con la enseñanza y a la interacción diaria con estudiantes que no siempre se encuentran comprometidos. Este estudio descriptivo y transversal tuvo como propósito comprender mejor la autopercepción del profesorado sobre sus propios niveles de estrés y su conocimiento acerca de las técnicas de mindfulness. Las personas participantes debieron completar dos cuestionarios digitales: una escala de ansiedad en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras (FLTAS), adaptada de Aydin y Ustuk (2020), y una encuesta sobre mindfulness. Un total de 47 docentes activos de EFL completaron el primer instrumento, pero únicamente 23 respondieron el segundo. Los hallazgos, confirmados por ambos instrumentos, muestran que el profesorado percibe bajos niveles de estrés en sus vidas; los elementos que puntuaron más alto como estresores fueron aquellos relacionados con la participación y el compromiso estudiantil, y el elemento que obtuvo la puntuación más baja como desencadenante de estrés fue el uso del inglés en la clase. Esta investigación podría aportar insumos importantes para instituciones educativas que buscan brindar apoyo al bienestar docente, programas de formación docente que procuran incorporar estrategias de manejo del estrés, docentes de EFL que podrían beneficiarse de enfoques de mindfulness y personas investigadoras que exploran la efectividad del mindfulness en contextos educativos.

Palabras claves: bienestar, estrés mental, enseñanza de segundas lenguas, resiliencia, percepción.

Resumo: O estresse ocupacional é uma questão séria entre os professores de inglês como língua estrangeira, associada ao excesso de tarefas relacionadas ao ensino e à interação diária com alunos que nem sempre estão envolvidos. Este estudo descritivo e transversal teve como objetivo compreender melhor a autopercepção dos educadores sobre seus próprios níveis de estresse e seu conhecimento sobre técnicas de mindfulness. Os participantes foram solicitados a

preencher dois questionários digitais: uma Escala de Ansiedade no Ensino de Línguas Estrangeiras (FLTAS) adaptada de Aydin e Ustuk (2020) e uma pesquisa sobre mindfulness. Um total de 47 professores de EFL em atividade preencheram o primeiro, mas apenas 23 preencheram o segundo. Os resultados confirmados por ambos os instrumentos mostram que os professores percebem baixos níveis de estresse em suas vidas; os elementos que obtiveram pontuação mais alta como fatores de estresse foram aqueles relacionados à participação e ao envolvimento dos alunos, e o elemento que obteve pontuação mais baixa como gatilho de estresse foi o uso do inglês em sala de aula. Esta pesquisa pode fornecer contribuições importantes para instituições educacionais que buscam apoiar o bem-estar dos professores, programas de treinamento de professores que buscam incorporar estratégias de gerenciamento de estresse, os próprios educadores de EFL que podem se beneficiar de abordagens de mindfulness e pesquisadores que exploram a eficácia da mindfulness em ambientes educacionais.

Palavras-chave: bem-estar, estresse mental, ensino de segunda língua, resiliência, percepção.

INTRODUCTION

Coping with everyday stressors such as personal and professional challenges has become a current concern among educators. Individuals, in general, expect to be happy and have a good quality of life, described as a perception of general satisfaction people have about their own existence (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025) including both physical and mental health.

Teaching stress, first defined by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978, as cited in Chang, 2022) differs somehow from general anxiety, involving a “sense of panic and tension” that results in feelings of not having control over “internal and external teaching environment and teaching events” (Liu & Wu, 2021, p. 2). Educators frequently complain about the restlessness they feel not only as a result of the excess of workload, the amount of responsibility involved, perceived insufficient support from coworkers and supervisors, and insufficient compensation (Alqarni, 2021; Bedir, 2023; Herman, et al., 2020; Karanfil & Khatami 2021; Morris & King, 2018; Safari, 2020; Seis, 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021) and even insufficient time management skills. Among teachers of English as a foreign language the issue aggravates when having to deal with students who are frequently frustrated and unmotivated to learn another language (Burden, 2004). Furthermore, Novembrin Maulimora (2019) highlighted that many language teachers are not native speakers, and therefore, experience anxiety because they lack confidence in their own communicative competence.

Several studies concerning the well-being of language educators have revealed several drawbacks that teachers constantly face in their professional and personal lives (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025), including burnout (Agyapong, 2023; Brady, 2022; Peditzzi, 2020). In spite of its importance and probable impact in the teaching and learning process foreign language teaching anxiety (FLTA) has not been extensively studied (İskender & Savaşçı, 2023). Herman et al. (2020) described that presence of stress and lack of coping mechanisms have a direct impact on classroom interactions suggesting that “higher levels of stress and lower levels of coping” (p.54) resulted in dysfunctional adaptation in teachers which transpired in low student outcomes. Some studies have suggested that FLTA might vary by gender, years of experience, the type of institution, and the level where the instruction takes place (İskender & Savaşçı, 2023).

Among the many possible measures to contain the impact of stress in educators, Agyapong et al. (2022) have suggested creating awareness programs in the institutions to avoid burnout, or programs that incorporate ameliorating techniques, such as meditation. Mindfulness is a term usually associated with wellbeing and peace of mind, based on Buddhist and Hindu teachings. Early Buddhist definitions of mindfulness refer to the capacity to recall what was said or done time ago and ‘clear knowing’ or ‘clear comprehension’ (Anālayo, 2019). The Buddha taught four exercises to develop sati which is considered the core of mindfulness (Mindfulness According to the Buddha, 2022):

- Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna – focusing on the body. For example, good postures (including walking) and breathing, among others.
- Vedānānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna –directed at feelings, in other words pleasant or unpleasant sensation (what is popularly known as emotions).
- Cittānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna – which is mindfulness directed at the mind. For instance, knowing if anger or other negative thoughts are permeating the mind, or if there is concentration or distraction.
- Dhammānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna –directed at mental states; for instance, reducing blockage, or overload of information, factors of enlightenment and others (Mindfulness According to the Buddha, 2022).

Lately, there have been attempts to expand the knowledge on mindfulness through training which can include activities immersed in daily routines or intensive training courses (Song & He, 2021) that include meditation, breathing exercises, yoga and other relaxing methods aimed at developing mindfulness skills (He, et al., 2023). Wong and Faikhamta (2023) preach that practicing mindfulness requires sensing when the negative emotions impact people. It requires the intuitiveness of knowing that thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and feelings are “uncertain, everchanging, and imperfect” (Wong & Faikhamta, 2023, p. 346).

The best-known author dealing with the concept of mindfulness in the Western hemisphere is Jon Kabat-Zinn who defined the term as the awareness resulting from the intentional focus to the here and now, with the purpose of self-understanding and achieving wisdom and empathy (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), deviating somewhat from the original Buddhist teachings. The modern vision of mindfulness represents practices that have been modified to adapt to the spiritual diversity around the world (Carroll, 2023). Kabat -Zinn (2001, 2013) has insisted that mindfulness does not conflict with any religious or cultural belief and that anyone can benefit from its principles, detaching it from its cultural, religious, and ideological origins (Carroll, 2023).

The aim of mindfulness is to avoid habitual and unhelpful reactions to current situations, for instance, negative thoughts which can contribute to the perpetuation of depression. It aims at minimizing negative moods and preventing harmful rumination (Cavanagh et al., 2014), and it has quickly extended to most areas where awareness and acceptance can bring peace of mind.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) has described the following key elements that contribute to mindfulness:

- Non-Judgment which is the ability to understand things without judging them as good or bad;
- Patience, which is defined as the understanding that things happen at their own pace;
- Beginner’s Mind, which refers to the capacity of purposefully seeing the surroundings as if for the first time, thus eliminating expectations and preconceptions;
- Trust, being described as the attitude of believing that the body and the mind can heal themselves;
- Acceptance, which is the ability to recognize that things are the way they are, even if they are not the way we want them to be;
- Letting Go is also important - the opposite of clinging or grasping;
- Gratitude, which is the appreciation of the simplest things in the present moment;
- Generosity – or the ability of giving oneself to other people without expecting retribution. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Second language acquisition expert, Stephen Krashen, has insisted on the importance of the role of the affective filter (1989, pp.37-39) in the success of language acquisition. A plethora of studies have evidenced the influence of an anxiety free environment on positive emotions and high academic performances in students (Fathi et al., 2021; Huang, 2022). Something interesting about stress is that teacher stress seems to be contagious, therefore as teachers increase their level of stress, students suffer it as well (Çetin,2023;Goetze, 2023). Consequently, when language teachers are less stressed it can be inferred that the teaching environment is also less tense. Therefore, language instruction should focus not only on the obvious development of language skills, but the mind frame of the actors should be examined (Boudreau et al., 2018; Dewaele & Li, 2021; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Yin et al., 2019). Mindfulness training for educators can impact positively the classroom environment (Wang, 2022) and can be conducive to a more satisfying performance in the class and a general wellbeing in the lifestyle of educators.

Empirical studies focusing on the impact of mindfulness on teaching have demonstrated positive reported outcomes, (Lomas et al., 2017) and the levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout have also decreased because of the use of mindfulness (Iancu et al., 2018; Zarate et al.,2019). Such interventions for teachers have resulted in the improvement of their abilities to cope (de Carvalho et al.,2021), and as a consequence, better performance in the class (Hwang et al., 2017). In the Costa Rican context, Cuellar Hidalgo et al., (2019) conducted a study on the effects of practicing Aikido on mindfulness and anxiety on university students, concluding that there was a significantly positive impact. Similarly, Pawlowski (2024), found a moderate correlation between time of meditation practice and better psychological health in 224 Costa Rican adults who implemented mindfulness practices.

In spite of the obvious relationship between a relaxed, pleasant environment that promotes good interaction between learners and EFL teachers, the implications of mindfulness in language teaching settings are an unexplored ground. In educational settings, research on mindfulness has mainly focused on students, leaving foreign language teachers' mindfulness underrepresented (Hwang et al., 2017). Hence the importance of exploring the perception of active teachers about their well-being and how they cope with stressors in their teaching environment and their lives.

This study attempts to explore teachers' perspective about stress in the job and mindfulness as a useful tool to ameliorate it in Costa Rica, a country where practices associated to mindfulness are not common. Based on this general aim, the following objectives were pursued:

- To understand the self-perceived levels of anxiety in EFL teachers.
- To identify specific classroom and administrative activities that EFL high school teachers perceive as most significantly contributing to their stress levels.
- To evaluate the current level of understanding, knowledge, and prior experience with mindfulness practices among EFL high school teachers.
- To assess the willingness and readiness of EFL teachers to integrate mindfulness practices into their classroom teaching and personal stress management routines.

Costa Ricans are generally perceived as relaxed, easygoing individuals. Nevertheless, Sledge (2021) reported that her findings suggest mental health problems are equally prevalent in Costa Rica as in other countries. Therefore, it is hypothesized that EFL teachers in high school settings consider their job stressful and have few tools to mitigate this situation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study is descriptive and cross-sectional in nature following a mixed approach, which is particularly useful to explore “trends in data and the nuances of individual experiences” (McLeod, 2024, p.1). For this research, mixed method was the most suitable approach to integrate the numerical data from the Foreign Language Teaching Anxiety Scale (FLTAS) and the experiences and opinions from the participants. It is a convergent parallel design as described by Creswell & Creswell (2018) where both types of data are collected and analyzed simultaneously, allowing discussion of convergence and divergence between both types of results.

The research contained two on-line questionnaires; aiming to obtain quantitative data about levels of anxiety, the participants were presented with the digital FLTAS adapted from Aydin and Ustuk (2020) narrowing it to 21 items. Each item consisted of a Likert type five-point scale ranging from never to always. The included dimensions for sources of anxiety in educators, as per Aydin and Ustuk (2020) were: low self-perception of second language proficiency; lack of teaching experience; low student engagement; fear of evaluation; and issues with time management. The FLTAS test presented a Likert nominal scale, ranging from never (1) to always (5). This first instrument was validated by said authors through expert judgement; it was reviewed “by two external experts who had experience teaching English as a foreign language” (Aydin & Ustuk, 2020 p. 58). Furthermore, the Cronbach’s Alpha calculation rendered a 0.950 (Aydin & Ustuk, p.60).

After this, the participants were requested to complete an opinionnaire; the first section consisted of two open questions regarding what causes them stress and what they do to cope with it. The instrument included four Likert scale type items following response options from “Completely Disagree” (1) to “Completely Agree”(5) with “Neither Agree nor Disagree” as a neutral middle point (3). The following range was established: from 1.0-1.79 represents very low agreement with the statement; 1.8-2.59 low; 2.6-3.39 is the neutral stance; 3.4-4.19 represents a high acceptance, and 4.2-5.0 very high agreement.

The items addressed statements characterizing the presence of anxiety and mindfulness strategies, inquiring if the subjects knew about them, practiced them or would be willing to do so. The content of the survey questionnaire focused on educators’ perceptions was validated after being piloted with a group of five teachers conveniently selected, who were not part of the study.

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as the mean and relative frequency of responses. The qualitative data was analyzed using theme analysis which essentially is the act of comprehending data by dissecting it into more feasible constituents (Creswell & Poth, 2018) which are systematically and rigorously scrutinized to identify common themes (Christou, 2024). This method was chosen given its flexibility (Yanto, 2023) and suitability. Inductive manual coding was used, finding emergent themes from the raw data (Nowell, et al., 2017). Then both were compared to confirm similarities and differences in the information.

Non-probabilistic sampling was used, specifically a convenience sampling, which suited the characteristics of the study. The population consisted of non-native English teachers who were undergraduate students in their early 30s enrolled in the Licentiate program of the English teaching major at a private university in San José, Costa Rica. All of them were, at the moment, teaching in different high schools from the central area of the country, mostly in the public sector. A total of 47 students from the aforementioned program completed the FLTAS diagnosis and only 23 filled the questionnaire about mindfulness. They were presented with an informed consent which explained the nature of the study, anonymization of information (names or any other distinguishing feature was not requested) and the confidentiality of the information (only the researcher had access to it). Participation was voluntary. This is one of the reasons why there was a considerable discrepancy in the response rate in the two instruments.

Data was collected during the months of February and March, 2025.

DISCUSION OF RESULTS

The first striking element was the fact that even though 47 subjects completed the FLTAS, only 23 finished the follow-up questionnaire on mindfulness.

A plausible reason for this is that they did not feel confident enough about their own knowledge about mindfulness and decided not to complete the questionnaire. This would indicate that in the Costa Rican context there is little awareness of mindfulness strategies, which was the researcher’s hypothesis.

For the first objective related to understanding the self-perceived levels of anxiety in EFL teachers, the aforementioned FLTAS, adapted from Aydin and Ustuk (2020) was used. Of the participants who completed it, 70% were female and 30% male. The average age was 34, while the teaching experience rendered 6.5 years. This represents a group of mature and somewhat experienced EFL teachers.

In table 1, the results of the application of the Foreign Language Teaching Anxiety Scale (FLTAS) are reflected in relative frequency.

Table 1. FLTAS (adapted from Aydin & Ustuk, 2020), results in relative frequency.

| Items | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Usually | Always | Mean |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|---------|--------|------|
| When I feel anxious in class, I have difficulty using English. | 13 | 42 | 29 | 13 | 2 | 2,50 |
| I feel embarrassed when some students speak English better than me | 29 | 33 | 20 | 13 | 4 | 2,34 |
| It makes me nervous to use English in class. | 58 | 27 | 13 | 2 | 0 | 1.66 |
| Unfamiliar topics in the textbook or the material I have to teach, confuse me. | 16 | 44 | 38 | 2 | 0 | 2.26 |
| Pronunciation mistakes while I am speaking make me nervous. | 13 | 40 | 31 | 13 | 2 | 2.53 |
| I am bothered when I have difficulty teaching the cultural content of English. | 29 | 44 | 22 | 4 | 0 | 2.06 |
| Unexpected questions from students put pressure on me. | 24 | 44 | 24 | 7 | 0 | 2.19 |
| I frequently forget things while I am teaching. | 22 | 53 | 22 | 2 | 0 | 2.08 |
| I feel worried before entering the classroom. | 49 | 36 | 13 | 0 | 2 | 1.80 |
| I don't feel comfortable when I have to teach grammar content. | 53 | 33 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 1.68 |
| I fear making mistakes while I am teaching in the classroom. | 16 | 49 | 20 | 9 | 7 | 2.45 |
| I feel stressed when students do not participate in the activities. | 11 | 22 | 44 | 18 | 4 | 2.91 |
| I feel upset because my students are bad at learning languages. | 42 | 33 | 22 | 0 | 2 | 1.94 |
| I feel tense when students are not interested in the activities. | 11 | 22 | 47 | 16 | 4 | 2.85 |
| Students' negative comments about me make me nervous. | 29 | 33 | 24 | 9 | 4 | 2.32 |
| I don't like to be observed by a peer or supervisor. | 24 | 40 | 11 | 16 | 9 | 2.47 |
| I feel panicked when I cannot finish the class on time. | 44 | 33 | 20 | 2 | 0 | 1.89 |
| I am nervous when I finish the activities before the class ends. | 51 | 31 | 11 | 4 | 2 | 1.81 |
| I feel tense when I am not prepared for the class. | 20 | 42 | 18 | 7 | 13 | 2.55 |
| I feel tense when the students misbehave. | 9 | 33 | 36 | 18 | 4 | 2.87 |

N= 47

None of the items received a mean punctuation over 3, which demonstrates that the sample population apparently exhibited control of their emotions and did not frequently feel stressed when facing the indicated challenges. The findings relate to Li, et al.'s study (2024) which show low to moderate levels of teaching anxiety among their participants as well as Isa and Palpanadan (2020) whose study on Malaysian lecturers indicated good management of participants' emotions and work life. Conversely, the results contradict the initial hypothesis which predicted high levels of anxiety. High levels of stress associated to teaching have been extensively reported (Akbanan & Dikilitaş 2022; Arbia et al., 2023; Fan,2022;Farhi & Rubinstein,2024; Khalifa, et al., 2022;). Nevertheless, it seems that contrary to common belief, in this context educators are able to manage their teaching practice in a good way.

For the second objective, "to identify specific classroom and administrative activities that EFL high school teachers perceive as most significantly contributing to their stress levels", facilitators reported slightly higher stress levels related to student misbehavior, aligning with Kim et al.'s (2021) findings correlating classroom discipline problems and emotional exhaustion. Students' lack of interest and participation also emerged as stressors, supporting Irhamna and Fithriani's (2023) research. Several other factors appear to elevate stress levels to some degree, for instance fear of making mistakes in the target language, insufficient class preparation, and anxiety provoked by classroom observations, also reported by Goetze (2023). These results corroborate Ozturk's (2016) findings, which, although conducted several years ago, provide valuable comparative data as the study also focused on non-native EFL teachers experiencing moderate teaching anxiety levels.

The qualitative data regarding the questionnaire about stress and mindfulness corroborates the quantitative data. As mentioned, only 23 people completed the on-line instrument. The average years of teaching experience was 9, reflecting a cohort of more mature and experienced educators.

Aligned to the previous data, the item referring to the amount of self-perceived stress and the amount of free time they have for themselves both had means of 3.2 which falls under the range of neutral. Contrarily, the item regarding feeling tired pondered a mean of 4.12 corresponding to a high level. Therefore, it can be affirmed that, the respondents did not perceive their lives as over stressed but did consider that they were depleted of energy. They do not seem to correlate being tired with a form of anxiety, which Poon, et al., (2019) reported in their study. This leads to an interesting reflection about the definition of stress that tends to be subjective and might be the explanation of the unexpected results. Perhaps some of the participants associated stress with more severe symptoms (Agyapong et al., 2022) and did not contemplate factors such as lack of concentration, fatigue, indigestion and many other physical manifestations as part of stress.

An additional open question was included regarding the aspects that cause anxiety specifically related to English teaching. Here the predominant themes were student related (misbehavior, lack of attention, confrontational attitudes) coherent to Al-Maliki's (2024) findings, and lack of preparation, aligned to Goetze (2023). Lesser triggers of anxiety were aspects not under the teachers' control such as large classes and lack of resources; excessive workload, insufficient time and being observed, akin to findings by Alruwaili (2023). Surprisingly, concerns about financial compensation or competitiveness mentioned as stressors by Irhamna and Fithriani (2023) did not emerge in the present study, most likely because competitiveness is not part of the Costa Rican culture, and in the public sector salaries for educators are considered appropriate (Cerdas, 2025). Yang (2021) presents a totally different side of anxiety mainly focused on pressure associated to academic success which was absent in this case.

Current findings contrast with other empirical research consulted. Agyapong et al., (2023) reported a prevalence of high chronic stress levels among educators. Novembrin Maulimora's (2019) study on preservice teachers showed that the majority of participants agreed that they experienced anxiety mainly caused by their lack of confidence and low English skills, which coincides with Pasaribu and Herendita (2018) and Sunibi et al., (2023) who also worked with novice teachers. Li, et al., (2023) reported that anxiety primarily originated from fear of negative evaluation, while Novitasari & Murtafi'ah (2022), Sunubi et al., (2023) and Yang (2021) mentioned teaching inexperience and low proficiency in the target language as the main factors causing stress, none of which appear to be perceived as stressors in this study. Perhaps, experience has an impact on the way that

educators perceive stress, either because they get used to it or because they learn how to cope. Qadimi et al., (2015) conducted research indicating that teachers with 6-10 years of experience reported lower levels of stress than teachers with less than 5 years' experience.

Another explanation to the discrepancies between literature review and current findings could be cultural (Burkova, et.al, 2021; Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2023). Costa Rica is classified as a collectivist, equal society with a higher degree of looseness than English speaking cultures or Asian societies, for example (Žemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowsk, 2023). Burkova, et.al, (2021) suggest that Hofstede's cultural dimensions of "individualism/collectivism, power distance, and looseness/tightness" (p.19) can be related to how different cultures react to stressors.

For the third objective concerning the current level of understanding, knowledge, and prior experience with mindfulness practices among EFL high school teachers, the mean was 3.6 representing high self-perceived knowledge contrary to what the researcher expected.

Among the options teachers use to cope with stress, 43% of the participants mentioned mindfulness practices such as breathing, walking and positive thinking coherent to the reported knowledge. A low percentage (24%) referred to preparing better for class as a way to avoid stress aligned to findings by Irhamna and Fithriani (2023) and Pasaribu and Lestari (2023); someone mentioned taking pills and another one said "nothing". Novice teachers, on the other hand, according to Sunubi et al., (2023), focus more on problem solving rather than on coping with emotional issues.

Overall, it can be stated that teachers are satisfied with their state of mind although they are aware that they might face stressful situations related to teaching and in those cases, they use the most commonly applied mindfulness strategies. Breathing exercises was the number one preference. Meditating and walking occupy a far second place while yoga and using a gratitude list were rarely mentioned. Related to mindfulness, Oladrostam, et al., (2024) as well as Pasaribu and Lestari (2023), found that having positive thoughts, being kind and having good humor were good strategies.

Corresponding to the fourth objective, to assess the willingness and readiness of EFL teachers to integrate mindfulness practices into their classroom teaching and personal stress management routines, participants expressed openness to include all the recommended mindfulness techniques mentioned above but favoring some such as breathing, meditation and walking. A couple of participants refused to consider any of these. Finally, participants were asked whether they believed that implementing mindfulness practices with their students could be beneficial in reducing stress levels within the classroom environment, and an overwhelming majority (95%) responded affirmatively, a finding that aligns with the reported benefits for students documented by de Carvalho et al. (2021) and Luong et al. (2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Although the current findings did not adhere to the researcher' initial hypothesis that EFL teachers in Costa Rican secondary education have elevated anxiety levels and are not using mindfulness to deal with such stress, the study sheds light into an important aspect that is not always in the spotlight which is the state of mind of those in charge of instructing young learners.

The study indicates that in service EFL teachers who are non-native English speakers with some years of experience in the Costa Rican context have manifested a low or very low self-perceived level of stress in the FLTA test. This might be consequence of the individual understanding of what stress entails or it might be related to cultural aspects, indicated in the discussion.

The features that resulted in higher levels of agreement in the open item responses, although not significant enough to be considered stress triggers, are related to students' lack of engagement, low participation and

misbehavior in class which are not directly related to teaching techniques or selection of material, but to motivation and learners' attitude. Yet, providing language educators with tools to cope with such challenges is the responsibility of all stakeholders.

Participants expressed having knowledge on mindfulness and the associated techniques to reduce stress. A little less than half of them acknowledged using breathing and walking as relaxation techniques, if necessary, but other recommended actions such as practicing yoga were rarely mentioned and making a gratitude list was not even considered. This would indicate that participants have some understanding of mindfulness techniques, but they do not master all the related strategies.

Almost all participants agreed that mindfulness in the classroom could be very positive, especially considering that, for instance meditation is a risk-free, low-cost, non-medicinal, and easy way to relax (Nirmala & Hemavathy, 2023). Teachers seem to be willing to include mindfulness strategies, but the question remains as to how, and if high school students would be eager to partake in such endeavor. Mrazek et al. (2019) discovered that a digital mindfulness-based intervention with 9th–12th grade students improved emotional regulation and stress management. Conversely, Montero-Marin et al., (2023) using thematic content analysis of the responses of 11–13-year-old students in the UK established that most teenagers were not willing to engage in mindfulness practices when given the opportunity.

Limitations and implications:

One of the limitations of the present study was the small sample. The size and the selection did not allow making generalization of results. The reduced response rate, especially on the second instrument, limited even further the possibility to gather a broader spectrum of opinions. Also, there was no differentiation by gender which might be an interesting path to explore, following İskender and Savaşçı (2023) who indicated lower levels of stress in female teachers.

An additional line of future research that would be interesting to pursue could be a correlational study between mindfulness and better teacher-student relationships, following research by Lavy and Berkovich-Ohana (2020).

It could prove to be useful to examine more novice teachers' perspective, since evidently more experience combined with maturity render educators who are more in control.

This research could provide valuable insights for EFL educators themselves who might benefit from mindfulness approaches and to researchers exploring the effectiveness of mindfulness in educational settings.

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