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Keywords

Bilingual Guided Meditation, mindfulness, wellbeing, Chinese, foreign language learning anxiety

Cover Page Footnote

The authors want to thank all participants and research assistants for their contribution to this project.



MINDFULNESS AND WELL-BEING: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF BILINGUAL GUIDED MEDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated the acceptability and outcomes of a mindful approach to teaching a foreign language in higher education institutions. The approach included Bilingual Guided Meditation (BGM[®]) in the classroom to reduce students' anxiety and foster a positive mindset. The BGM program combines bilingual positive suggestions with guided meditation and relaxing background music. Results indicated that the BGM may reduce anxiety and can improve academic performance.

Keywords: Bilingual Guided Meditation, mindfulness, wellbeing, Chinese, foreign language learning anxiety

Background

As the world becomes more and more interconnected (Friedman, 2005), language becomes a bridge to understand and mediate differences among cultures, leading to a greater demand for effective language education. According to recent reports (Archer, 2013; Flaherty, 2015), college enrollment in foreign language programs in the United States has grown to more than 1.6 million. However, high anxiety levels and low self-confidence are major reasons for many learners to stop studying a second language (Caliendo, 1990; Lonsdale, 2006).

There is growing literature emphasizing that foreign language learning anxiety has a negative impact on language acquisition skills (Brantmeier, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Lonsdale, 2006; Saito et al., 1999; Young, 1999; Zhang, 2002; Zhao, 2008). Previous research has found that meditation practice has significant effects on reducing stress/anxiety levels (Edwards, 1991; Miller, Fletcher & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). Furthermore, meditation has been found to be related to improved school grades, learning ability, and short- and long-term memory (Moore, 1992; Shapiro, Brown & Astin, 2011).

A consensus on incorporating all human dimensions into learning and inquiry is emerging (Ferrer et al., 2010). Meditation practice is one of the approaches that address nonacademic dimensions (Albrecht et al., 2012; MaCown et al., 2011). In the last few years, Bilingual Guided Meditation (BGM) was developed to create a relaxed and positive mindset to

reduce student anxiety in a foreign language class and optimize their learning of the Chinese language (Cai, 2017; Li, Cai & Elias, 2018).

The BGM program is novel in its combination of bilingually positive suggestion input with the benefits of guided relaxation meditation and soothing background music. Meditation is aimed to help students enter a relaxed state that leads to restful alertness (McCown et al., 2011). The soothing background music is intended to enhance relaxation and activate the right hemisphere of the brain (Bancroft, 1999; Racle, 1979; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) so that the left hemisphere will be relaxed to create optimal conditions for sustaining selective attention. Thus, simultaneous presentation of the bilingual suggestion and soothing music during the meditation may enable the brain to call upon all its resources to assimilate new data (Racle, 1979, Lozanov, 2009). Activation of the right brain may also facilitate the learning of Chinese characters, which were developed from a pictographic writing system (Li, Nuttall, & Zhao, 1999). Under this kind of ideal learning environment, it is also possible for bilingual language input involving positive suggestions to have the subconscious effect of tapping into the students' reserved potentials (Lozanov, 2009; Matera, 1997; Storz, 1990).

Although contemplative education has been gradually receiving mainstream acceptance worldwide as a valuable tool that creates an increased state of restful alertness (MaCown et al., 2011), empirical research on contemplative education remains in its infancy. Studies, with a control group, are pressingly needed to investigate whether the incorporation of contemplative techniques with curriculum subjects enhances academic performance and general wellbeing (Albrecht et al., 2012). Craig (2011) strongly suggested that future research should prioritize the collection and evaluation of student performance. This study answered this call and enriches the literature by evaluating the acceptability and preliminary outcomes of incorporating BGM in Chinese language courses in a higher education institution.

Bilingual Guided Meditation Program

Bilingual guided meditation (BGM) practice involves two versions: A 5-minute BGM as a language classroom activity, and a 30-minute BGM as a cultural classroom activity. The BGM program seeks to shelter students from any potential negative effects of stress exposure related to foreign language learning by cultivating a relaxed and positive mindset. With soothing background music, these versions of the BGM program incorporate positive suggestions.

The intervention is secular in nature, and the investigators did not utilize terminology that would be considered religious or unusual for this context. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the BGM[®] program in higher education, more specifically on college-level learners of the Chinese language in classroom settings.

Methods

A mixed-methods was used in this study. The acceptability of the BGM was investigated by a qualitative method using a questionnaire with open-ended questions to gain the students' perspectives. Student responses to each question were organized by themes. The outcomes of the BGM were assessed by a quantitative method.

Participants

The participants included 227 undergraduate students, 132 females and 95 males, who enrolled in Chinese language courses at a large urban university in the New England area. The sample consisted of participants over eight semesters (see Table 1 for the number of students in each semester). Among the 227 participants, 121 students have practiced the BGM for one semester whereas 106 students are from the matched control groups without the BGM practice.

Table 1.
Experimental and Control Groups in Eight Semesters

Year/Semester	Chinese Class Session	Meditation (#)	Control (#)	Total (#)
2013 Fall	CHNS 2101	10	6	16
2014 Spring	CHNS 1101	19	12	31
	CHNS 2101	7	7	14
2014 Fall	CHNS 1101	14	14	28
2015 Spring	CHNS 1101	15	16	31
2015 Fall	CHNS 2101	12	12	24
2016 Spring	CHNS 1101	13	10	23
2016 Fall	CHNS 2101	14	16	30
2017 Spring	CHNS 1101	17	13	30
Total (#)		121	106	227

Measures

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Anxiety levels were measured by a modified version of Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) at the beginning and end of the course. The FLCAS (Horwitz, 1986) has been validated as a measure of student foreign language classroom anxiety level. The current study also found evidence of adequate internal consistency of the FLCAS as a measure of anxiety in the foreign language classroom (Cronbach's alpha = .938[Pre-test]/.956[Post-test]). According to FLCAS's guidelines, the higher the score is, the lower the anxiety level is.

Feedback to the BGM Program. At the end of the course, students evaluated the BGM program by completing a questionnaire (developed by the investigators), which covered student perceptions of the acceptability of the BGM program, its utility and its efficacy for reducing anxiety and enhancing Chinese language learning. The questionnaire includes three types of questions: Likert scale, a yes/no/not sure checklist, and open-ended questions.¹

Academic Performance Evaluation. Students took a placement test of Chinese written language (as a baseline) before the course started and took a regular final exam (as a post-test) when the semester ended. Academic tests were scored by two faculty members for inter-rater reliability.

¹ The questionnaire and all student feedback are available upon request.

The investigators compared the pre and post-test results of the students who practiced the BGM with those who did not.

Procedures

The study began after approval from the Institutional Review Board and obtaining written consent from participants. During a pilot study in 2013 and 2014 in a short-term study abroad program, 36 students spent four hours per weekday morning studying Chinese at an institution in China. During the cultural activity time on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, half of the students were randomly assigned to participate in the thirty-minute BGM practice (the cumulative practice time for each student was 300 minutes). The other half of the students were in the control group either practicing Yoga in 2013 or learning Chinese folk dance in 2014.

With the positive feedback generated from the pilot study in the short-term study abroad program, in the following eight regular semesters from 2013 to 2017, a five-minute BGM (which included a three-minute BGM practice at the beginning of each class, and a two-minute BGM at the end of the class) was practiced in the Chinese language courses (the cumulative practice time for each student was 210 minutes). The control group received the same Chinese language instruction without the BGM practice.

Data collection occurred immediately following the first Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) measurement at the beginning of each course. On the last day of each course, students completed the post FLCAS measurement and the evaluation of the BGM program by the aforementioned questionnaire.

All data from the measures were entered by trained research assistants and then analyzed by the investigators. The responses from the participants' feedback to the BGM program were grouped conceptually to reflect similar emergent themes. A 2 (BGM and Control) x 2 (Foreign Language Academic Performance at baseline and post-intervention) ANCOVA was conducted to analyze the quantitative data regarding Chinese language performance. The baseline and post-intervention anxiety levels regarding foreign language learning were also compared by a two-tailed, paired t-test for a within-group design. Alpha (α) was set at .05 for both the ANVOCA and t-test.

Results

Acceptability of the BGM Program

Analyses of student responses to the questionnaire identified three overarching themes: 1) Greater relaxation, calmness, and stress/anxiety reduction; 2) More confidence in their Chinese language class performance, and 3) Enhanced learning and concentration abilities in the Chinese classroom.

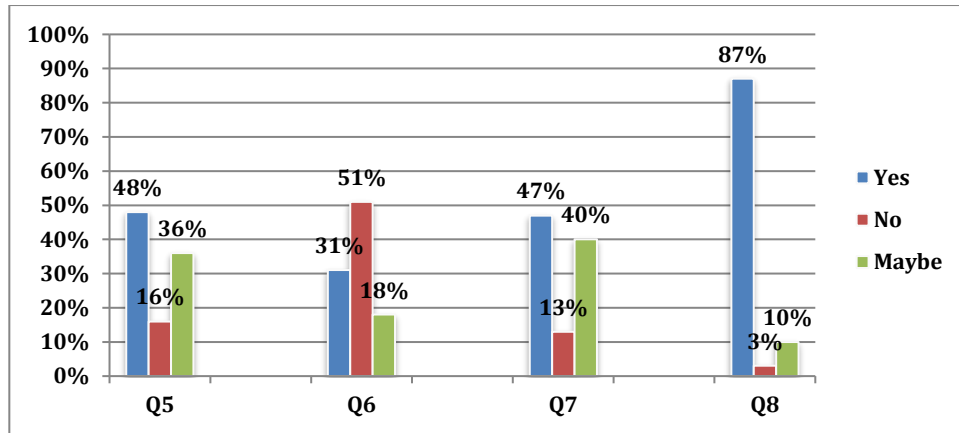


Figure 1. Effectiveness of meditation in-and outside of classroom learning (Q5-Q8) (Q5=Do you believe the anxiety reduction meditation technique affected your performance in your Chinese class? Q6=Do you feel any change in your life outside of Chinese class? Q7=Are you going to use the anxiety reduction meditation technique in the future? Q8=Would you recommend the use of the anxiety reduction meditation techniques to your friends?)

As shown in Figure 1, 48% of students answered “Yes” to Q5, with 36% responding “Maybe”, and only 16% of students answered “No.” Students provided additional comments regarding the effectiveness of the BGM. Among these comments, the investigators have identified three themes indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Student Comments on the Effectiveness of Meditation in Their Chinese Class

Theme:	Percentage of Student Comments with this theme
1. Students reporting greater relaxation, calmness, and stress/anxiety reduction.	Total: 61% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater relaxation: 58.2% • Greater Calmness: 18.4% • Stress Reduction: 15.6% • Anxiety Reduction: 7.8%
2. Students Reporting More Confidence in their Chinese Class Performance	10%
3. Enhanced Learning Abilities in the Chinese Classroom	Total: 29% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning ability (Speaking, Pronunciation, Listening, etc.): 50.72% • Concentration ability (Centering, Focus, Clear Mind, etc.): 49.28%

Overarching Themes

Theme 1: Greater relaxation, calmness, and stress/anxiety reduction. Fifty-eight percent of the comments included “feeling more relaxed” after meditation, while 18.4% used a synonymous “calmer” in their responses. One student reported, “It clears the mind, releases the mind of the day’s worries and obligations, allowing me to focus on learning Chinese.” While another said, “Coming into quizzes or even regular classes can be stressful, and the meditation helped center me.” Another 15.6% reported stress reduction, and 7.8% anxiety reduction. Another student stated “Relieved stress and anxiety hugely. No more worries about probably being wrong.” In total, out of 232 student comments, 141 reflected this theme.

Theme 2: More Confidence in their Chinese Class Performance. Ten percent of the student comments reflected that they felt more confident in their abilities in the classroom as a result of meditation. One student stated “I thought that the guided meditation was extremely helpful and made me feel more confident and relaxed. I looked forward to it.” Another participant said: “Helped me to be calmer and more confident in my answers. Reminded me to take a few seconds and think.”

Theme 3: Enhanced Learning and Concentration Abilities in the Chinese Classroom. Twenty-nine percent of students observed visible changes in terms of academic performance in their Chinese class. Within these comments, 50.72% reported improved learning ability including speaking, pronunciation, and listening skills, etc. Another 49.28% indicated enhanced concentration ability regarding focus and clear mind. Comments included:

- *“I felt I could soak in everything I learned by relaxing.”*
- *“I heard and recognized vocabulary and structures used in class. It was a relaxing way to end the day and reduce stress before studying and doing homework.”*
- *“It was a really good and useful experience listening to a native speaker pronounce Chinese words. It really helped me with my pronunciation.”*
- *“It helped me practice listening, learning new words, and reinforce grammar structures in addition to just sounding nice.”*
- *“By going back and forth between two languages, students can learn (in my case) more about different cultures. If it weren’t for the bilingual meditation, I wouldn’t have known that ‘qing song’ is ‘relaxed’ I think it is super effective, personally.”*

Student responses to Q6 (“Do you feel any change in your life outside of Chinese class?”) were 31% “Yes”, 51% “No” and 18% “Maybe”. When asked to further elaborate, 29 students provided elaborations such as *“I feel more able to try new things after seeing that Chinese is not as scary as people make it seem”* and *“I could keep calm faster and I feel easier to sleep at night when I practice meditation myself.”*

When responding to Q7 (“Are you going to use the anxiety reduction meditation technique in the future?”), 47% of students stated that they would continue to use the BGM in the future, while 40% were unsure, and 13% answered “No.” In response to Q8, 87% of participants stated they would recommend the use of the anxiety-reducing meditation techniques to their friends, while only 3% of students answered “No” and 10% of students stated that they were unsure.

Feedback regarding structure/delivery of BGM

The survey additionally asked students if they noticed a difference between the way the meditation was presented, between Chinese/English and English/Chinese (Q9a). Fifty-four percent did not notice a difference. Some of their detailed responses included: “*Not at all. The meditation plus music was the most important part*” and “*Not really- at that point I could interpret each, less of a language barrier because I had heard it many times.*”

Out of the students that did perceive a difference, the results were almost split in half on whether they noticed a difference and preferred the meditation presentation of Chinese/English or English/Chinese. One response summarized “I found it the same and when we change to Chinese/English I felt a lot more confident as I understood the Chinese from the beginning.”

The investigators also posited the question: “Which element of BGM program did you like most?” (Q9b). Twenty-nine percent of the participants credited the bilingual format as most helpful, 17% preferred the positive suggestion input. 33% felt the soothing background music was the most important element for BGM, while 21% liked the guided meditation itself. One response concluded, “I enjoyed all the different parts of the meditation as they made me relaxed and prepared for Chinese class.”

The investigators also asked: “Which version of meditation (BGM) do you feel is most effective and helpful?” (Q10). Thirty percent of the participants preferred the beginning of class BGM, while 26% preferred the end of class BGM and 44% liked both. One participant provided an additional comment, by stating: “The beginning of class BGM and end of class BGM are equally important. The beginning of class BGM prepares the student mind for learning, and end of class BGM reinforces the learning mindset.” Another participant complemented: “(the end of class BGM) helps cap the learning session for increased retention.”

The final survey question asked for any additional comments, in which 42 students responded. Responses were positive as students showed appreciation and encouragement for the continuation of BGM in their Chinese classes, as one student said: “I love it! Bilingual guided meditation should be implemented in all language classes! Very effective.” Two students recognized the original intention for this program of helping students instill their learning into the subconscious, as they stated: “...successfully goes into my mind,” and “Every time I heard it I would subconsciously know the meaning, drilling it further in my head.”

Preliminary Anxiety Reduction and Academic Outcomes

The outcome of anxiety reduction for the BGM program was first examined in a pilot study with 36 college students (see table 3). Eighteen of them participated in the thirty-minutes of BGM implemented as a short-term study abroad afternoon activity, while the other 18 did either Yoga or Chinese Folk Dance practice (serving as control groups). The combined practice time was 300 minutes (30 minutes x 2 times per week x 5 weeks). The mean score of the FLCAS for the BGM group’s baseline was 108.11 ($SD=22.75$), while the Yoga and Dance group’s baselines were 103.78 ($SD=11.43$) and 115.78 ($SD=20.19$). The final mean score of the BGM group was 126.50 ($SD=16.35$), while the Yoga and Dance group scored 115.00 ($SD=13.46$) and 121.89 ($SD=22.82$).

Results from paired samples T-Tests (Sig. 2-tailed) yielded a statistically significant intervention effect for the BGM group [$t(17) = 3.391, p = .003$] while not statistically significant for either the Yoga group [$t(8) = 2.257, p = .054$] or the Dance group [$t(8) = 1.168, p = .276$].

Table 3.

FLCAS Pre & Post Test Comparison (Paired Samples T-tests)

Groups	Baseline	Post-Intervention	Sig. (2-tailed)
Meditation (30 min) ($n = 18$)	M=108.11 SD = 22.75	M=126.50 SD=16.35	$t(17) = 3.391$ $p = .003$
Yoga (30 min) ($n = 9$)	M=103.78 SD=11.43	M=115 SD =13.46	$t(8) = 2.257$ $p = .054$
Chinese Folk Dance(30 min) ($n = 9$)	M=115.78 SD=20.19	M=121.89 SD =22.82	$t(8) = 1.168$ $p = .276$
Participants with 5-minute BGM ($n = 120^*$)	M=108.21 SD =14.36	M=117.50 SD = 16.88	$t(119) = 7.78$ $p < .001$

*One out of 121 participants did not complete the post-FLCAS measurement because of sickness

Later analyses of the FLCAS scores of post-intervention (mean = 117.50, $SD = 16.88$ and baseline (mean = 108.21, $SD = 14.36$)² of a larger sample of 121 participants who practiced the 5-minute BGM as a language classroom activity across eight semesters (Fall of 2013, Spring, and Fall of 2014, 2015, 2016, and Spring of 2017) showed similar gains of scores as that of the BGM group in the pilot study. A two-tailed, paired t-test (a within-group design) revealed a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-tests [$t(119) = 7.78, p < .001$] (See Table 3). To investigate the impact of gender on the BGM intervention, an analysis was conducted using ANCOVA. No significant difference was found between male ($n = 51$) and female ($n = 69$) students [$F(1, 119) = 1.872, p = .174$] in terms of anxiety reduction after practicing one semester BGM.

Table 4 presents the baseline and post BGM intervention test scores of the Chinese language. The average score of Chinese language skills at the baseline level for the BGM group was 20.20 ($SD = 30.76$), with 23.01 ($SD = 31.63$) for the control group. The average score of Chinese language skills at post-intervention for the BGM group was 81.86 ($SD = 14.68$), with 74.01 ($SD = 17.41$) for the control group. A one-way between groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the increased scores of the experimental and control groups. After controlling for baseline scores, the ANCOVA revealed a significant intervention

² According to the FLCAS guidelines, the higher the score, the lower the anxiety level.

effect for both five-minute BGM and thirty-minute BGM (see Table 4). Overall, the BGM group’s Chinese language scores had a larger increase than those from the control group. Table 4.

ANCOVA Tests of Chinese Language Exam Score Comparison

Groups	Baseline	Post-Intervention	Effect Size (Sig.)
5-min BGM Meditation (n =120)	M=20.20 SD =30.76*	M=81.86 SD = 14.68	$F(1, 224) = 5.364$ $p = .021$ □ ² □□□□□□
Control (n =106)	M=23.01 SD = 31.63*	M=74.01 SD = 17.41	
30 min BGM Meditation (n =18)	M=43.36 SD =28.37	M=85.53 SD = 9.92	$F(1, 34) = 6.839$ $p = .013$ □ ² □□□□□□
Control (n =18)	M=50.36 SD = 24.76	M=72.28 SD = 13.94	

*The CHIN 1101 group students’ baseline of 0 contributes to the large SD

Discussion

Implications

The qualitative data from this preliminary exploration indicates that the BGM is acceptable to the participating students. Most students responded positively to the course, perhaps since the BGM is designed to facilitate a more positive classroom environment. Students have also expressed appreciation for incorporating BGM into their Chinese courses. The participants indicated much of the effectiveness of the BGM was due to it being presented at the beginning of class, which made the participants more receptive to learning. The background music was also noted by participants to be soothing and helped them become more relaxed in the classroom environment. Of further note, the students overwhelmingly encouraged the continuation of BGM as part of their Chinese learning experience.

The preliminary quantitative data from pre and post-test scores on FLCAS and Chinese language indicate that BGM has positive effects on both anxiety reduction and foreign language learning. It should be noted that the effect of Yoga on anxiety reduction was almost statistically significant ($p = .054$) although not as strong as BGM. The small sample size from this group may have impacted the statistical result.

Based on the literature (Bancroft, 1999; MaCown et al., 2011; Shapiro & Walsh, 2003; So & Orme-Johnson, 2001; Zhao, 2008) and results from the current study, we propose the following model for understanding how these intervention effects are generated from the BGM practice which integrates a meditative practice with curriculum subjects (foreign language courses). In this framework, we posit that the relaxed and positive mindset induced by the BGM program appears central to facilitating the reduction of anxiety over foreign language and

enhancing foreign language learning among college Chinese learners. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed pathways.

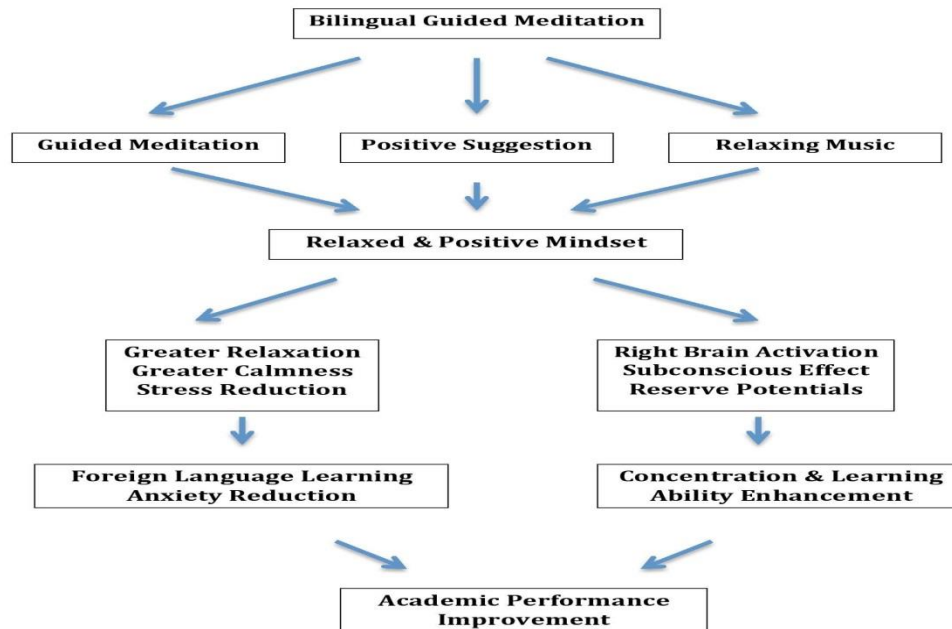


Figure 2. Model of potential effects of the Bilingual Guided Meditation

The findings from this study support the call for incorporating all human dimensions into learning and inquiry (Ferrer et al., 2010). The findings indicate that BGM is a promising approach to address non-academic dimensions in a foreign language classroom. Furthermore, incorporating BGM optimizes the participating students' learning of the Chinese language. Meanwhile, it should be noted that there were 16% of the participants did not believe that BGM affected their Chinese language performance and 3% of the participants did not recommend the use of the BGM to their friends. These findings warrant caution when applying the BGM to all students in a class.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. First, due to limitations with the sample size, some theoretically related outcome measures were not assessed, including teacher ratings of behavior, student attendance, oral communication performance, and the mediation of anxiety reduction in foreign language learning on the performance of foreign language skills. Due to the initial pilot nature of this study, the intervention implementation was also not evaluated for fidelity. The non-normality of the outcome measure (Chinese language scores) for the ANCOVA is a limitation of the statistical robustness of those analyses. Next steps for this research will involve sampling and statistical procedures to satisfy all assumptions of the statistical model, evaluating fidelity of implementation, and exploring the possible mediation effect of anxiety reduction on academic enhancement with a larger sample and more classrooms (such as incorporating BGM practice in ESL, Portuguese, and other language courses). In addition, the student self-report measure of the BGM program administered in this study may be influenced by the students' desire to make a favorable impression with the investigators, or other

biases. Additional measures should be used to address this issue in future studies.

Conclusions and Future Studies

Despite the limitations, the present study was the first randomized controlled trial of a classroom-based bilingual guided meditation intervention for college foreign language learners. The findings suggest that the BGM intervention (1) is acceptable to participants in university settings and is likely to be attractive to students, and (2) shows promise in reducing foreign language classroom learning anxiety, and (3) has the potential of facilitating a range of positive emotions and academic outcomes. This initial pilot study provides some support for building more effective college foreign language or other compatible curricula from a holistic approach that optimizes students' learning while nurturing their wellbeing.

Since an increasing number of schools are searching for innovative ways to meet the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students (Wisner, Jones & Gwin, 2010), this pilot study provides a practical tool to help educators create a nurturing learning environment from a holistic approach, which optimizes student academic performance and promotes varying degrees of wellness outcomes in student populations. The BGM program could be easily adapted by other language instructors into their curricula for improving student learning experience in the classroom.

To establish BGM as an evidence-based educational approach, our next steps involve further examining the efficacy of BGM in different settings, subjects, with different age groups and different teachers. We are also exploring a new course with corresponding teaching materials (Bilingual Interpretation of Selected Classical Chinese) with two components: 1) Introduction of the Classical Chinese philosophers' view of virtue as a way to stress-reduction, health and happiness (60 minutes each class) and 2) BGM adapted for this course (5 minutes each class), to broaden the horizons of virtue/character education with a holistic perspective.

Our holistic approach to teaching aims to improve students' learning through nurturing a relaxed and positive mind by using a contemplative technique—BGM. Our approach begins with one individual, in one classroom, in one university, but the effects of BGM can ripple into something much greater than we imagined. We hope the soft melody from our hearts can join with the collective choir of the growing development of consciousness that promotes the well-being of all.

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