

Chill to Thrill: How Ice-breaking Transforms TOEFL Preparation and Student Engagement

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Abstract

This research explores students' roles and perceptions towards ice-breaking activities in the context of TOEFL preparation classes at one of the universities in East Java. The research employed a qualitative approach with data analysis conducted using NVivo 12. The study involved 20 TOEFL preparation class students who actively participated in ice-breaking activities. The research instruments used were observation and semi-structured interviews to collect data on student perceptions of ice-breaking. Data analysis was carried out by identifying thought patterns that emerged from student responses to the ice-breaking activity. The research results show that ice-breaking activities effectively create a livelier and more interactive classroom atmosphere, increase students' active participation, and reduce anxiety often experienced when preparing for the TOEFL test. In addition, the active role of mentors in facilitating these activities has proven to be very important in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In-depth observations also revealed that ice-breaking strengthens social interaction and collaboration between students, increasing their understanding of the material being taught. Future researchers should explore the long-term impact of ice-breaking on students' academic performance in the TOEFL test.

Keywords: ice-breaking, student perception, TOEFL preparation

Introduction

Preparing for TOEFL is very important for students who aspire to study or work in English-speaking countries. Success in the TOEFL test proves their English language skills and helps them prepare to face challenges in academic or professional environments where English is the primary communication medium (Kim, 2017; Smart, 2019). Several universities and companies in various countries prefer fluent English candidates, which shows they can handle academic and professional situations well. Therefore, a high TOEFL score can significantly increase

educational and employment opportunities for individuals aspiring to succeed internationally.

Improved English language skills, as measured through TOEFL scores, are positively correlated with academic success at university (Devi, 2023; Prawiyata & Barus, 2022). It suggests that a higher TOEFL score meets entry requirements and indicates a student's ability to succeed in higher education. Moreover, preparation for TOEFL improves language skills and strengthens skills such as listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing, which are crucial in academic and professional contexts. However, it is also important to note that the TOEFL test demands a deep understanding of the test structure and the types of questions encountered (Ali, 2023). Prospective test takers must develop effective study strategies to tackle the test's various sections, including reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Some resources, such as TOEFL preparation books and online courses, offer exercises and tips to help with this test. Regular and focused practice sessions can significantly increase the chances of getting higher scores, thereby improving one's academic and professional prospects.

TOEFL prep classes face several challenges that make learning difficult for students. One major obstacle is the test's difficulty (Karimullah & Mukminatien, 2022). The TOEFL exam assesses various English skills like listening, reading, writing, and speaking, so students must excel (Sawaki & Sinharay, 2013). Achieving proficiency in each area requires significant time and effort from students. The test's strict structure and limited time also add to the difficulty. Moreover, some classrooms lack supportiveness, leading to tension among students, especially due to test anxiety (Kalantar, 2023). Anxiety about performing well on tests can hinder students' ability to effectively demonstrate their English skills, making learning harder (Zheng & Cheng, 2018)

Creating a supportive and relaxed classroom atmosphere enhances students' motivation and participation in TOEFL preparation classes. Research has shown that a tense classroom environment can harm students' engagement and learning outcomes (Akmal et al., 2020). In such an environment, students may feel reluctant to actively participate in discussions and class activities actively, hindering the development of their language skills and affecting their performance on the TOEFL test. Thus, to address these challenges, adopting an inclusive learning approach that fosters student motivation and reduces anxiety is imperative. It can be achieved by emphasizing cooperation, support, and open communication between students and teachers (Cao & Yu, 2023). Incorporating icebreakers and language games into the curriculum is one effective strategy to create a more relaxed and enjoyable class atmosphere (Akmal et al., 2020). By prioritizing these

approaches, TOEFL preparation classes can become more effective and enjoyable for students, ultimately increasing their chances of success on the test.

Good classroom dynamics are necessary to support learning. In this sense, ice-breaking exercises are helpful since they encourage student participation and create a lively learning atmosphere. Ice-breaking exercises provide a good atmosphere for the learning session by removing early barriers and promoting interaction right away (Basioudis, 2019). Studies have indicated that these exercises foster social connections between students, which raise their comfort and confidence in the classroom (Rusman, 2022). In summary, ice-breaking exercises are essential for fostering a welcoming and encouraging learning environment, establishing the foundation for effective learning outcomes.

Furthermore, creating an enjoyable learning environment is crucial for students' achievement. When students feel comfortable and supported, they are more likely to engage and participate actively. One important aspect of the ice-breaking concept is its aim to create a comfortable and interactive learning environment (Fitria, 2023). A supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing and sharing ideas can improve learning outcomes. In the context of ice-breaking, activities held at the beginning of class can help students feel more relaxed and better prepared to participate actively in the learning process. With this comfortable and interactive atmosphere, students are more open to discussing, collaborating, and taking risks in learning.

Nevertheless, effective teaching strategies are vital for fostering a productive learning environment. One such strategy is using ice-breaking activities, which can play a crucial role in enhancing student engagement and participation. Furthermore, ice-breaking also strengthens bonds between students (Sasan et al., 2023). Students can get to know each other through fun and collaborative ice-breaking activities and build positive relationships. The social bonds built through ice-breaking can generate strong social support among students, contributing to their mental well-being and academic performance. Thus, ice-breaking increases student interaction in the classroom and forms the foundation for a solid and mutually supportive learning community.

Ice-breaking activities can significantly positively impact language learning. They help move beyond the initial awkwardness and create a classroom atmosphere conducive to language learning. With increased interaction, comfort, and social bonding among students, this technique can be a key component in creating an effective and satisfying learning experience. Al Ghifarah and Pusparini (2023) stated that ice-breaking is a useful teaching technique in the classroom. It developed into a shift from dull circumstances to unwind and rediscover

excitement. Therefore, implementing ice-breaking in language learning is an important pedagogical strategy for improving the quality of guidance and student learning outcomes.

Previous research has highlighted the benefits of ice-breaking activities in language-learning contexts. Several studies show that ice-breaking effectively increases student participation, reduces anxiety, and strengthens student relationships. For example, research conducted by Parlina et al. (2023) found that ice-breaking can increase social interaction and collaboration between students, ultimately increasing the effectiveness of classroom learning. In addition, similar research by Mepieza (2023) concluded that ice-breaking can increase student engagement and create an atmosphere that supports effective learning. These results suggest that ice-breaking in language learning helps reduce psychological barriers and creates a more inclusive and productive learning environment.

However, specific research examining the impact of ice-breaking in the context of TOEFL preparation still needs to be completed. Existing research tends to focus more on the application of ice-breaking in language learning without exploring its impact on improving learning outcomes in specific language tests such as the TOEFL. Most studies focus more on the psychological and social effects of ice-breaking than on its influence on students' language abilities in the context of standardized tests such as TOEFL. For example, (Al Ghifarah & Pusparini, 2023) show that ice-breaking can help reduce social anxiety and increase students' engagement in language learning. However, no specific analysis of its effect on TOEFL test results exists. Likewise, (Akmal et al., 2020) highlighted ice-breaking's social and psychological benefits but did not specifically investigate its impact on students' ability to take language tests such as TOEFL.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for more specific and focused research on the effectiveness of ice-breaking in the context of TOEFL preparation. Thus, this research aims to explore students' roles and perceptions regarding ice-breaking activities in the context of TOEFL preparation classes. In language learning contexts, where student motivation and performance are critical, a deeper understanding of the impact of ice-breaking can have significant implications for mentoring practice. By exploring students' procedures and perceptions regarding ice-breaking in TOEFL preparation classes, this research aims to provide valuable insights for educators and educational practitioners in developing more effective and supportive learning strategies for students. Thus, this research can create a conducive learning environment and increase students' motivation and academic performance in preparation for the TOEFL test.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the procedures and impact of ice-breaking activities in TOEFL preparation classes. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the participants' perceptions, experiences, and subjective views in depth. Through this approach, researchers can gain a richer and more contextual understanding of how ice-breaking affects students' motivation and academic performance in TOEFL preparation. As Creswell & Poth (2018) stated, qualitative research is very effective in understanding complex phenomena involving social interactions and individual perceptions. In collecting data, this research uses two main instruments: interviews and observation. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the views and experiences of students and mentors regarding ice-breaking implementation. These semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in eliciting relevant and in-depth information from each participant. Through interviews, researchers can understand students' perceptions, emotions, and motivations more deeply. Observations were carried out to monitor ice-breaking activities and interactions during the learning session directly. These observations provide empirical data regarding class dynamics, student participation, and supervisor responses to ice-breaking activities. By observing interactions directly, researchers can identify patterns of behaviour and changes in a classroom atmosphere that may not be revealed through interviews alone. This observation was carried out by systematically recording every activity and interaction, which was then analyzed to identify the emerging main themes.

Participants in this research were students from Tribhuwana Tungadewi University Malang (Unitri) who were involved in the TOEFL preparation class. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, namely selecting 20 students who actively participated in the TOEFL preparation class and mentors who played a role in implementing ice-breaking. By focusing on Unitri students, researchers could obtain relevant and specific data regarding their experiences and perceptions regarding ice-breaking activities in the context of TOEFL preparation. Data collected through interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo 12 software. Thematic analysis is a technique used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in data. It allows researchers to organize and describe data in rich detail. The analysis process involved several steps, including transcription of interview data, in-depth reading, coding, identifying themes, and interpretation. During the coding process, data is divided into smaller units of meaning, which are then categorized based on emerging themes. These themes were then analyzed to understand how ice-breaking activities influenced student

motivation, participation, and academic performance. This analysis not only focuses on the themes that emerged from the data but also on the relationships between these themes, providing a comprehensive picture of the impact of ice-breaking in the context of TOEFL preparation at Unitri.

Findings and Discussion

Bringing TOEFL Preparation Classes to Life: Maximizing Ice-Breaking Potential

This research explores ice-breaking activity procedures in the context of TOEFL preparation classes at Tribhuwana Tunggaladewi University Malang using qualitative data analysis processed through NVivo software. Ice-breaking activities are designed to increase student participation, reduce anxiety, and improve class dynamics, making them more collaborative and supportive. Observation results show that ice-breaking created a livelier and more interactive classroom atmosphere, an important prerequisite for an effective learning environment.

The majority of students, namely 18 out of 20, were actively involved in this activity, showing high enthusiasm through various forms of active participation. Their involvement is not limited to passively following instructions; they also engage in in-depth discussions and interactions with fellow students and mentors. It shows that ice-breaking functions as an icebreaker and an effective tool to encourage active participation and motivate students in learning. This research aligns with Liang (2024) findings, which indicate that opening activities such as ice-breaking can significantly increase student involvement and participation.

Apart from that, ice-breaking activities have also been proven effective in significantly reducing student anxiety. Before the activity began, many students appeared nervous and anxious, especially because of the pressure they felt in preparing for the demanding TOEFL test. Signs of anxiety can be seen in tense facial expressions and minimal interaction. However, drastic changes occurred after the ice-breaking activities began. The classroom atmosphere became more relaxed and enjoyable, with students starting to laugh and smile, reflecting an increase in their comfort level. Activities that involve humour and light interaction between students and mentors help break down tense situations, allowing students to feel more relaxed. This finding is supported by research conducted by Chao and Fan (2020), who found that ice-breaking activities can reduce anxiety levels among students, especially in demanding learning situations. This increase in comfort is very important because it prepares students mentally to face more intensive and challenging learning sessions. By reducing anxiety, students can be more focused

and open in receiving the material presented, increasing the overall effectiveness of learning.

The role of the supervisor in ice-breaking activities also has a crucial impact on the student learning experience. They not only act as facilitators but also as key drivers in creating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. Through clear and supportive instructions, advisors can guide students who may be feeling uncertain, providing praise and constructive encouragement. This strategy increases students' self-confidence and provides a sense of being valued and cared for, which is important to motivate them to participate actively. Mentors who actively facilitate ice-breaking activities succeed in creating a positive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and collaborating with others. In this supportive atmosphere, students are more likely to engage in the learning process, exchange ideas, and share experiences, ultimately increasing the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, class dynamics experienced a significant positive transformation after the ice-breaking activity was carried out. Increased social interaction and collaboration between students is a prominent aspect, with students more actively communicating and collaborating to complete the tasks. In-depth observations show that ice-breaking activities provide individual benefits for students and collectively improve relationships and interactions between students. This is reflected in the increased intensity of discussions, the exchange of ideas, and teamwork in completing various group activities. This effect is not only limited to academics but also creates a more cooperative and socially supportive learning environment. These more positive and inclusive classroom dynamics create a more productive and enjoyable learning atmosphere. With a more open and collaborative atmosphere, students feel more comfortable actively participating, asking questions, and sharing their thoughts, improving their understanding of the learning material. Thus, ice-breaking activities not only impact individuals but also form a strong foundation for effective and sustainable learning in the classroom environment.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm the importance of ice-breaking activities in the context of TOEFL preparation classes, considering their significant role in increasing student participation, reducing anxiety levels, and creating more positive class dynamics. The positive response from mentors to this activity is also an important highlight, indicating their crucial role in supporting an effective learning process. Ice-breaking is an important component that should be integrated into the guidance strategy in TOEFL preparation classes. By providing great benefits

to both students and mentors, icebreakers enrich the student's learning experience and form a solid foundation for ongoing and effective learning.

Students' perceptions regarding ice-breaking in TOEFL preparation classes

The findings of this research reveal students' perceptions regarding ice-breaking activities in the context of TOEFL preparation classes. Several thought patterns emerged from student responses by analyzing interview transcripts and utilizing the NVivo application to organize the findings. First, the research highlights the importance of procedures in implementing ice-breaking activities. Students explained that ice-breaking generally involves short introductory games or group activities to solve problems together. They see this activity as an effective method to start each meeting in a relaxed and interactive atmosphere. Although there are variations in how it is carried out, instructors always try to ensure the involvement of all students in the activity. It is in line with research by Rusman (2022), which shows that clear procedures in ice-breaking activities can increase student involvement and create an inclusive classroom atmosphere. Thus, ice-breaking is not only considered an introduction but also an important first step in building inclusive relationships between students and increasing active participation in the learning process.

Apart from the importance of procedures, the frequency of ice-breaking is also a highlight in students' perceptions of this activity. Most students stated that ice-breaking was carried out on the sidelines of each meeting. For some, this activity is a fun and useful routine for strengthening relationships with fellow students. However, it must be addressed that some students struggle to participate in this activity. Some of them mentioned that they sometimes missed the icebreaker because of time constraints or the absence of several other students. Thus, emphasizing the frequency of ice-breaking implementation is important in understanding how this activity can influence the overall student learning experience.

Apart from emphasizing procedural and frequency aspects, it is also important to understand the psychological effects of ice-breaking activities on students, which are reflected in their perceptions of self-esteem and anxiety. Although most students see it as a positive experience that can help reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence, it cannot be ignored that some students initially feel awkward or uncomfortable with the activity. However, as time passes and you become more accustomed to ice-breaking activities, this feeling tends to subside. It shows a positive adaptation, in line with the findings of Mepieza (2023), which shows that interactive activities such as ice-breaking can reduce anxiety levels and

increase students' self-esteem. Thus, understanding changes in students' perceptions and comfort levels with these activities provides a more complete picture of their psychological impact in the learning context.

The impact of ice-breaking on student motivation and academic performance is also noteworthy. Ice-breaking is proven to have a significant role in motivating students to be more active in taking classes and studying. Some students reported that these activities helped them become more involved in the learning process, which resulted in improved understanding of the material and English language skills. They felt that the interaction and collaboration during ice-breaking helped them better understand the material being taught and improve their English skills. However, it must be noticed that some students feel that they do not experience a significant impact on their academic performance even though they regularly participate in ice-breaking activities. This finding is consistent with Sasan et al. (2023) study, which shows that the benefits of ice-breaking on academic performance may vary depending on individualization and classroom context. Thus, understanding the impact of motivation and academic performance provides a more complete picture of the effectiveness of ice-breaking in supporting student learning in TOEFL preparation classes.

Ice-breaking also plays an important role in strengthening social interactions between students and increasing their understanding of the material being taught. Ice-breaking is a fun activity and an effective means of opening up more open and collaborative communication between students. Participating in icebreakers makes students feel more comfortable sharing thoughts, ideas, and experiences with their classmates. The interactions that occur during this activity not only strengthen social relationships between them but also increase their understanding of the material being taught. The discussions and collaboration during icebreakers help students view topics from various points of view and deepen their understanding. Thus, ice-breaking is not just an additional learning activity but is also an integral part of the learning process that helps create a supportive and productive learning environment for students in preparation for the TOEFL test.

Overall, this research confirms the importance of ice-breaking in the context of TOEFL preparation classes. These activities significantly increase student participation, reduce anxiety levels, and create more positive classroom dynamics. Positive responses from tutors also highlight the importance of their role in supporting an effective learning process. Recommendations for improving ice-breaking provide valuable direction for developing more effective learning strategies in the future. It can be concluded that ice-breaking is an important

component that should be integrated into the guidance strategy in TOEFL preparation classes. With great benefits for students and mentors, icebreakers enrich the learning experience and form a solid foundation for ongoing and effective learning.

Conclusion

This research reveals that ice-breaking activities are important in creating a conducive learning environment in the TOEFL preparation class at Tribhuwana Tunggaladewi University, Malang. Ice-breaking effectively increases active participation, reduces anxiety, and establishes a more collaborative and inclusive classroom dynamic. Most students showed enthusiasm and active participation in this activity, contributing to a more lively and interactive class atmosphere. This finding is in line with previous research, which shows that opening activities such as ice-breaking can increase student engagement and participation and reduce the anxiety students feel in demanding learning situations.

In addition, this research highlights the importance of the role of mentors in facilitating ice-breaking activities. An active, supportive advisor can increase student confidence and participation, creating an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. For future researchers conducting research with a similar focus, it is recommended to consider variations of the ice-breaking method that can attract the interest of all students, as well as hold feedback sessions to improve the effectiveness of the activity continuously. Another recommendation is to conduct further research on ice-breaking's long-term impact on students' academic performance in the TOEFL test. These findings emphasize that ice-breaking is an important component that must be integrated into teaching strategies to support effective learning experiences.

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