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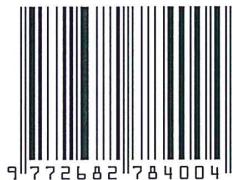
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AN INVESTIGATION ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ICEBREAKERS IN CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the importance of having ice-breaking activities in classrooms and how it can help learners to feel welcome and comfortable as well as it can provide them with a platform to initiate episodes of conversation with others who are first considered strangers to them. Argued by Dixon, Crooks and Henry (2006), icebreakers normally serve as early activities that participants in a particular group take part before any other social relationships could be developed as it could influence one's social presence in a particular setting. Thus, considering this notion, this paper examined the usefulness and effectiveness of ice-breaking activities to learners as part of their learning experience. There are 46 learners cum respondents had undergone three ice-breaking activities before they were asked to answer open-ended questions which are related to the significance of ice breaking and how the activities could help them to socialise and build appropriate network whenever necessary. The main goals of this study are to investigate the learners' point of view about icebreakers to unearth the types of information they usually provide when introducing themselves and to what extent ice-breaking activities can help them in their daily interaction in classrooms. The results, however, show that not all respondents felt comfortable and ready to break the ice with those whom they barely knew. Nevertheless, the data proves that to feel less anxious is important whenever the learners are required to engage in any of the classroom activities and this can be done through icebreakers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Many studies have found that learners easily develop fear when entering a classroom where they are required to learn something new and collaborate with new people. Knowing that classroom anxiety can be overwhelming for certain learners, they may experience learning barriers and classrooms no longer become an enjoyable space for them to engage in various learning activities (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014).

However, it is encouraging to know that classroom anxiety can be overcome effectively by using the right measure of icebreakers. According to Boatman (1991), a relaxed and comfortable learning setting can be achieved by using icebreakers where the activities have been proven to lower learning anxiety, enhance class participation and promote active cooperation among the learners. Forbess-Greene (1983) defined icebreakers as activities that

we usually do at the beginning of any working or educational session that can let the participants join in the program without feeling shallow or intimidated. Deering (2011) also explained that applying icebreakers on the very first day of class could allow instructors to identify the learners' common traits and ease the process of putting them in groups for any class activities. Using icebreakers in classrooms can progressively help the learners to take charge, foster positive teamwork and thus, meet all the objectives of every given task.

1.2 Objectives of the study

Looking at the benefits that icebreakers could offer, this study has three objectives to achieve:

- a. To examine the respondents' point of view about icebreakers
- b. To discover types of information the respondents typically provide during icebreaking activities
- c. To understand the trend of how icebreakers can help the respondents to establish rapport and promote teamwork with their classmates

1.3 Significance of the study

Since the benefits of icebreakers can be considered far-reaching, many educators have been relying on this strategy to facilitate learning and establish rapport especially among adult learners (Chlup & Collins, 2010). Thus, this study intends to investigate our respondents' general idea about icebreakers, information that they can provide during their class induction and their readiness to build rapport with their classmates. We believe that by conducting this study, we could gain insights about the usefulness of icebreakers from the learners' point of view and how it can assist them to reduce classroom anxiety, cultivate teamwork and develop rapport inside and outside of classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Icebreakers have been acknowledged as one of the useful strategies for people to start initiating conversation, promote active cooperation and build a network among them. Moon et al. (2013) extrapolated in their study that icebreakers have effectively assisted their subjects to develop solidarity and eradicate feelings of awkwardness when they must work together in a group for the first time. They believe that by using the appropriate type of icebreakers can promote intimacy which eases the process of blending in among the participants and in their study, they have used games which consist of many levels to foster effective teambuilding. In certain situations, particularly dealing with adults meeting other new adults, feeling estranged can be considered normal and familiarisation may consume a significant amount of time. Therefore, this study is trying to investigate if icebreakers can help, particularly learners in classrooms, to eliminate gaps, create a warmer atmosphere and foster active participation.

The benefits of using icebreakers in engaging strangers can be considered extensive and far-reaching. Bui (2014) found that icebreakers are useful to alleviate anxiety faced by the instructors due to the positive impacts it could bring in nurturing the relationships between them and the learners. Knowing the fact that it is normally difficult for the newly met learners to achieve full cooperation and understanding, he further argued that icebreaking activities are powerful to minimise the gap, relieve stress and to direct the learners to the right mood of learning. In the study, he conducted surveys to investigate types of icebreakers preferred by his learners which are also related to the information they were willing to reveal to each other. The results show that most of the participants favoured verbal to physical icebreakers and in any ice-breaking activities, they had a stronger urge to get to know their peers rather than accomplishing any required task. This proves icebreakers are useful to help developing bonds and rapport between participants. In another study by Hutasoit and Tambunan (2018), they

have discovered that icebreakers are beneficial to assist their students to feel more comfortable because it could create a conducive environment for learners and they finally achieve a successful classroom. The researchers created two groups i.e., control and experimental to investigate which group could perform better when icebreakers were used as a treatment to foster their speaking proficiency.

When applying icebreakers on children, Saniy and Sarwi (2020) unearthed that the activities could encourage young learners to develop their interpersonal skills. Physical activities like singing, jumping, and clapping hands are more common as icebreakers among children and this study have proven that these actions can stimulate the development of their interpersonal aspects. The children were found to interact more actively, and the icebreakers have also motivated them to be more focused on accepting instructions and able to comply easily. In another active learning research, Frey, Horton, and Somerville (2002) came up with an idea of using polystyrene boards to engage new learners at colleges to join hands in building activities. They had to work as a team to generate structures from the boards where many sessions of discussion had taken place before any constructions can be produced. The activity, according to the study, has inculcated powerful teamwork, sense of friendship as well as in promoting creativity skills among the learners.

It is also imperative for this study to highlight types of icebreakers that have been utilised by people around the world to create a more comfortable environment for strangers to engage in social activities. Icebreakers, which hitherto can be manipulated into many kinds of activities that suit the class or group and participants' purposes and objectives. There are many studies where researchers have developed various kinds of icebreakers to match the purpose of getting people to feel comfortable working together in a new environment. Yerigan (2008) has used Casual Answer Tool (C.A.T.) in her study as an icebreaker to promote active learning in the classroom. Many variations have been introduced and the main purpose of the activities is to mitigate stress and fear among the students. Casual questions like, "what is your favourite movie and why?" and "what do you think about this course?" have been found to encourage them to speak up calmly which inadvertently induced the other learners to do the same and this proves that icebreakers are viable to create a less hostile learning environment, especially to new students. Jarusriboonchai, Malapaschas and Olsson (2016), on the other hand, has developed a multi-player mobile game and the participants had to engage in a joint activity where they had to share some information about themselves. Even though the method used is completely different than the previous study, icebreakers are still considered relevant to help strangers to feel at ease, especially when they are required to cooperate for the first time.

Cheng, Rohall, Patterson, Le and Ikura (2009) justified the usefulness of icebreakers by inventing a system using networking devices and the participants can communicate on a common communication channel. The channel acts as a platform for any newly met people to communicate in sharing their different backgrounds, interests, and personal achievements. More interestingly, the participants were given opportunities to respond and ask questions should they need more information from a particular participant. The objective is made clear and it is to engage the strangers comfortably as well as for the participants to acquire insights about individuals' persona which may become their strengths or weaknesses in their future collaborative endeavours. Another creative invention can be found in a study by Kan et al. (2015) whose icebreakers can be found on the garments of the wearers. They introduced wearable computing textiles that are fully incorporated with electronics and circuits to act as a vehicle for the wearers to initiate conversations with others. The garments are designed to fit the purpose of opening interaction opportunities especially when people must attend any community events or gatherings and they have to meet strangers who may not know how to get into any small talks. This brilliant initiative proves that there are some unacquainted people may need a catalyst to ease their transitions before getting into any collaborative activities.

We have shown the benefits of icebreakers as well as the types that have been utilised actively for people to connect, particularly with new participants and in unfamiliar settings. At

this juncture, it is proven that the benefits are rather widespread, but we have yet to identify the research gap that this present study is trying to narrow. Based on the studies that we have presented, icebreaking activities are mostly conducted among strangers where they are required to reveal details about themselves and in certain situations, which somehow can encroach into their private matters like their past, likings, and family backgrounds. Taking our respondents' culture into consideration, this study is also trying to investigate our respondents' readiness to reveal their personal information. 40 out of 46 respondents in this research are Malays and the other 6 are Bumiputeras whose culture may depict the ways of some Asians perceiving icebreakers or limiting them in disclosing certain information about themselves. Li, Fox and Almarza (2007) made a study on international students studying in America who originated from Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Laos and the findings show that these Asians preferred to talk only when they were talked to. It has consequently led to a low number of conversational exchanges with their peers. The researchers described this as part of Asian culture that has caused discouragement in active class participation due to their quietness and reluctance. This study may relate to our respondents whose nature may be confined in typical Asian culture that whenever they are in a large group of people, they always prefer listening to speaking (Fu, 1995 as cited by Li et al., 2007).

Considering privacy from a culture point of view, Asian culture honours it as a social practice and this matter has been discussed by Li, Bronfman and Zhou (2017) that sensitive information should not be revealed arbitrarily which eventually may disgrace the family. This was elucidated in their study by highlighting the Chinese culture that they should always keep any shameful details with that particular family and it must not be shared with anyone outside of the family. This proves that privacy matters to many people in Asia and as Malaysia is also part of it, the influence may sustain significantly. Mathews (2000) also agreed with this research where she studied South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans concluded that the gesture of revealing or discussing any personal matters or issues with strangers can dishonour the family and it must be avoided to protect the family's reputation. Due to this limited access to disclosing details about oneself, it is fair to say that Asians have become less expressive even though in Japan, being quiet and having lesser things to say are considered virtuous and positive (Yamamoto, 2011). In this study, the researcher discovered that Asian children are much quieter as compared to their American and European counterparts and this is considered as a negative trait in American schools.

In this section, we can deduce that icebreakers serve as a potent catalyst to help participants engage in communication especially in group activities. However, cultural constraints may hinder the participants' willingness to break the ice with those whom they barely know. Thus, this study intends to investigate if our participants perceive icebreakers positively in connecting them with their peers or rather disrupting their privacy while they are trying to protect it.

3. ESTIMATION METHOD

3.1 Participants

This study has administered a survey form to 46 Diploma students which consist of 35 males and 11 females who are currently pursuing a Diploma in Mechanical Engineering in UiTM CawanganPulau Pinang. The students were selected based on their class groupings (prepared by the university) and no gender selection was made.

40 out of 46 of the respondents are Malays and the other 6 are Bumiputeras from Sabah and Sarawak. At the point of time conducting this research, the respondents were attending an English proficiency class in UiTM CawanganPulau Pinang and all of them attended other required courses in the same class grouping. Therefore, even though not all, many appeared to know each other quite well.

3.2 Tools and techniques

In the previous section, we have mentioned that we used a survey form for us to collect the data from our respondents concerning their perceptions about icebreakers. However, before that, there were also some substantial steps we had taken which were believed to affect the respondents' opinions and insights in answering the survey.

3.2.1 Ice-breaking activity

During the first week of our meeting, we conducted several ice-breaking activities to ensure the participants' familiarity as well as to gauge their knowledge about icebreakers. There were three activities altogether and all of them were conducted at the very beginning of their English classes before the lectures took place.

The first activity required the participants to do a simple introduction about themselves and explain about their likes and dislikes. They were given freedom of how and what to say but the content mostly revolved around the theme of this activity.

The second part (this section was conducted on the next day) required the participants to sit in groups of four and played an ice-breaking game named 'Would you rather and why?'. Sitting in a circle, each subject in every group was instructed to come up with a question of 'would you rather do this or that and why?' and the person next to him/her must choose one answer and justify it.

On the third day of the week, we conducted the final part of the activity which is considered more intimate than the previous two and it required the participants to engage in another ice-breaking game named 'Two Truths and One Lie'. The subjects had to brainstorm two facts and one lie about themselves and the others in that group must guess which of the statements given were true and not true. Bonding and engagement were highly expected in this particular activity.

3.2.2 Survey

We created a survey form to retrieve the participants' insights about icebreakers and there was a twelve-week hiatus from the previous session to answering the survey. There were 5 open-ended questions and no time limit was set as to ensure the validity of the answers. The participants were allowed to take as much time as needed and each feedback was considered confidential.

The questions in the survey form were constructed as follows:

- i. State the meaning of icebreaking.
- ii. When is it important to have an icebreaking session?
- iii. If you were given the freedom to let others know about you, what kind of personal information you would like to include as part of your icebreakers?
- iv. Why do you prefer to provide such information?
- v. Do you feel less anxious and ready to get into interpersonal relationships after an icebreaker? Why?

3.3 Analysis

The analysis of the data only looked at the feedback provided by the participants in the survey (this can be found in the next section). No further analysis was made on the ice-breaking activities that the participants had to undergo at the initial stage of this research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we are going to analyse the findings based on the questions given in the survey (can be found in the methodology).

1.1 Question 1: State the meaning of icebreaking

Out of 46 subjects, 44 of them appeared to understand the meaning of icebreaking by providing almost similar answers to define the term. Ideas like 'activities to get to know each other', 'to give a proper introduction about oneself' 'to be familiar with others' and 'a process of knowing others' can be found extensively across the data. Damara (2016) in her research has quoted Virgil and Varvel (2002) by explaining that icebreakers can be considered as tools and activities used by the instructors for the participants in a group to get familiar with one another. By referring to this definition, we can infer that the majority of our subjects were fully aware of the meaning even though they did not state any specific activities that can be carried out as apt icebreakers.

1.2 Question 2: When is it important to have an icebreaking session?

All of 46 students unanimously agreed that icebreakers are significant when they are in a new environment when they have to be with a group of newly-met people. Adjectives and verbs like 'new', 'first', 'introduce' and 'begin' are among the common descriptors found in the data to signify when is the appropriate situation to conduct an icebreaking session. According to Jenkins (2001), icebreakers are crucial before a relationship between learners and learners-teacher can be established as it can break the barriers between them and provide the general idea about the content of a particular event, course or lesson. We can surmise that all of our respondents believed that a set of induction (which can be done through icebreakers) is imperative before any activities take place in a classroom. This can ensure the longevity of social network as well as to promote cooperation between the participants in a particular setting.

1.3 Question 3: If you were given the freedom to let others know about you, what kind of personal information you would like to include as part of your icebreakers?

We have found that 39 out of 46 respondents have provided almost similar feedback to this question. Each one of them appeared to feel comfortable by not letting others know about them more than their names, age, hometown and hobbies. As a matter of fact, out of the 39 respondents, only 8 of them preferred to include hobbies as part of their self-introduction. Rachels (2017) discussed in her book that by making some parts of our life private to others could control how much intrusions that we want to have in our life. By applying this idea to the response that we have received, our students have decided to take charge of what to expose to others about themselves. In other words, many of them chose to protect their data and make it private.

In addition, we also would like to highlight the other 7 respondents (5 females and 2 males) who have given different responses to this question. These students added more criteria in their self-introduction which included likes, dislikes, goals in life, strengths and weaknesses. Assessing this carefully, it is fair to conclude that only 15.2% of our respondents believed that being open with those whom they newly met can help to develop positive relationships that can ease the process of learning and enhance familiarity (Preziosi, 2006).

1.4 Why do you prefer to provide such information?

From the data, we can see that those who preferred to disclose less personal information about themselves nonetheless wanted their social relationship with others to go further as it can ease the process of learning and completing any group work in the class. Although all of these 39 (84.8%) respondents preferred to only reveal their names, age and

hometown, interestingly, we have discovered that they enjoyed the idea of knowing others more and even vice versa. This can be inferred from the data when many of them used phrases like, 'I can know others better', 'to have stronger bond/relationships', 'others can know us better' and 'to ease communication'.

Besides fostering positive cooperation among classmates, the other 7 respondents have also explained the reason why they needed their friends to know about their likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses and it was mainly because they did not want others to breach their boundaries and sensitivities.

1.5 Do you feel less anxious and ready to get into interpersonal relationships after an icebreaker? Why?

We have received an undivided response to this question with 100% of the respondents said "yes" and agreed that icebreakers provided a friendly atmosphere when dealing with a new group of people. This is evident in Dover (2004) that icebreakers have the power to inculcate solidarity and help to shape a less hostile environment where the participants can feel more relaxed and comfortable.

However, 80.4% (37 students) of the respondents were reluctant to develop interpersonal relationships even though they had come together in an icebreaker. From the data, they have provided reasons like, 'I don't know if I can trust them', 'they need to know me better', 'they may lose interest in me if they know the real me', 'It's hard to believe someone new', 'I don't feel comfortable to be friends with someone new', 'New people hardly understand me' and 'I don't want them to judge me'. These responses signify that the learners may need more time to get familiar with each other before they feel ready to develop any personal relationships with their new classmates.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Implications of the study

It is imperative to highlight that we have managed to achieve all of the objectives of this study. Many studies (some are quoted in this paper) have found that icebreakers do provide ease to learners and instructors in classrooms even though Bui (2014) has emphasised that not all kinds of icebreakers can promote active learning because many factors may influence the success of the activities.

Our study has discovered that all of our respondents are fully aware of the meaning and the use of icebreakers. Being in a new environment and to work with new people, all respondents feel that they need icebreakers to get to know others and ease the process of doing work in groups.

However, despite knowing the fact that icebreakers can help the respondents to understand their peers better, some of them still prefer to practice caution in letting others know about them. This is proven when they refused to let their classmates know about them more than their names, age and hometown. Some of the respondents exhibited some sense of apprehension in disclosing their personal information which they believed should only be shared with those who were no longer strangers to them. Thus, we believe that icebreakers do act as tools to lessen classroom anxiety among them but we cannot confirm that through icebreakers alone, they are ready to build rapport and networking with their new classmates.

To conclude, particularly in the case of this study, our respondents need more group work activities before they can put their trust in each other and just like how Porras, Clegg & Crawford (2004) illustrated in their study, trust can only be materialised through repeated collaborations between people before they are ready to share any information openly. The respondents also have explained that icebreakers can aid the process of getting into teams and cooperate with their group members. With these results, therefore, we can see that our

findings generally coincide with most of the research about icebreakers and the positive impacts that they can bring, especially in educational fields.

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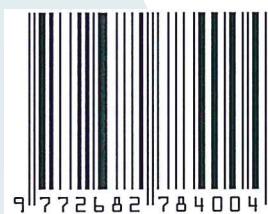
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