

Ice-breaking as A Useful Teaching Policy for Both Genders

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Abstract

These days focus of interest in English learning changes to productive skills, in Turkey. This research study assesses the teachers' point of view about using ice-breakers for adult Turkish EFL learners in upper-intermediate level. It also, anticipates finding valuable information with applying ice-breaker activities as a useful teaching policy that will contribute to comparison of interest between male and female learners while trying to employ icebreaker activities and speak fluently in the target language. The present study concluded that teachers need to be informed about the usefulness of ice-breaker activities for adult learners. Also, according to the finding of this study there is not any relationship between gender of Turkish EFL learners and the effect of using ice-breaker activities in improving their speaking ability.

Keywords: EFL, Ice-breakers, Gender, teaching policy

1. Introduction

1.1 *What is an Ice-breaker in language learning environment?*

Ellis (2005) considers language acquisition as a very young field of study and most of the researchers yet have controversies about the kind of teaching policy that can be effective in language learning. Some of the researchers prefer focus- on- forms methods, which is traditional way of teaching by grammar and, some others prefer focus- on- form which, is learning new language by communication activities. Although Ellis disagrees with simultaneous use of explicit and implicit teaching or learning, he agrees with Lantolf's (1996) computational model and, explains that it has some limitations because it does not consider social context and relations in language learning. He adds some psycholinguistic principles for internalizing and restructuring new linguistic forms. Nunan (2005) by focusing on popularity of task based learning and its accelerating effect on learning mentions that researchers must think about borrowing or adopting useful techniques and experiences to their own region. Schmit (2010) imposes noticing hypothesis and declares that it is possible to generalize explicit and implicit learning. In his hypothesis, individual differences are important factors in second and foreign language learning. Schmit also discusses that with attention to internal and external factors appropriate tasks must be chosen for different learners in different levels (2010).

As stated by Sivaranjani and others (2015) effective teaching policy and providing information is a kind of art that needs appropriate strategies and methods. Different kinds of ice-breakers can be used by teachers to encourage students to interact with each other and teacher as a major role player in the learning environment (Williams and Southerns, 2010). These activities make the relationship between students with each other and teacher friendlier and as a result the learning approach will be more effective and efficient (Shippen & others, 2012). Also, Eggleston and Smith (2004) took relevancy as a main feature in efficiency of ice-breakers.

1.2 *Students' gender and their speaking ability*

At the early stages of language studies, there were just a few studies about the relationship between language learning and gender. As Oxford and Nyikos (1989) mentioned in their study, there is a straight relation between learners' gender and the strategy that they choose for learning English. According to the results of studies that have done by Lan and Oxford (2003) and Liu (2004) female students use more strategies than male students. Green and Oxford (1995) claimed that female learners' quality of strategy use also is better than male learners. Wharton (2000) and Radwan (2011) studied the effect of gender on strategy use among English learners but their results were different. They concluded that male learners use more strategies than female learners. Green and Oxford (1995) discovered that in watching TV or film as a strategy for improving English learning, male learners surpassed female learners.

Ehrman and Oxford (1990), Dadour and Robbins (1996), and Riazi and Khodadadi (2007), in their studies proved that there were not significant variations between male and female strategy use.

1.3 *Ice-breaker activities in practice*

Ice-breaker activities can be defined as every act that teachers apply in the classroom to make the students get interested in the lesson. Forbes- Greene (1982), categorized several different kinds of ice- breakers, as follow:

1. Openers: They warmed up the group by challenging and motivating students. They could be used to begin a session or a discussion, or to introduce a new topic.
2. Energizers: They are used when students feel stressed, more relaxed, or when the group is flat.
3. Feedback and disclosure: They are used to demonstrate communication variables rather than as a means for

developing ongoing interpersonal relationship among students.

Zhang (2000) categorized the ice- breaker activities used by teachers into several groups:

1. Reading stories: It was a good technique to make the students speak- up. It improved both listening and speaking ability of learners.
2. Question and Answer: It demanded students' participation and immediate feedback that caused interest and motivation. In "question time" activity students could build on their prior knowledge and at the same time, used vocabulary and structures that were connected with a particular function.
3. Using pictures: They had the advantages of being easy to prepare and organize, being interesting, meaningful and authentic. Pictures were also useful in developing students' motivation and provided a general background and context.

Yusuf (2009) believes that ice- breakers could help teachers to create a joyful learning but also mentions that joy should not persuade an uncontrolled and noisy classroom. They increased motivation, comprehension, and fully involvement in the students.

2. Methodology

In the first part of study interview and observation were used as a qualitative research method. A quasi-experimental design also was put forward to test the second hypothesis of the study. So, ice-breaker activities manipulated as dependent variable in order to determine their effect on the students' gender that is considered as the independent variable.

2.1 Research questions

This study aimed at answering the following questions:

- 1-When do teachers use ice- breaking as a strategy to improve oral ability in English classrooms?
- 2- Is there any significant difference in using ice- breaking activities in relation to students' gender?

2.2 Participants

Ten English teachers attending English classes at the private language school in Turkey took part in this study and their mean age was 28. Besides, one-hundred students of upper-intermediate level participated in the study. Among the total participants included in the final data analysis 50 (50%) were male, and 50 (50%) were female.

2.3 Interview

According to Merriam (1998), main purpose of an interview is obtaining information that was not observed during the observation.

In this study there were some interviews with the teachers who participated in this study. The interviews were in English and Turkish. Due to the fact that English was not teachers' mother tongue, sometimes during the interview, researcher switched code from English to Turkish and in fact used code-switching as an ice-breaker while questioning. These interviews were useful. Because they allowed the researcher to get important input about teachers and also the techniques and approaches which they were applying before this study and the methods that they will use in their future teaching experiences. Data obtained from these interviews, answered first question of this research.

2.4 Researcher's Role

According to Nagy, Berninger, and Abbott (2006), in a study researcher may have two roles: participant role and observer role. In this study, the researcher played a participant role, but at the same time she also, acted as an observer and a facilitator. Similar to Perry's (2012) case study, researcher as a facilitator, concerned the direction of the instruction session, and helped in doing activities as a motivator while students were developing the tasks. She also gave feedback elicited information from the student. Furthermore, the researcher observed teachers' strategies and behaviors during the class, and gathered information by means of note taking.

In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, i.e. verifying teachers' ideas about using ice-breakers as a strategy to improve oral ability in English language classroom, the researcher developed and administered an interview with teachers at the end of the sessions. The teachers were briefed on the concept of ice-breakers and unknown points were clarified by the researcher (mostly by giving an example).

Finally, by the result of post-test and comparing them with pre-test, researcher analyzed the effect of treatment in every gender.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Teacher's Comments about Using Ice-Breaker Activities as a Strategy

The first part of data for this investigation consisted of interviews that clarified teachers' points of view about usage of ice- breaker activities as a teaching policy. This part answers the first research question.

The researcher observed the use of language, interviewed with teachers, and transcribed their answers. Before interview, the researcher explained about different kinds of ice-breakers and clarified the purpose of interview. The interview was done with ten experienced teachers who were teaching English for upper-intermediate groups.

Generally, most of teachers said that before treatment they had limited information about usefulness of using ice-breaker activities for young learners and they thought that adult learners will not be interested in doing this kind of activities. Then, teachers shared their proved information about usefulness of ice-breaker activities among adult learners and said that most of the students found doing these activities interesting. They said that there were some shy students who did not like to join the activities at first but after a few efforts they apparently preferred to join and enjoy varied activities. It seemed that using this kind of activities completely increases their attention, risk taking ability, and interest. It also encourages them to promote classroom interaction. Their opinions are similar to the findings of Pakdel-Estalkhbijari and Khodareza (2012) who studied the effect of warm-up tasks on students' writing ability.

They also approved that by adding these activities to lesson plan, classes would be more motivating. Some other experienced teachers explained that ice-breaker activities can be used as a motivation means in various stages of the lesson, but teachers must be careful in choosing and integration of appropriate activities related to every lesson. Teacher must clearly explain the procedure before doing any activity to avoid ambiguity among learners. Then teacher and students can develop ideas individually and in groups.

So, according to teachers' claims, using ice-breaker activities for improving adult EFL learners' speaking ability is an effective means that has significant effect on oral participation and gear current teaching methods toward more affective approaches in teaching speaking.

3.2 The Variance between Female and Male Participants in Using Ice-Breaker activities

This section of data analysis answered the second research question and proved if there is any relationship between gender of Turkish EFL learners and the effect of using ice-breaker activities in improving their speaking ability. Following tables show the results.

Table1.Group Statistics: Ice-Breakers and Students' Gender

	<i>GENDER</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
<i>Post-tests-vocabulary</i>	<i>Female</i>	50	16.8000	2.44949	.48990
	<i>Male</i>	50	16.4000	2.29129	.45826
<i>Post-tests-grammar</i>	<i>Female</i>	50	17.0000	2.50000	.50000
	<i>Male</i>	50	16.6000	2.38048	.47610
<i>Post-tests-pronunciation</i>	<i>Female</i>	50	20.0000	3.22749	.64550
	<i>Male</i>	50	20.0000	3.53553	.70711
<i>Post-tests-fluency</i>	<i>Female</i>	50	18.0000	2.88675	.57735
	<i>Male</i>	50	17.4000	3.26599	.65320
<i>Post-test</i>	<i>Female</i>	50	71.8000	6.43558	1.28712
	<i>Male</i>	50	70.4000	8.52936	1.70587

Table 2. Independent Samples Test for Equality of Means

		Levene's Test Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Post-tests- vocabulary	Equal variances assumed	1.395	.243	.59648	.554	.40000	.67082	.67082	-.94877	1.74877
	Equal variances not assumed			.59647	.788	.554	.40000	.67082	-.94893	1.74893
Post-tests- grammar	Equal variances assumed	1.274	.265	.57948	.565	.40000	.69041	.69041	-.98816	1.78816
	Equal variances not assumed			.57947	.885	.565	.40000	.69041	-.98825	1.78825
Post-tests- pronunciation	Equal variances assumed	.314	.578	.00048	1.000	.00000	.95743	.95743	-1.92504	1.92504
	Equal variances not assumed			.00047	.607	1.000	.00000	.95743	-1.92545	1.92545
Post-test- fluency	Equal variances assumed	.545	.464	.68848	.495	.60000	.87178	.87178	-1.15283	2.35283
	Equal variances not assumed			.68847	.287	.495	.60000	.87178	-1.15351	2.35351
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	1.895	.175	.65548	.516	1.40000	2.13698	2.13698	-2.89668	5.69668
	Equal variances not assumed			.65544	.638	.516	1.40000	2.13698	-2.90506	5.70506

As tables indicate, after applying ice-breaker activities, Turkish male and female EFL learners had the same amount of improvement in their speaking skill. Because mean scores of males and females were close to each other. The amount of p-value or sig for both was above 0.05. It means that the significance was not meaningful and ice-breakers did not play different role, in improving performance of males and females.

4. Findings and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was comparing the effect of ice-breakers on each gender and also teachers' opinion about using them in learning environment. Teachers encouraged students to join speaking activities, even by repeating a few simple sentences, singing funny songs, playing simple games, and even playing a short and funny role (Yeganehpour, 2016). They considered ice-breakers as interactive tools which caused meaningful learning and fluent speaking to those who were looking for an effective way of language acquisition.

The findings of this research are in line with studies that suggested ice-breakers as a natural, purposeful, funny and motivating phenomenon which facilitates, and supports communication, pronunciation, and fluency, and increases risk taking among older learners (Yeganehpour, 2016). Researcher believes that ice-breakers in language classroom do not indicate any kind of breakdown in pedagogical purposes and teachers need to use this kind of activities even in upper-intermediate and advance level for improving all language acquisition skills (Forbes- Greene, 1982; Preziosi, 1989; Wright, 1999; Witkowski, 2000; Jenkins, 2001; Varel, 2002; Rodrigues, 2011).

We have seen that according to teachers' point of view, who participated in the interview, using ice-breaker activities accelerates learners' linguistic development and this kind of acquisition policies may have a quite positive effect on confidence and motivation and consequently accelerates the improvement. It needs to be mentioned that additional studies need to be carried out on ice-breakers and their linguistic, social, and cultural functions at different levels.

Finally, for answering the second research question (What is the variance between using ice-breaker activities and students' gender?) that aims to analyze the correlation of students' gender between students, independent t-test was used. Results show that Turkish male and female EFL learners have the same amount of improvement in their speaking skill and their mean scores are close to each other. The p-value or sig for both is above 0.05. It means that the significance was not meaningful and ice-breakers do not play different role, in improving performance of males and females.

The main limitation of this study may be the limited number of students and teachers and it is recommended to do this study in a larger era and in different cultures. Also, the gender of teachers did not take into consideration.

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