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Research Paper

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE ROLE OF ICE-BREAKING ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

This qualitative study attempts to find out teachers' views on the role of ice-breaking activities in the English language classrooms. Ice-breaking activities can make a hard lesson easy for students by setting the tone of the lesson and adding fun elements. As a result, they may facilitate smooth teaching and learning in English language classrooms. English language teachers worldwide use countless ice-breaking activities tailored to their learners' contexts, levels, and needs. Ice-breaking activities in English language teaching and learning at the university level have been a disputable issue since university students are considered self-motivated compared with school and college-going students. Individual interviews with ten teachers have been conducted to collect data. The study's findings may trigger the ELT practitioners to rethink the importance and effectiveness of ice-breaking activities in the English language pedagogy.

Keywords: Ice-breaking activities, English language class, teachers' perception

1. Introduction

Ice-breaking activities function as the starter of an English language classroom. These activities can help break the ice between the teachers and the students, and even among the students. These are generally called ice-breaking or warm-up activities. By initiating students' interest and concentration toward learning, ice-breaking activities accelerate the learning process. "It is an effective way to help the students begin to think in English and to review previously introduced material" (Kay, 1995, p.vi). It helps make the students focused, prone to creative thinking, and eager to find new techniques for their learning (Peterson, 2010). English language teaching (ELT) experts worldwide advocate for the use of ice-breaking activities in teaching English skills (Almarza, 1996; Royka, 2002; Rinvolucri, 2003; Deng and Carless, 2009, cited in Savas, 2016). Ice-breaking activities are suggested since they focus on the practical use of the language rather than merely teaching the language and its structure (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). Based on the experience of conducting warm-up sessions in an English language classroom, Allwright (1984) says, "with warm ups, students paid closer attention, asked better questions and seemed a bit more excited than before (p.162)… the proper presentation of warm ups will cause people to stop whatever they are doing or thinking and refocus their attention" (p. 164).

The support and urgency for using ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms are rooted in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory (1978). Vygotsky suggests teachers help the students reach their target level of development by guiding them with a similar task as a demonstrator, not by doing the task for them. Ice-breaking activities play the role of demonstration here by letting the students experience a similar lesson in the classroom that they will learn later.

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So, the objective of this study is to explore the Bangladeshi university-level ELT teachers' perceptions regarding the role of ice-breaking activities in their English language classrooms. With this aim, the following research questions have been set for the study- (i). What are the teachers' perspectives on using ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms? (ii). What problems do the teachers face in conducting ice-breaking activities in their English language classrooms? (iii). What solutions do the teachers apply to the problems faced in carrying out the ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms?

2. Literature Review

Estalkhbijari and Khodareza (2012) posit that ice-breaking activities foster students' motivation toward the classwork and set "the ground for the various stages of the lesson" (p.197). However, the authors urge the ELT teachers to make the ice-breaking activities "short, related to the topic, useful to continue later activities, interesting, and enjoyable" (p.197) and practice them at the beginning session of a class for the best impact. Leblanc (2011) suggests that students' concentration can be centered in the classroom by turning off their outside world thinking by warm-up activities. Moreover, implementing ice-breaking activities in English classrooms injects fun into learning; thus, they can assist teachers in creating a comfortable and students-friendly learning atmosphere in classrooms (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Flanigan, 2011). Kavanagh et al. (2011) also think that ice-breaking activities can help teachers convey their enthusiasm to the students, which is very important since teachers' eagerness may accelerate students' classroom learning.

A study by Huang and Hu (2016) in China shows that most teachers (85%) and students (73.75%) agree to the need to implement ice-breaking activities in the classroom. However, teachers mostly (55%) like everyday activities (i.e., debate, mini-lecture, retelling story, presentation) while students (56.25%) like recreational activities (English Dubs, song cloze, role play, and short play) as ice-breaking activities in their classrooms. Savaş (2016) warns that the selection of ice-breaking activities should be carefully done as some students may find them very "easy and mostly time wasting" (p.73). Therefore, those ice-breaking activities should be selected which are "more concerning real-life experiences " (p. 74) and engaging.

The ELT experts reported numerous ice-breaking activities that could be picked up and practiced according to the students' particular classroom context and needs. For example, Kavanagh et al. (2011) mention "getting to know the group" where groups are formed among students based on some common issues among them and letting them explore each other interests; "going deeper" where students in pair take each other interview and share their findings with the whole class; "group work" where different groups of students debate and defend on some given topics. Kilppel (1985) suggests "back-to-back" activity where one student moves in a circle by listening to music while another student keeps describing the moving student's appearance from the back; and "proverb matching". Robertson and Acklam (2000) add "what they are talking about" activity where students play guessing games. "Question time" (Jun, 2000) and "jigsaw reading" (Treko, 2013) are the two other popular types of ice-breaking activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A random sampling method was followed to select the teacher participants for the study as the study aimed to find out what is the actual situation in the classroom (i.e., what is the frequency of the teachers who are using ice-breaking activities in classrooms, and why or why not they are using the ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms). For this purpose, ten English language teachers were selected (five from a public university and five from a private university in Dhaka, Bangladesh). Among them, one is an associate professor, one is an assistant professor, and one is a senior lecturer. Besides English foundation courses, they take advanced level courses like pragmatics, phonetics and phonology, and literature courses. The other seven participants are lecturers or novice

teachers who teach English foundation courses to undergraduate students in their concerned universities. So, there was age and experience variety among the participants.

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

Individual interview with each teacher has been taken at their convenient mutual time at different places. In the interviews, to find the answers for the three research questions, seven questions, including both close and open-ended questions, have been asked to elicit their response regarding their perspective on using ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms. The interview responses were audio-recorded, along with taking notes manually. The interview with each participant lasted for around thirty minutes. Later on, the interview transcripts were transcribed manually, maintaining their accuracy for data analysis. Responses collected from the interview with the teachers have been analyzed descriptively to provide an in-depth discussion on teachers' perspectives on the role of ice-breaking activities in the English language classroom.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Research Question (i): What are the teachers' perspectives on using ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms?

Five questions were asked in the interview to find the answer to the first research question. The first question that was asked to them was, "do you use ice-breaking activities in your English language classroom regularly? Why or why not?" Out of ten, eight teachers mentioned that they regularly practice ice-breaking activities in their English language classroom, while two teachers said it was not regular in their classes. Analyzing the reasons for using ice-breaking activities mentioned by the teachers, two categories are identified. These are-

Motivational Factors –	to make students easy with the teacher and with the classmates to make them feel confident to create comfortable classroom environment
Schema Activation-	to prepare them mentally for the class to check their comprehension of previous class contents to arouse interest for the target lesson of the class

The teachers who responded that they do not regularly use ice-breaking activities in their classrooms were senior teachers (assistant professor and associate professor). They said that for Master's degree and undergraduate students (who are in the third year) are self-motivated students mostly. For them, ice-breaking activities are not very necessary. They add that " ice-breaking activities seem effective for them only for complicated topics".

Next, the teachers were asked what ice-breaking activities they usually practice in their English language classroom. By analyzing their responses, it is seen that most of them practice ice-breaking activities that relate to the class content, for example, response elicitation on the target topic, telling anecdotes, short story, and showing content-related videos, etc. The other commonly used ice-breaking activities that the teachers had mentioned are –

- Drilling (students repeat any interesting phrase or sentence with the teacher that has a connection with the learning content)
- Playing puzzles (teachers provide different cues to students to guess different ideas that are related to the target lesson of the class)
- Quick physical movements (i.e., long breathing, smiling loud, changing sitting arrangement)
- Forming groups, pairs, and introducing different types of speaking activities (finding commonalities and differences among them, interview taking)
- Conversation on contemporary issues (randomly asking students about a topic that is of recent interest among people)

As benefits of using different ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms, teachers unanimously highlighted that it arouses students' interest, attention, and motivation. It works as a tool to break boredom and inhibition. In one teacher's words-

> It helps me make my students easy in the class who come from a long distance facing regular disturbances caused by traffic jams and other uncertain sources. We cannot expect them to be engaged in the class all automatically. They need a break or refreshments to feel connected with the class. Ice-breaking activities play this role very well in this circumstance.

Another teacher adds that ice-breaking activities give students an exposure to be connected with the real world through the activities like knowing each other, conversation on current issues, listening to one another, etc. They emphasized that these activities increase their confidence and make them autonomous learners. As they find fun and comfort by participating in the activities, they become eager and enthusiastic to know what to do and know next. However, teachers consider ice-breaking activities to "build rapport" between the teacher and the students and among the students.

Teachers' responses were mixed when they were asked if they think ice-breaking activities have a significant role in students' learning in classrooms. Only a few teachers (four) strongly agreed that there is no way to deny the obvious role of ice-breaking activities in classrooms. Without ice-breaking actions, classes will start abruptly, and students will fail to focus on the class. On the other hand, most teachers argued that warm-up activities are influential for students' learning but not essential. In one teacher's words "it is not everything, but it is many thing". Teachers alert that for shy and struggling students, warm-up activities could produce even negative results if they are forced to participate without making them comfortable before initiating the ice-breaking tasks.

The last question related to teachers' perception of ice-breaking activities was "do you think ice-breaking activities should be a regular practice in English language classrooms?" Most teachers strongly opined that ice-breaking activities should be a regular practice in English language classrooms as language learning is a practical process and demands performance-based activities. They also highlighted that ice-breaking activities in ESL (English as a second language) contexts like Bangladesh are essential as students come into the class with poor schema. The majority of the students cannot accommodate new content and information quickly and easily. So, to activate their memory and make them ready to receive any new knowledge, ice-breaking activities are essential as expressed by them. On the other hand, few teachers think that the use of ice-breaking activities "should be" not "must be" a regular practice in classrooms. They view ice-breaking activities as something complementary to classroom teaching, not essential, especially when students are self-motivated and serious about their learning goals.

4.2. Research Question (ii): What problems do the teachers face in conducting ice-breaking activities in their English language classrooms?

As findings of this research question, many difficulties were addressed by the teachers. Interestingly, all the teachers share the same problems commonly faced while practicing ice-breaking activities in classrooms. The issues are noted below-

- Getting students' attention at the beginning of the class and making extremely introvert students easy
- Engaging a big size class in ice-breaking activities
- Lack of technological supports in language classrooms that makes ice-breaking activities less attractive to students
- Late entrance of the students in the classrooms distracts and hampers the regular flow of the class
- Group of advanced and self-motivated students often find the ice-breaking activities less important, which lead them to think of it as a wastage of time
- Unequal participation of the group members (i.e., advanced students do most of the task while others remain inactive; domineering students take floor most of the time)

- Some extremely demotivated and lazy students' intentional negative attitudes that affect other students

4.3. Research Question (iii): What solutions do the teachers apply to the problems faced in carrying out the ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms?

In answering how they managed the difficulties, the teachers confessed. Some of them admitted that sometimes they get irritated and angry and show strict behavior to control distracted students. So, "patience" is the first thing to handle their problems while doing the ice-breaking activities. However, for most teachers, the experience was not very unpleasant. They prescribed some strategies that could be maintained to minimize the problems. Before starting any ice-breaking activities, they said that students should be encouraged by telling the positive rewards of participating in in-class activities. According to them, it is better to focus on advanced students and give them activities according to their level not to get frustrated. Sometimes, controlling the class or leading a group could be an excellent trick to motivate them. For struggling students, calling them personally at counseling hours, helping them individually in the classroom, reinforcing their attempts are some ways that the teachers suggested. All the teachers emphasized one thing very strongly that in any circumstance, students' behavioral problems should not be addressed publicly and directly; instead, they could be given in general feedback on the expected code of conduct of the students in the classroom.

5. Recommendations

The study's findings imply that the teachers view the ice-breaking activities as a supportive tool to make teaching easy. However, the results also denote that practicing ice-breaking classroom activities will succeed if they meet students' needs and demands. In this regard, teachers should prepare enough to design and practice ice-breaking activities in classrooms. Significantly, they should not forget to clarify the importance of the ice-breaking activities and their link to the learning contents. Besides, the findings also suggest that ice-breaking activities work best for the junior level students (first to second-year undergraduate students) who usually appear timid and often require teachers' direct assistance. As learning a second language is a combination of many factors (i.e., appropriate input, teaching method, classroom setting), ice-breaking activities are just a small step of the process that ensures effective learning and teaching in classrooms. Therefore, cooperation both from students and teachers should be solicited for the successful implementation of ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated the English language teachers' point of view regarding ice-breaking activities in teaching the English language at the university level in Bangladesh. The findings suggest that teachers view ice-breaking activities as an influential factor to sharpen students' learning process by stimulating their schema and enhancing language acquisition factors. The results also urge teachers to be patient and pragmatic in practicing the ice-breaking activities in English language classrooms. These activities promote learning rather than hampering the valuable time of the classrooms. However, the study includes a small number of participants for which the findings may not be generalizable. So, further studies might be carried out, including more participants to catch the whole picture of this area of ELT pedagogy. Finally, the study provides the pedagogic implication that ice-breaking activities can be an effective instrument even for the university students in teaching English if they are implemented with plan and care.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Do you use ice-breaking activities in your English language classroom regularly? Why or why not?
2. What ice-breaking activities do you usually use in your English language classroom?
3. What are the benefits you observe in using these activities?
4. Do you think ice-breaking activities have a significant role/impact on students' learning in class?
5. Do you think ice-breaking activities should be regular in English language classrooms?
6. Do you face any difficulties in implementing the ice-breaking activities?
7. How do you manage the difficulties?