
Breaking the Ice for Incoming Students

ANDREA CARLSON, SOONHEE FRAYSSE KIM AND NICULINA NAE

The present paper reports on the findings of an icebreaker conducted at NUCB in 2012. The activity was aimed at helping the incoming students familiarize themselves with the school and the teaching staff, as well as offering a glimpse into our communicative teaching method. The results and feedback from students and teachers are encouraging and suggest that such events may be beneficial for establishing a rapport between students and teachers before the semester begins, and could ease students' apprehensions related to communicating in a foreign language, with foreign teachers, in a completely new environment.

The Purpose

This activity had a number of purposes, among which were helping the incoming students know their teachers and their peers through participating in English communicative activities, and easing students' possible negative feelings and anxiety about learning in a foreign language classroom setting. It was also an opportunity for teachers to assess their students' English communication skills and prior learning (Adams & Nicolson, 2014).

Our students come mostly from high schools around the Tokai area (Aichi, Mie and Gifu Prefectures), but also from more remote prefectures (Akita or Okinawa), and very few are acquainted with their peers when they enter our program. Their English communicative competences vary widely, from elementary to upper intermediate. The Communication Department teaching staff comprises native and non-native speakers of English from various cultural backgrounds and with a wide array of research interests. Courses are taught mostly using the Communicative Language Teaching Method, and are centered around group or pair assignments and projects, peer interaction and communicative tasks.

In an EFL classroom, icebreaking activities are usually conducted in order to reduce students' anxiety and build confidence, which, as Yashima points out, is beneficial for increasing Japanese students' willingness to communicate in English (Yashima, 2002). The degree of attitude, anxiety and motivation may exert considerable influence on the learner's willingness and achievement (Yashima, 2002). In particular, anxiety in a classroom context can affect the attitude and motivation of L2 learners (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Bailey, 1983; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Clement, Dörnyei & Noels, 1994). According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, foreign language classroom anxiety is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz&Cope, 1986, p 128). The authors identify three kinds of apprehensions as being responsible for class anxiety. These are communication apprehension, social evaluation apprehension, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is directly related to the fear of the act of speaking, social evaluation refers to fear regarding how the subject's performance is perceived by their peers, and the test anxiety refers to worries about failing a test. Tsui (1996) found that

in Hong Kong anxiety in the English classroom manifests itself as the reticence of students to give answers to the teacher's questions unless asked to do so for fear of appearing boastful in front of their peers. Similarly, Japanese students seem reluctant to speak up in settings where they would stand out in front of their peers for fear of being negatively evaluated (Anderson, 1993). Kimura, Nakata & Okumura (2001) consider that teachers should find ways to promote a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and to create a better rapport with their students in order to minimize negative anxiety (p. 62). The ice-breaking event discussed in this paper proposed to solve not only classroom anxiety related issues, but also to ease students' transition from high-school to university life.

The Event

The icebreaker event was conducted several days before the beginning of the first semester of the 2012 academic year. All first year students and all the Communication Department teaching staff participated in the event. The schedule included a welcome from the Dean of the Department, followed by introductions of the faculty members, their research interests and country of origin. Then the groups proceeded to the Language Center building for the commencement of the icebreaker activities, which were organized around five stations, manned by two teachers each. The teachers wore nametags, which made it easier for the students to identify them and learn their names. The activities conducted in each of the stations were Gesture Game, Description Game, Who Am I?, Pictionary, and \$10,000 Pyramid. The stations were located in five of the classrooms where the freshmen would attend classes once the semester begins. At the beginning of the activity each student received a paper with the number of each classroom and the activity they would participate in.

The Instrument

Two pre- and post-activity questionnaires were administered to the students as a means of measuring their expectations and feedback regarding the perceived effectiveness of the icebreaker event. Moreover, a different questionnaire was administered to teaching staff after the completion of the event in an attempt to gauge the teachers' attitudes regarding the event.

The Students' Survey

Before and after the event a Japanese questionnaire was distributed in paper format to all of freshmen participating in the event. The survey contained fourteen items, each with a 5-point response scale (Agree, Rather agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Rather disagree, and Disagree), where 1 = Agree and 5 = Disagree. 118 pre-event questionnaires and 108 post-event questionnaires were returned.

The Teachers' Survey

An 8-item English questionnaire was distributed in paper format to the 21 teaching staff members after the conclusion of the event. The responses were on a 5-point scale and could range from 1 = Agree to 5 = Disagree.

We formulated the following hypotheses:

- H1. The students' perception regarding their own selves is more positive after the icebreaking activity.
- H2. The activity is effective for improving the students' attitude regarding their relationship with their peers.
- H3. The students' perception regarding foreign teachers is improved due to the icebreaking activity.

H4. The event is positively affecting the students' attitude regarding studying English.

H5. The event is effective for familiarizing the students with their school and department.

Results and Discussion

With regard to the Students' Survey, as shown in Table 1 below, the items in the students' pre- and post-event survey were grouped around five main themes: expectations regarding self, relationship with peers, expectations regarding relations with teachers, perception of the event and first impression of the department as a whole.

Table 1: Average points and t-values based on students' responses before and after the ice-breaker (English translation)

	Items	Before Average (SD)	After Average (SD)	t value	Stu. Evaluation
Self	1. I feel comfortable in this room.	2.23 (0.89)	1.56 (0.70)	6.35 ***	↑
	2. It is interesting to have new experiences.	1.41 (0.64)	1.27 (0.57)	1.77	↑
	3. It is interesting to solve a problem by myself.	1.99 (0.83)	1.61 (0.73)	3.67 ***	↑
Peers	4. I think I can be friends with the people around me.	2.29 (0.81)	1.54 (0.73)	7.56 ***	↑
	5. To communicate with other people is interesting.	1.72 (0.77)	1.40 (0.68)	3.35 ***	↑
	6. It is fun work as a group.	2.08 (1.02)	1.67 (0.79)	3.41 ***	↑
Teachers	7. I believe I can have good relationship with the teachers in this department.	1.80 (0.68)	1.43 (0.64)	4.21 ***	↑
	8. It is difficult to communicate with foreign people.	1.91 (0.99)	1.98 (1.09)	-0.54	↑
Event	9. Today's event looks interesting. (Today's event was interesting.)	1.91 (0.78)	1.21 (0.48)	8.18 ***	↑
	10. Today's event looks effective for studying English. (Today's event was effective for studying English.)	1.83 (0.74)	1.42 (0.63)	4.53 ***	↑
	11. It is interesting to communicate in English.	1.62 (0.71)	1.31 (0.66)	3.47 ***	↑
Dept.	12. The school seems interesting.	1.88 (0.76)	1.43 (0.69)	4.73 ***	↑
	13. I feel I can develop as a person in this school.	1.72 (0.81)	1.47 (0.73)	2.44 *	↑
	14. I feel if I learn in this school my English will improve.	1.53 (0.67)	1.38 (0.62)	1.73	↑

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

With the exception of items 2, 8 and 14, the differences between pre- and post- activity responses were significant from a statistical viewpoint, suggesting that the above mentioned goals were achieved. The responses pre- and post- event to items 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10 and 12 suggest an especially positive effect of the icebreaking activities. Thus, regarding the group of items referring to the students' perception of self (items 1–3), their responses pre- and post- icebreaker suggest that the event helped them to feel more comfortable in the classroom atmosphere, working alone or with peers. However, regarding responses to item 2 (It is interesting to have new experiences), students started off with quite high expectations (1.41), but their post-event feedback suggests that, although they were generally satisfied with the activities, there is no significant difference between their initial expectations and their impressions after icebreaker. Another possible cause may be the relative generality of the question, which might have been interpreted as not being strictly related to the event.

The second group of items (items 4 to 6) relates to students' expectations and impressions about group interaction during the event. The analysis shows statistically significant differences in the pre- and post-event responses, especially regarding item 4 (I think I can be friends with the people around me). The significant improvement in the post- values at item 4 indicate a shift from a slightly reserved attitude to a more relaxed disposition regarding their peers, possibly due to group or pair communicative activities.

The third group of items was related to students' views regarding foreign teachers (items 7 and 8), and produced contradictory results. Compared to their initial expectations, after the event more students considered that they could have a good relationship with their teachers (item 7). However, their belief that communication with foreigners is not facile did not change significantly (item 8), despite a slight improvement. The result could be explained by the cultural differences between Japanese students who come across as shy, passive and reluctant to speak using L2 or to challenge the teacher, and the expectations of foreign teachers, who value individualism, critical thinking and originality (Cutrone, 2009). The result may also reflect students' lack of English communication confidence and an almost unchanged degree of foreign language anxiety. Another cause could be the potentially biased nature of the questionnaire item, which may have negatively influenced the attitude of the students regarding foreign teachers.

The items related to the event (9 to 11) obtained statistically significant values. The high t-values at item 9 (Today's event looks/was interesting) indicate that although the students were slightly reserved at the beginning, they found the activities enjoyable and interesting. Likewise, the results obtained at items 10 and 11 show that the event strengthened the students' interest in studying and communicating in English.

Finally, items 12–14, regarding the department and the school in general, revealed that the students found the school interesting and good for their education (items 12 and 13). On the other hand, the lack of significant differences between pre- and post- icebreaker responses to item 14 (I feel if I learn in this school my English will improve), may be due to the fact that students may have come with higher expectations, which were beyond the “get to know each other” scope of the present event.

Judging by the above findings we can conclude that the five hypotheses were proved valid; however, there is a certain discrepancy between the relatively high expectations of the students and the limited goals and scope of the present event.

With regard to the Teachers' Survey, as shown in Table 2 below, the eight items of the teachers' questionnaire were divided into three main areas – self (teachers' personal impression of the event), group (how teachers felt about interacting with other teachers during the icebreaker), and students (effectiveness of the event from the teachers' viewpoint).

Table 2. Teachers' post-event survey

	Items	Average (SD)
Self	1. I felt comfortable in my role in this event.	1.52 (1.08)
	2. I enjoyed this event.	1.62 (0.92)
Peers	3. I think the event was a good way for us to work as a team.	1.76 (0.89)
Students	4. This event was a good way to get to know the incoming students.	1.67 (0.91)
	5. This event helped me to know the English level of the incoming students.	1.81 (0.81)
	6. I think this event was effective in helping students feel comfortable with their peers.	1.76 (0.83)
	7. I think this event was effective in helping students feel comfortable with their teachers.	1.67 (0.80)
	8. I think this event was effective in helping students feel comfortable in the Language Center.	1.52 (0.75)

Teachers' responses to these items were generally positive. Most teachers considered that the event was effective in helping students feel comfortable in the Language Center (86%), that the event was a good way to know the incoming students and help them feel more comfortable with their teachers (81%), and that it was a good opportunity for the teaching staff to know the English level of the incoming students (76%). However, a comparison between teachers' and students' post-event responses regarding whether they enjoyed the event (item 9 in students' questionnaire and item 2 in teacher's questionnaire) shows a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.995$, $df = 127$, $**p < .01$), with 97% of the students reporting that they found the icebreaker event quite enjoyable, whereas teachers were less enthusiastic, with only 72% positive responses. Moreover, one third of the teachers were not completely persuaded that the event was a good way for faculty to work as a team.

Concluding Remarks and Possible Questions

As we mentioned earlier, the overall positive feedback from students and teachers indicate that the event managed to ease some of the students' anxiety about communicating in English, and dispel some of their worries about relating with foreign teachers and peers. A number of questions and possible future tasks arise from the results of this study. First, given that the scope of the event is limited to communicative activities aimed at helping students and teachers become acquainted in a friendly and playful atmosphere, should more challenging tasks be included so that incoming students get a glimpse of what is expected of them during their four years of study? Second, it is necessary to reflect upon the fact that although the students believed that they could have a good relationship with their teachers, they continued to feel that communicating with foreigners was difficult. What are the best strategies to ease Japanese students' shy-

ness around foreign teachers? Third, is the relatively lower enthusiasm of the teaching staff for this kind of icebreaking activity an indication that teachers regard themselves as facilitators of the event, rather than active participants?

Perhaps when planning future events one should not only focus on students' satisfaction, but should also consider building teamwork among teachers, some of them new or lacking experience in working with Japanese students. Therefore, further discussions are necessary to identify the type of icebreaking activities to involve, interest and benefit students and teachers in equal measure.

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