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Bridging mindfulness and TEFL: unveiling implicit contemplative pedagogy in Slovak secondary education

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ABSTRACT

Contemplative pedagogy has gained increasing attention in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) instruction, particularly in fostering cognitive engagement, emotional regulation, and student-centered learning. This study examines the implicit integration of contemplative activities in Slovak secondary education through a mixed-method approach, incorporating content analysis, 58 student questionnaires, and two teacher interviews. Findings indicate that while educators unknowingly incorporate dialogue, journaling, storytelling, and mindfulness exercises, these practices are not explicitly recognized within formal TEFL curricula. Students reported a strong interest in structured contemplative techniques, such as freewriting and music-based reflection, highlighting a misalignment between current instructional methods and learner preferences. Teacher interviews revealed varying levels of awareness regarding contemplative pedagogy, suggesting a need for professional development programs to formalize its implementation. Despite the promising role of contemplative pedagogy in reducing language anxiety, enhancing engagement, and promoting holistic learning, Slovak TEFL lacks systematic research and institutional support for its structured adoption. This study contributes to pedagogical discourse by identifying key research gaps and emphasizing the need for intentional curriculum design that integrates contemplative strategies to enhance language learning and student well-being.

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KEYWORDS

Mindfulness; contemplative activities; English as a foreign language; upper-secondary level; Slovakia

1. Introduction

The integration of contemplative activities into education has gained increasing attention in pedagogical discourse, particularly in the realm of language learning. Contemplative pedagogy originates from diverse philosophical and educational roots, including humanistic education, contemplative traditions, and socio-emotional learning frameworks, all of which emphasize the development of the whole learner – intellectually, emotionally, and relationally (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Morgan, 2014). Its integration into educational settings responds to growing concerns about student well-being, disengagement, and the limitations of traditional cognitive-focused instruction, offering a more holistic approach that nurtures attention, emotional resilience, and meaningful learning (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2017). Contemplative practices – such as mindfulness, deep reflection, and meditative exercises – are believed to enhance cognitive engagement, emotional regulation, and overall academic performance (Aguilar & Peña Aguilar, 2017; Baugher & Bach, 2015).

Scholars argue that contemplative practices encourage students to move beyond rote memorization, enabling them to construct meaning through reflection and introspection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Zajonc (2013) and Morgan (2014) emphasize that contemplative practices facilitate deep learning by fostering interconnectedness between thought and experience. Within this broader contemplative movement, reflective practice has emerged as a complementary and essential dimension, encouraging both educators and learners to critically examine their experiences, beliefs, and pedagogical choices (Farrell, 2018). In the context of language education, Farrell (2013) and Franzese and Felten (2017) argue that reflective practice plays a critical role in teacher development, supporting a more personalized and adaptive teaching approach. This

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approach aligns with communicative language teaching principles, emphasizing the development of linguistic competencies through personalized and meaningful interactions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the context of English language learning, mindfulness-based exercises – such as focused listening, expressive writing, and guided meditation – have demonstrated positive outcomes in comprehension, fluency, and retention (Gkonou et al., 2017). Several studies have examined the direct impact of contemplative pedagogy on English language acquisition. Giveh (2018) explored the role of self-directed learning through contemplative methods, highlighting improvements in reading comprehension. Scida and Jones (2017a) investigated the impact of contemplative practices on reducing language anxiety, demonstrating that students benefit from a structured approach to mindfulness exercises. Ahmadpour et al. (2020, 2022) compared contemplative and transformative instruction, illustrating how contemplative strategies promote speaking fluency and self-regulation. Furthermore, the integration of contemplative strategies appears to foster a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment, allowing students to engage in deeper dialogues and self-exploration (Hyland, 2016).

While contemplative activities may not be explicitly labeled within formal curriculum guidelines, research indicates that educators often incorporate reflective and meditative practices without being aware of it. Current studies primarily focus on the incidental or informal use of reflective and meditative practices; however, there is limited data on structured contemplative curricula, educator awareness, and student outcomes in terms of language proficiency, motivation, and emotional well-being. However, there remains a lack of empirical research examining the systematic implementation and measurable effects of contemplative pedagogy in TEFL within specific regional contexts. Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how intentional contemplative pedagogy can enhance language acquisition and foster student-centered learning within the European TEFL landscape. This study advances the discussion on contemplative pedagogy by analyzing its implicit presence in Slovak secondary education. The research highlights the need for a more deliberate integration of contemplative activities into TEFL frameworks, which may contribute to holistic language acquisition models that support both cognitive and affective domains of learning (Beer et al., 2015).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to examine the integration of contemplative activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at the upper secondary level. To achieve this, the following research questions were formulated:

- (1) Which contemplative activities are included in EFL textbooks?
- (2) Which contemplative activities have learners encountered in EFL classes?
- (3) Which contemplative activities do teachers implement in EFL instruction?

2.2. Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional mixed-method design, incorporating three data collection techniques: content analysis, a questionnaire, and interviews. The content analysis aimed to identify references to contemplative activities within the textbooks used in EFL classes. The questionnaire explored students' exposure to contemplative practices and their interest in adopting them. Finally, semi-structured interviews with two EFL teachers provided insight into the implementation and pedagogical rationale behind contemplative activities.

The contemplative activities examined were selected from *The Tree of Contemplative Practices* (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2019) based on the researchers' experience in EFL teaching. The selection process focused on activities that could be feasibly integrated within a standard 45-minute secondary school lesson. These activities were selected not only for their adaptability to EFL instruction but also for their capacity to operationalize contemplative pedagogy in ways that support the development of the learner – intellectually, emotionally, and relationally. Their inclusion reflects an intentional effort to bridge contemplative theory with classroom practice,

offering a framework through which language instruction can become more reflective, inclusive, and transformative.

The selected activities were grouped according to their pedagogical and contemplative functions:

- Deep reading and meaning construction: *Lectio Divina*, mindful writing, and writing about reading encourage learners to engage with texts reflectively, fostering interpretive depth and personal connection.
- Relational and communal engagement: Storytelling, dialogue, and listening to each other promote empathy, perspective-taking, and collaborative meaning-making, aligning with the social dimension of language learning.
- Attention training and affective regulation: Visualization, deep listening, beholding, and listening to music cultivate focused awareness and emotional grounding, supporting learners' capacity to manage stress and remain present.
- Self-expression and introspection: Journaling, freewriting, and improvisation facilitate personal reflection and creative exploration, enabling learners to articulate inner experiences and develop voice.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

2.3.1. Content analysis

The content analysis followed established methodological frameworks (Prasad, 2008). To ensure transparency, reproducibility, and academic rigor in examining contemplative activities in EFL textbooks, an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied. The units of analysis were defined. In this study, the focus was on textual elements (lesson content, instructions, and exercises). The textbooks (Gateway 2nd Edition B1+ and B2+) used by students were systematically reviewed and manually coded by both authors independently to identify instances where contemplative activities are explicitly or implicitly incorporated. The coding labels were assigned to relevant passages and activities. To enhance the validity of the data, inter-coder reliability was assessed ($\alpha = 0.87$), and triangulation with other methods (questionnaire responses and teacher interviews) was conducted.

To distinguish genuinely contemplative practices from routine communicative tasks, a coding framework was developed that is grounded in the core dimensions of contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc, 2013). Activities were coded as contemplative if they met at least one of the following indicators: cognitive engagement that promotes deep reflection, meaning-making, or metacognitive awareness; affective regulation that encourages emotional awareness, stress reduction, or embodied mindfulness; and relational presence that fosters empathy, dialogic exchange, or interpersonal connection.

Routine communicative tasks such as scripted dialogues or grammar drills were excluded unless they incorporated reflective prompts, personal storytelling, or emotional engagement. For example: the 'What about you?' section in *Unit 3: City to City* (B1+) includes questions such as 'Would you like to study abroad? Why or why not?' While this appears to be a communicative task, it was coded as contemplative due to its reflective nature and potential to elicit personal meaning and emotional engagement, meeting both cognitive and relational indicators. In contrast, a standard grammar gap-fill exercise, even if embedded in a speaking task, was not coded as contemplative unless it included a reflective or affective component.

2.3.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two closed-ended questions designed to assess students' engagement with contemplative activities. Respondents selected activities they had previously encountered during EFL classes and those they wished to experience in the future. To ensure clarity, a list of predefined activities, along with brief descriptions, was provided (Appendix). The questionnaire responses were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS software (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations).

The questionnaire items were:

- (1) Which of these activities have you experienced in your English language classes?
- (2) Which of these activities would you like to try in future English language classes?

2.3.3. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers sought to explore their perspectives on contemplative practices in language instruction. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding and analysis. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed to identify recurring themes in teachers' perceptions of contemplative practices. The interview protocol included the guiding questions:

- (1) Are you familiar with contemplative activities in EFL teaching?
- (2) Do you incorporate contemplative activities into your lessons? If so, which contemplative activities do you use?
- (3) Which activity do you find most effective or engaging?

3.3.4. Sample

This study was conducted at a secondary school in Slovakia. The sample comprised 58 students from the second and third grades. Additionally, their two EFL teachers participated in interviews. Both educators had over 15 years of teaching experience. To uphold ethical standards, all participants' identities remain confidential. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, with resolution no. UKF/74/2024/191013:003.

3. Results

3.1. Content analysis

To assess the presence of contemplative activities in EFL instruction, a content analysis was conducted on two textbooks used by students: *Gateway 2nd Edition B1+* (Spencer, 2016a) and *Gateway 2nd Edition B2+* (Spencer, 2016b). The analysis focused on identifying contemplative activities integrated into lesson content, exercises, and instructional prompts. Table 1 summarizes the contemplative activities found in each textbook.

Both textbooks heavily emphasize 'Listening to each other' and 'Dialogue' (10 occurrences each). Gateway B1+ includes a greater variety of activities but with lower frequencies (several activities occurring only once). Gateway B2+ has fewer different activities but maintains a slightly higher mean frequency (6.0 vs. 4.6). Some activities, such as 'Journaling' and 'Beholding', are only present in Gateway B1+, while 'Writing about reading' is unique to Gateway B2+. The standard deviation is similar for both textbooks (around 4.6–4.9), indicating similar variability in activity frequencies.

3.1.1. Gateway B1+

The Gateway B1+ textbook contained multiple activities that, although not explicitly designed as contemplative practices, could be adapted for this purpose. The most frequently identified contemplative activities were listening to each other, dialogue, journaling, beholding, and storytelling. Some examples of identified activities are given in the following subsections.

- Listening to Each Other & Dialogue: Many speaking exercises encouraged students to engage in meaningful discussions. For instance, in *Unit 3: City to City*, the 'What about you?' section posed

Table 1. Contemplative activities in the textbooks.

| Contemplative activities | Gateway B1+ | Gateway B2+ |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Listening to each other | 10 | 10 |
| Dialogue | 10 | 10 |
| Journaling | 1 | – |
| Beholding | 1 | – |
| Storytelling | 1 | 2 |
| Writing about reading | – | 2 |
| Mean | 4.6 | 6 |
| SD | 4.93 | 4.62 |

reflective questions about studying abroad, inviting learners to explore personal motivations and challenges (relational contemplative dimension).

- Journaling: *Unit 1: Personal Best* incorporated journaling through a Life Task activity, where students listed their strengths, skills, and achievements, reinforcing self-reflection and resilience-building strategies (cognitive and affective contemplative dimensions).
- Beholding: *Unit 8: Smart Art* introduced an art appreciation exercise where students observed and discussed artwork before analyzing visual elements in greater detail (cognitive and affective contemplative dimensions).
- Storytelling: *Unit 9: Future Leaders* featured a writing activity that prompted students to rewrite a story, encouraging engagement with narrative structure and personal interpretation (cognitive and relational contemplative dimensions).

3.1.2. Gateway B2+

The Gateway B2+ textbook included contemplative activities focused on listening to each other, dialogue, storytelling, and writing about reading. While similar in approach to B1+, the exercises exhibited greater complexity and encouraged deeper reflection.

- Listening to Each Other & Dialogue: In *Unit 3: Mind Power*, thought-provoking discussion questions invited students to explore concepts of talent, cognitive ability, and personal aspirations (affective contemplative dimension).
- Writing about Reading: The revision section for *Units 3 and 4* introduced a literary reflection exercise in which students analyzed a book that had a significant impact on them, evaluating character development and thematic elements (cognitive contemplative dimension).
- Storytelling: The revision section for *Units 1 and 2* contained a storytelling exercise where students composed a narrative beginning with the sentence: 'We had been planning the journey for several months but had no idea of the excitement that was waiting for us!' (cognitive and relational contemplative dimensions).

3.2. Questionnaire results

A total of 58 students completed the questionnaire, reporting their previous engagement with contemplative activities and indicating which practices they wished to explore further.

3.2.1. Student exposure to contemplative activities

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently experienced activities were dialogue (98.3%) and listening to each other (93.1%), reflecting the strong emphasis on speaking-focused exercises in both textbooks. In contrast, music or singing (20.7%) and beholding (19.0%) were the least encountered activities, suggesting limited integration of creative and sensory-based contemplative practices in standard EFL lessons.

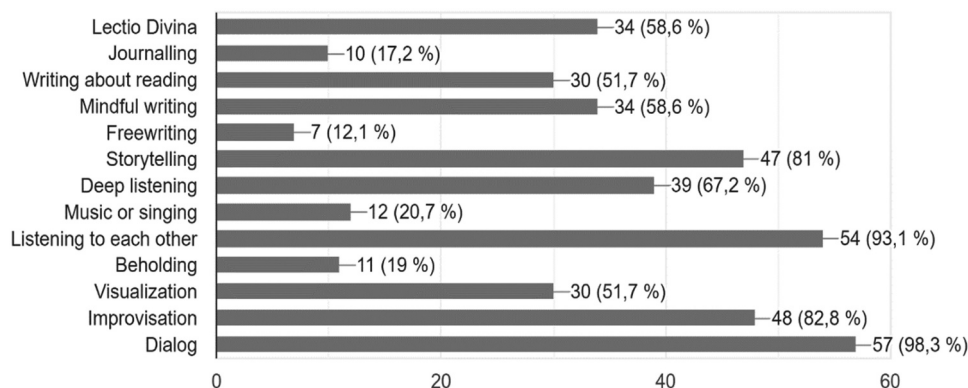


Figure 1. Contemplative activities students have done.

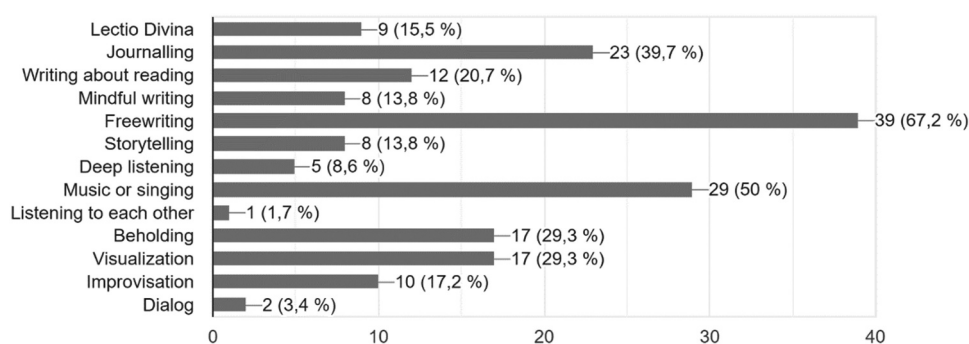


Figure 2. Contemplative activities students would like to do.

3.2.2. Students' interest in contemplative activities

Students expressed a strong interest in freewriting (67.2%) and music or singing (50.0%), highlighting a preference for expressive and creative activities. Conversely, dialogue (3.4%) and listening to each other (1.7%) received minimal support, likely due to their ubiquity in standard classroom interactions (Figure 2).

3.3. Interview results

Two English language teachers participated in semi-structured interviews to provide insights into their understanding and implementation of contemplative activities.

3.3.1. Awareness of contemplative activities

Teacher 1 (T1) demonstrated strong familiarity with contemplative practices, incorporating meditation and guided breathing exercises into lessons to enhance student focus and engagement. Teacher 2 (T2) initially lacked awareness of contemplative teaching methods but recognized their presence in her existing pedagogical approach upon reflection.

3.3.2. Integration of contemplative activities in teaching

Both teachers confirmed regular use of contemplative activities in their classrooms. T1 emphasized making lesson topics personally relevant to students, incorporating deep reflection and thought-provoking questions into discussions. T2, despite initially being unaware of the term, had integrated practices such as Lectio Divina and freewriting into lessons, particularly in writing and arts-related subjects.

3.3.3. Preferred contemplative practices

T1 emphasized the importance of dialogue and listening to each other, highlighting their role in fostering critical thinking, informed decision-making, and self-expression. She also recognized the value of storytelling, Lectio Divina, visualization, and improvisation for cognitive and creative development. T2 prioritized visualization, stressing its impact on student engagement and memory retention, particularly in bilingual instruction settings.

4. Discussion

This study examined the integration of contemplative activities into EFL instruction in Slovak secondary education, revealing both the implicit presence and untapped potential of contemplative pedagogy in TEFL settings. The findings indicate that while educators unconsciously incorporate contemplative activities into their instruction – through dialogue, journaling, and storytelling – there remains little formal recognition or structured implementation of these practices within national curricula and pedagogical training frameworks.

The content analysis demonstrated that EFL textbooks currently in use contain multiple opportunities for contemplative engagement, even though such activities are not explicitly framed within a contemplative pedagogy model. Activities such as journaling, storytelling, and reflective dialogues – found in both Gateway

2nd Edition B1+ and B2+ textbooks – provide avenues for fostering deeper engagement, aligning with previous research that highlights the benefits of contemplation in language learning (Giveh, 2018; Gkonou et al., 2017).

Additionally, student questionnaire responses indicate a strong interest in adopting contemplative methods such as freewriting and music-based activities, suggesting a gap between student preferences and actual classroom implementation. However, it is essential to recognize the definitional overlap between routine communicative tasks and contemplative practices, acknowledging its potential impact on how students interpreted the questionnaire items. For instance, activities such as ‘dialogue’ and ‘listening to each other’ are common in EFL classrooms. Yet, their contemplative potential depends on the presence of reflective prompts, emotional engagement, or relational depth. To clarify the operational definition of contemplative activities used in the questionnaire, future instruments should distinguish conventional dialogue from contemplative dialogue, such as open-ended, introspective exchanges that foster empathy and self-awareness. This distinction would help ensure that students interpret the items in alignment with the study’s conceptual framework.

The results must, therefore, be interpreted cautiously. The high exposure but low interest in certain activities may reflect terminological ambiguity rather than actual learner attitudes toward contemplative learning. Students may have associated familiar classroom tasks with routine instruction, overlooking their contemplative dimensions due to a lack of explicit framing. A brief reflection on validity is warranted here. Conceptual imprecision in distinguishing contemplative from conventional pedagogical practices may have influenced how students responded to the questionnaire. Without clear differentiation learners may have underreported interest in activities they already engage with, simply because they did not recognize them as contemplative.

Teacher interviews provided valuable insights into the pedagogical awareness and attitudes toward contemplative practices. While one instructor explicitly integrated meditation and guided breathing exercises into lessons, the second educator only recognized contemplative elements in her teaching upon reflection. This reinforces findings by Aguilar and Peña Aguilar (2017) and Hyland (2016), who argue that many educators unknowingly employ contemplative teaching strategies, despite lacking formal training or theoretical grounding in this approach.

The implicit integration of contemplative activities in the Slovak EFL classrooms presents an opportunity for intentional pedagogical development. Existing scholarship on contemplative pedagogy emphasizes its transformative potential in fostering self-regulation, cognitive engagement, and reduced language anxiety (Ahmadpour et al., 2022; Scida & Jones, 2017b). However, this study highlights a regional gap: contemplative pedagogy in Slovak TEFL context remains largely underexplored, lacking systematic research on its effects and the perspectives of educators.

Institutional and policy-level interventions, such as teacher training programs and curriculum development initiatives, could help bridge this gap, fostering a more structured approach to contemplative pedagogy. Expanding professional development opportunities for educators to formally integrate contemplative strategies into language instruction may enhance student outcomes, particularly in language proficiency, motivation, and emotional well-being.

5. Conclusions

The content analysis highlights that existing EFL textbooks contain multiple contemplative activities, even if they are not explicitly labeled as such. This suggests an opportunity for educators to intentionally integrate and frame these activities within a contemplative learning approach. The questionnaire results indicate that while students have frequently experienced dialogue-based activities, they show a stronger interest in freewriting and music-based activities, which are less prevalent in classroom instruction.

This discrepancy suggests a need for curriculum adaptation, integrating more diverse contemplative practices that align with student preferences and creative expression. Teacher interviews reveal that contemplative activities are often used unintentionally, meaning educators lack formal training or awareness of contemplative teaching methods.

This highlights the importance of teacher education programs that introduce contemplative pedagogical principles, helping educators recognize and purposefully implement these strategies.

5.1. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, the sample size – including only two EFL textbooks, 58 student responses, and two teacher interviews – limits the generalizability of findings across the broader educational context. Future studies should incorporate larger and more diverse samples to capture regional and institutional variations in the implementation of contemplative pedagogy.

Second, while teacher interviews provided valuable insights, the lack of longitudinal data prevents analysis of how contemplative methods evolve within instructional settings over time. Future research should consider tracking educators and students across multiple academic years to assess the sustained effects of contemplative practices on language learning outcomes. Lastly, this study focuses exclusively on Slovak secondary education, limiting its applicability to broader Central European contexts. Comparative studies examining cross-country variations in the implementation of contemplative TEFL could help identify best practices for integrating contemplative pedagogy into regional curricula more effectively.

While this study provides valuable insights into the presence of contemplative activities in EFL classrooms, further research is needed to quantify their impact on student learning outcomes. Future studies could examine teacher perceptions and readiness for contemplative instruction through larger-scale qualitative studies, exploring how cultural and institutional factors shape the adoption of contemplative teaching within different cultural contexts.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Contemplative activities are tasks that encourage students to slow down, think deeply, and reflect on what they are learning. These activities help students focus, connect ideas, and better understand concepts. Examples include journaling, mindfulness exercises, or discussing thought-provoking questions.

| Activity | Which of these activities have you done during your English classes in high school? | Which of these activities would you like to try during your English classes in high school? |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Lectio Divina | | |
| Journaling | | |
| Writing about reading | | |
| Mindful writing | | |
| Freewriting | | |
| Storytelling | | |
| Deep listening | | |
| Music or singing | | |
| Listening to each other | | |
| Beholding | | |
| Visualization | | |
| Improvisation | | |
| Dialogue | | |

Use a tick ✓ to mark the activities.

Lectio Divina – a slow, thoughtful reading of a text, followed by reflection or discussion to understand its deeper meaning.

Journaling – writing down your thoughts, feelings, or experiences to explore ideas or reflect on personal growth.

Writing about reading – summarizing or reflecting on what you have read to connect with the text and better understand it.

Mindful writing – writing with full attention, focusing on the present moment, and expressing thoughts clearly and intentionally.

Freewriting – writing continuously for a specific period of time without worrying about grammar or structure, letting ideas flow freely.

Storytelling – sharing stories, either personal or fictional, to express ideas, teach lessons, or entertain.

Deep listening – focusing entirely on what someone else is saying, without interrupting, and trying to truly understand their message.

Music or singing – hearing and reflecting on music to relax, spark creativity, or explore emotions and ideas.

Listening to each other – paying close attention to others during conversations to build understanding and connection.

Beholding – looking at something (like art or nature) with full attention, appreciating its details and meaning, followed by reflection.

Visualization – imagining a scene, concept, or outcome in your mind to clarify ideas or achieve goals.

Improvisation – creating or acting spontaneously without planning, often to explore creativity or solve problems.

Dialogue – engaging in an open and thoughtful conversation to share perspectives and learn from others, without judgment or interruption.