

Enhancing EFL Oral Proficiency Through Ice Breaking Activity: An Empirical Study of Motivation in Language Classroom

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Abstract

A classic problem in EFL speaking classes was students' motivation for classroom engagement in speaking activities. To overcome the problem, the researcher proposed ice-breaking activities to reduce psychological boundaries. The aim of this research was to prove whether or not ice-breaking activities were able to improve students' motivation, which directly influenced their speaking skill. This was empirical design research with a mixed method approach. The sample was taken by random sampling, which involved the first semester class of the English department program, containing of 23 students. The result was unpredictable since the improvement was not only occur in test score (10,38 points or 14,6%), but also questionnaire (4,18 points or 12,23%), and observation in phase 1 to phase 2 which showed students' behavioural improvement from negative (Shy, silent, talking to friends, etc.) to positive (Speak louder, pay attention, asking question, etc.). This research led to the conclusion that ice-breaking activity could strengthened students' motivation, improved oral fluency, and reduced affective obstacle.

Keywords: ice breaking, enhancement, speaking

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking proficiency has been a challenge for the EFL learners. The speaking proficiency remains a new benchmark for EFL that can be observed easily and directly. Speaking was usually used not only as a common measurement, but also as a direct way to check EFL English proficiency. Speaking determines the expressiveness of a person, and this skill is highly regarded for communicative purposes (Humaira, 2023). Furthermore, speaking fluency of an individual points to his or her overall competence in the language because speaking skill includes the correct use of vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, listening, pronunciation, etc, in a controlled manner which conveys meaningful ideas to others (Matin, et.al in Humaira, 2023).

Researchers have been investigating speaking among Indonesian EFL, and they found that English is not spoken extensively for communicative purposes (Winnie et al., 2023). This fact is a general issue among the English learning process in formal education. The students learn English in schools and colleges to get the scores for the examination, ignoring the communicative competence. This is the real problem that causes the absence of students' learning motivation. Research in second language acquisition has consistently demonstrated that motivation serves as the most powerful predictors of the language learning process, with speaking motivation specifically correlated with willingness to communicate, frequently for language use and ultimate oral proficiency outcomes.

The problem that commonly occurs in EFL speaking classes, as in this research, is that students are not motivated to speak, then later decreases their speaking skills. The motivation here is the core problem, since if the students are motivated, they will try to be brave in speaking, even though with mistakes. The motivation is a psychological boundary that leads to speaking skills becoming stuck and trapped. Here, researcher choose first semester students of the English department which their speaking skills is still in the same level as in others subject in university, and it is a pure condition of senior high school graduates. We have been facing a low motivation of students in speaking class, as they feel shy, unconfident, or underestimating speaking activities in the classroom, which leads them to unwillingness to engage with the speaking activities.

Researcher proposes a solution that the nature of language learning is better in providing a joyful environment to improve students' bravery and motivation. Later on, it can contribute to the students' understanding of the material provided by the curriculum (Rahmawati et al., n.d.). It is not only about students' willingness and confidence to speak but also about feeling capability, connected, and in control in the teaching learning process. Students are motivated when they meet three basic psychological needs, which include autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Creating a joyful environment, the researcher used ice breaking as an activity in improving learners' speaking motivation. Yet, the aim of this study is to measure the effectiveness of ice-breaking activity in improving students' motivation in speaking. Ice breaking is an activity for overcoming student tension and boredom in learning, so that the class becomes more enjoyable and conducive before moving on to the main activity. Students will learn more effectively in supportive circumstances than in stressful ones (Kasimova, 2022). Based on the speaking problems in eleventh grade, the researchers came to the conclusion that improving students' enthusiasm and motivation for learning was the best strategy to address these problems. Students who are motivated will study more diligently and learn enough material to solve their difficulties and improve them. Students' self-confidence will rise as their knowledge base develops, and they will experience greater freedom, challenge, and pleasure when speaking English. Researchers believe that ice breaking is an effective teaching method for resolving these problems.

Ice breaking activity

Ice-breaking activities have been used for educators, and it has been documented as an essential activity at the beginning of the study process. Ice breaking is also said as a technique that serves intervention to lower psychological barriers which it is an obstacle to language acquisition, so that it can develop the learner's linguistic system to

reach a comprehensive input (Krashen, 1985). Contemporary it has been proven in some previous research that ice breaking activity enhances communicative competence and release language learning anxiety in various educational contexts (Jamhurriah, 2023; Rahayu & Suharti, 2023; Saragih et al., 2023).

It is in alignment with (L.S. Vygotsky, 1978) sociocultural theory about how the ice breakers facilitate zone of proximal development experience by classmates' structured interaction that allows them to finish the classroom assignment through interaction and teamwork. Furthermore, the Vygotskian thought that the concept of mediation explains that there are cultural tools that mediate the communicative competence with social interaction among the learners. The simple way, the ice-breaking activity is applied in initial of the language learning process and the aim is to break the anxiety and relax learners' mind, so that their brains are able to absorb new knowledge and do the activity in a pleasant way.

Motivating EFL Learners in Classroom

Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) underpins this study by providing several theories about independence in speaking. Human were compared with ape in producing speech resulting in human speech being structured in the mind, having a purpose, and flouting out to get a solution. Direct manipulation is replaced by a complex psychological process that includes motivation and intention. It postpones the realization of speech and delays the oral proficiency. This process is absent in ape. The oral and intellectual development will occur when a human under the condition of independency and stimulus are converged.

The teacher's role in the classroom is crucial in making the converged of independency and stimulus because it is the dominant factor in creating learners' motivation. Motivation is the most crucial factor in the development of oral proficiency since motivational intervention contributes to learners' motivational self mind system (Wang et al., 2025). It shapes the learner's mind dimension into an ideal mood. Teachers' motivational strategies are crucially needed in building the mood that will affect on their behavior and attitudes in the classroom (Ye & Hu, 2025).

Ice Breaking Activities and EFL Learner Motivation in the Classroom

Research findings show that games and ice breaking activities are thought as a welcome break from routines and boredom in a language classroom. It helps learners in overcoming basic obstacle of fluent oral productivity, lack of motivation and inspiration, traditional learning methods, and the anxiety paradigm that English is difficult (Liu et al., 2021). Ice breaking activities are not only effective in creating joyful environment but also give a meaning and relevance to the learning material, let the learners find back their spirit, motivation, and focus. This happens when they come into boredom and learning fatigue that leads to loss of learning information, lack of willingness, and finally they fail to get the learning indicator (Fitria, 2023). The latest findings proposed by Eragamreddy (2024) find that students appreciate the ice breaking activities and they consider it as pleasant, memorable, original, and interesting, proving the effectiveness in assessing and improving students' speaking skills ability while creating a positive vibe in the classroom environment.

The application of gamification in the EFL language classroom influences the learners' behaviour, attitude, and responses in such positive emotions, provides an authentic learning environment and developing their comprehensive competence

(Zhang & Hasim, 2023). This not only happen in the classroom but also in virtual online learning, which shows that improving learning motivation through the ice breaker is able to create a dynamical learning environment (Hanggrahini, 2021). Managing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) by using ice breaking in English class for a specific purpose (ESP) has shown promising results since it can reducing anxiety and developing learners' confidence by changing them relax and become comfortable learners. They feel confidence in English communication during the exercises without pressure that they can express ideas freely without worrying about language structure and perfect pronunciation (Madden & Robinson, 2025).

Although ice breaking sounds promising for the learners, the failure of this activity may also occurs since the teacher must possess very strong motivation when they bring it in the activity. A teacher also must be flexible and sensitive to the class environment and students' situations. It means that teacher must be able to facilitate students' needs while making sure that ice breaking not only creates a cheerful atmosphere but also gives meaning and relevance to the material. The game in ice-breaking activity must be in correlation with the learning material, so the material can be optimally delivered without reducing the time allocated. The teacher also must show the importance of planned integration rather than using the ice breaking method as entertainment (Fitria, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

Design

This was an empirical design with mix-method approach. The empirical design (D'souza, 1982) was chosen because the needs of problem formulation, data collection procedure, and data analysis to find out the answer of general question of a process about how oral proficiency can be improved when learners have a motivation that was improved by ice breaking activity. Meanwhile, the mix-method approach (John W. Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2018) was implemented because the needs of instruments and data analysis.

Sample

This research was conducted in English Education Program of Sains Al-Qur'an University. The sample was 23 undergraduate students taken by simple random sampling technique. This technique allows the sample taken in random without considering the quality, so each has equal probability of being chosen (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Instrument and Data Collection

The data was taken by using test, observation, and questionnaire. Test was taken twice in the pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test, firstly, students selected an object from a paper contained of objects such as animals, things, characters, and places, then they described the object in detail individually the tell it in front of the classroom. The post-test provided similar activities, but the object was change by their friends. They were asked to describe about the physical appearance, identity, and personality. In this case, students had to memorize the concept because they had to describe the person without any written text. Students were trained to describe their friends spontaneously before.

The observation was conducted during meetings when ice-breaking activity was applied. Researchers used an observation checklist which include information on

students' learning interests, level of attendance, behavior, and habits during the learning process. Throughout the two cycles, the observation checklist is completed in accordance with the student's actual circumstances.

The questionnaire was given to the students before and after ice-breaking activity was implemented. Researcher distributed a questionnaire in the form of a Google link contained ten statements. It used 5-point Likert scale to categorize the judgement of students' answer.

Success Indicator

This research can be considered successful if both quantitatively and qualitatively met the success indicators. Quantitatively, the test score must be higher than 75. This score was used as an indicator based on the standard score achievement in the language education program. Meanwhile, the researcher determined that the class observation checklist received a score of 75% or above. Qualitatively it means that the student's behavior in learning was good and there was an improvement of their speaking motivation. In questionnaire, there was no persist amount of number achievement, but researcher would count the number and calculate the improvement, however it must be rise. In qualitative it was a generalization of students score improvement which indicated the improvement of their positive attitudes to learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Testing Speaking

The speaking test was conducted twice in the pre- and post-tests. Both have the same format, such as instructions and scoring criteria. The pre-test was conducted before the implementation of the ice-breaking activity, and the post-test was conducted after it. The instructions were the same as those for the first task, that is, students spoke in free description based on the picture provided. The picture has the same theme but is random in kind. This means that the themes (animal, thing, character, and place) were the same between the pre-test and post-test, but the kind for every theme was different. For example, in the animal theme, the pre-test provided horses, hens, monkeys, lions, and cats, while the post-test provided donkeys, zebras, gorillas, tigers, and dogs, and it also belonged to other theme patterns. The test scoring criteria was the average of 20-100 range score, and it was taken from pronunciation, fluency, idea, and grammar for each individual student. Then, after it was gathered the score was calculated by following this formula:

$$X = \frac{\Sigma}{N}$$

$X = \text{mean/average}, \Sigma = \text{total score}, N = \text{Students attendance}$
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There were 23 students, and 21 attended the pre-test. The students absent (S6 and S22) were not counted in the next research activity because it was impossible to measure the improvement without pre-test data; nevertheless, the students were included in the research activities for their improvement. The result was calculated by adding the total score and dividing it by 21. The pre-test score was calculated as follows:

$$X = \frac{\Sigma}{N}$$

$$X = \frac{1495}{21}$$

$$X = 71,19$$

The initial condition of students speaking proficiency can be recorded, and it is known that it had not achieved the criteria of a success score of 75. The Pre-test was conducted in the form of an oral test. Students were tested to describe an object provided without any guidance before, so this is a pure initial condition for students speaking proficiency.

The post-test showed better results for students' speaking proficiency. The amount score was 1584, resulting in an average of 81,47. This was calculated in the same way as the pre-test. Below is a comparison between the pre- and post-test scores.

Table 1. Improvement Score of Pre-Test to Post-Test

Mean Score	Pre-Test Post-Test	
	71,09	81,47
The Improvement	14,6%	

A substantial improvement was observed in the test score from 71,09 to 81,47. This proves that students speaking proficiency has also improved after the implementation of ice-breaking activities in motivational intervention. Quantitatively, it has been improved 10,38 points or 14,6%, a significant leap and meaningful in EFL learning context. Qualitatively, this result proved that ice-breaking with the game inside was able to reduce the psychological obstacle, increase the comfort, and improve students' engagement in the learning activity.

Qualitatively, there was a significant improvement based on the score, which was rose by 10,38 points. The general calculation of the standardized mean difference assumed an average deviation was 8-10 point (a common assumption in many studies); therefore, "d" can be in the 1,0-1,3, which can be categorized as very large. This means that the ice-breaking intervention not only significantly improved but also had a strong practical effect on the students' speaking skills.

From a practical implication point of view, the improvement of the test result not only proved ice-breaking activity as trivial matters but also as a right accurate pedagogical strategy. The average improvement proved that this intervention was consistently meaningful for all students with various psychological conditions. This could signal to teachers that routine ice-breaking activities at the beginning or middle of the learning cycle could strengthen students' motivation, improve fluency, and reduce affective obstacles.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to help researchers obtain more information about students' speaking motivation in the speaking learning process. The results of the questionnaire were tabulated, which was the process of changing the data collection instrument (the questionnaire) into a table of numbers (percentages).

The questionnaire consisted of ten questions, each with five response categories, to measure students' motivation in the speaking learning process. The questionnaire questions and response categories are as follows:

Table 2. Questionnaire Questions

Questions	Response Categories				
	1	2	3	4	5
1 I take part in learning activities seriously					
2 I actively ask questions during the learning process					
3 I always try to do the assignments given by the teacher correctly					
4 I feel free and brave to express my opinions during the learning process					
5 Learning English is very fun.					
6 I am happy when the teacher gives me praise					
7 I like working with groups to complete assignment given by the teacher					
8 I don't give up easily when I have difficulty learning English					
9 I know the purpose of studying English learning materials					
10 I am interested and apply to solve the English questions given by the teacher					

Score Category

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither/Nor Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

The questionnaire was given to students before and after ice-breaking activity was applied, and the result was calculated at the table bellow:

Table 3. Calculation of Students response improvement

Name (Code)	Before	After	$\Delta\%$
S1	28	40	42,86
S2	36	39	8,33
S3	29	39	34,48
S4	27	41	51,85
S5	27	43	59,26
S7	34	39	14,71

S8	21	46	119,05
S9	29	36	24,14
S10	27	40	48,15
S11	29	46	58,62
S12	31	40	29,03
S13	30	35	16,67
S14	39	31	-20,51
S15	38	36	-5,26
S16	39	34	-12,82
S17	40	38	-5,00
S18	50	21	-58,00
S19	41	40	-2,44
S20	37	36	-2,70
S21	45	30	-33,33
S23	25	38	52,00
Total (Σ)	702	788	
Average $\{\bar{X}\}$	33,43	37,52	
Improvement $\{\Delta\}$	4,09	12,23%	

The table shows an improvement in students' responses in the English teaching-learning process. Every response was improved from questions 1 to 10 before and after the implementation of the ice-breaking activity. This indicates that their motivation also improved. Motivation improved significantly after the ice-breaking activity. *Before*, there was middle down to relatively low motivation with a score of 20-35. This indicates that students may have felt unconfident, less interested, or did not have any strong personal reasons to actively participate in speaking activities. This changed after the ice-breaking activity was implemented, and the students' motivation improved significantly in almost every aspect, from their willingness to speak, their confidence, and their interest in trying to use English in communication.

In the After phase, motivation improvement was evenly distributed, even though it was drastic for some students, such as S5, S8, S10, and S11. This proves that ice-breaking can create a supportive learning atmosphere. The ice-breaking activity created a low-anxiety environment that influenced the students to be brave in taking linguistic risks. In educational psychology, ice-breaking decreases affective obstacles such as shyness, fear of mistakes, and lack of confidence, which can be obstacles in speaking activities. Besides, ice breaking with collaboration and language game were able to activate intrinsic motivation through curiosity, happiness, and an engagement of positive emotion that influences the students to be ready and driven them to engage with verbal activity.

The implementation of ice-breaking activities in the learning process showed significant improvement in motivation. The average questionnaire score improved from 33,34 to 37,52, or by 12,23%. It proved a student's positive affective enhancement, especially in their confidence, comfort, and preparation in speaking English. Ice-breaking provided a warm, supportive, and secure environment that directly contributed to oral participation and decreased language anxiety. Thus, the ice-breaking activity can function as an effective intervention at the beginning of the learning process.

A significant improvement in some students, such as S4, S5, S8, S10, and S11, showed that ice-breaking worked effectively, especially for students who possessed a tremendous affective obstacle. An easy and unthreatening activity psychologically influenced students to feel secure before they encountered a more complex oral communication assignment. Here, a joyful interactive learning activity were able to enhance their willingness to communicate through enjoyment and perceived competence improvement

Nevertheless, several students (S14, S16, S17, S18, and S21) experienced score decline, which proved that ice-breaking activities were not universally effective. This contrast response can be explained by individual differences factors, including interaction preference, learning orientation, and sensitivity to social pressure. The researcher found that anxiety developed when they had to deal with open or spontaneous social interactions. This proves that an effective approach to learning cannot be implemented by generalization.

In general, the questionnaire data showed that ice-breaking activities positively contributed to motivation improvement and students' readiness for oral communication in the EFL context. This activity made the classroom conducive, interactive, and cooperative. Nevertheless, the effectiveness depended on the uniqueness of the individual's characteristics; therefore, pedagogical adaptation was needed to obtain optimal results. Therefore, based on the questionnaire data, ice-breaking activities are still valuable to be considered as a part of modern language learning strategy integrated with affective, motivational, and communicative interaction.

Observing students' behavior

The observation was conducted at every meeting during the implementation of the ice-breaking activity and one meeting before it. The researcher gathered meetings 1 and 2 (1st phase) in one behavioral category and meetings 3 and 4 (2nd phase) in the other. Observing students' behavior in the classroom alone is not possible; therefore, the researcher asked the collaborator to take a footnote attached to every single student. The footnote was taken using the collaborator's words, and the data were in the form of qualitative. After the data were gathered, the researcher concluded that every student's behavior in a simple word indicated the actions or what they did during the lesson. This led to the qualitative data being simplified into single verbs or phrases indicating their behavior, such as pay attention, playing, talking, asking, doing assignment, taking note, speaking, focusing, being silent, and chatting. These verbs were a short way to describe students' behavior after it was simplified from the collaborator's field notes.

Table 4. Sample of Observation Guidance sheet

Name (Code)	Behavior Improvement		
	Before Ice Breaking	1 st phase (meeting 1&2)	2 nd phase (meeting 3&4)
S1	(+) Pay Attention, taking note, finishing assignment	(+) Asked teacher, show curiosity	(+) Asking questions, speak louder.
	(-) silent, do not speak.	(-) Speak in low volume	
S2	(+) Taking note, complete the task.	(+) Pay attention.	(+) Pay attention, asks question.
	(-) No questions, talking to friends.	(-) Don't want to ask.	

S3			
			
S23			

There were many affective obstacles before the implementation of ice breaking activities, such as S3 “(-) playing cell phone”, S4 “(-) Didn’t show enjoyment in learning, took long time in finishing the assignment”, “and S12 “(-) Didn’t pay attention and difficult to follow instructions. This shows that there was no engagement between students and their learning, low motivation, and social insecurity in the classroom. Based on previous research, these factors can increase the affective factors in language learning. In educational psychology, a basic initial condition such as relatedness and competence has not been fed yet, so students tend to be defensive, passive, and there is no engagement (Restianti et al., 2025).

There was transitional behavior after the first two meetings (phase 1), such as S1 who “(-) embarrassed in asking questions and silent” changed into “(+) asking questions and speak louder,” S8 who “(-) lack of confidence in asking the teacher and speaking in front of the class” changed into “(+) show interest in English, be more confident, and asking questions. This showed behavioral improvement during the learning process. The effect of ice-breaking implementation during the teaching-learning process was able to improve motivation in learning. Psychologically, this influenced the learning environment to be more secure (psychological safety), and students felt that they had the autonomy to speak, ask, and express ideas (Niken Elfayeni & Melani, 2025).

The Improvement was consolidated in Meeting 3 and (Phase 2). For example, S10 changed from “(-) Didn’t pay attention, taking too long in finishing assignments” became “(+) enthusiastic in learning and finishing the assignment on time. Another example was taken randomly, S21, initially “(-) not confident, shown lazy and sleepy” became “(+) more confident in speaking, and showed signs of enjoyment.” This behavior showed that there was improvement not only in attention and motivation, but also indicated a behavioral learning autonomy to be more adaptive toward their internal motivation. Students enjoyed the learning process, showed initiative, and finished the assignment on time. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan in Fellani, 2022) explains that when the needs for competition, autonomy, and engagement are fulfilled, intrinsic motivation increases. Ice-breaking not only creates a joyful learning atmosphere but also fosters cooperative conduct and controls the emotional climate in the classroom (Fellani, 2022) (Fellani, 2022).

Ice-breaking functions as an emotional mechanism that regulates and activates students’ social cognition in the classroom. The researcher categorized behavioral improvement into two phases. The first was in meetings 1 and 2, which was called the adaptation phase. Here, the students began to feel comfortable and open their minds to accept the learning concept and material. The second phase was in meetings 3 and 4, which the researcher called internalization. Here, students were able to articulate their ideas and finish the assignment on time. Thus, ice-breaking activities not only open the learning process, but also foster classroom belongingness, increase self-efficacy, and lead students to continue active participation.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of ice-breaking activities in two phases enhanced students’ motivation in the speaking class, which automatically improved their oral proficiency.

Motivation enhancement could be detected by looking at the questionnaire and observation data, which was supported by test data as proof of their enhancement in speaking ability. The mean score of questionnaires arose from 33,34 to 37,52, and which was counted as 12,23%. The observation data qualitatively showed an improvement in two phases: the adaptation phase (meetings 1 and 2), in which the students began to feel comfortable and open their minds to accept the learning concept and material. In the internalization phase (meetings 3 and 4), students were able to articulate their ideas, speak louder, and actively engage in the classroom. The ice-breaking in their behavior functioned as a social mechanism that activated social cognition in learning. Motivation was enhanced in both the questionnaire and observation data, and this was supported by the increase in test scores. The pre-test score was 71,09 increased to 81,47. It was improved by 10,38 points or 14,6%. It was a significant improvement since a common assumption of researchers allowed the standard deviation (d) 8-10 or 1,0-1,3. This means that students' oral proficiency in speaking skills was significantly enhanced.

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