

## USING ICE-BREAKERS IN IMPROVING EVERY FACTOR WHICH CONSIDERED IN TESTING LEARNERS SPEAKING ABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate a suitable integration of ice-breaker activities into upper-intermediate EFL learners to test their speaking ability. Ice-breaking activities require students to practice speaking English as a foreign language in more enjoyable ways and get positive result. However four factors of grammar, pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary are considered simultaneously. The actual classroom research was performed while teaching speaking through ice-breakers to 20-27 year-old-students of the American culture Institution of Erzurum Branch in Turkey in upper-intermediate level. According to the result of factor analysis and information gained from a descriptive analysis of each factor in pre-test and post-test, using ice-breaker activities has a positive effect in improving all four factors, but this effect for pronunciation and fluency is more than the effect for vocabulary and grammar. According to the results the most improved factor is pronunciation and the least improved factor is grammar.

**Keywords:** Speaking skill, Ice-breakers, Testing speaking, factors, English as a Foreign Language.

### INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the most demanding skill among English learners and over the past decades, increasing interest in different aspects of improving speaking ability has triggered a variety of investigations and theoretical discussions that have shed light on improving this ability. Icebreakers will be used in this study to improve speaking ability in adult upper-intermediate EFL learners. Ice breaking means breaking the ice among learners and using ice breakers encourages students to interact all together.

It is the time of internet and information technology, so speaking English has become so important and many EFL instructors and supervisors understand the essence of the speaking process. Learning to speak English fluently is important to most of the students. Thus, there are lots of demands from teachers to help students in

developing speaking ability. Using an appropriate ice breaker is important in an English language lesson because it organizes the students for being successful on many different levels.

According to Flanigan (2011), performing ice breaking activities in English class will direct students to the good mood of learning. Also appropriate kind of ice breaking activities will make students sure to get the most from their lesson and also, they will have fun.

This study will highlight different positive dimensions of using ice breaker activities and their effects in improving adult Turkish EFL learners' oral ability. It also will consider positive contributions of ice breakers in fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.

There are several empirical studies related to the beneficial effects of effective classroom activities on language acquisition (Busch, 1982; Day, 1984; Ely, 1986; Spada, 1986; Ellis, 1993; Pica, Lincoln- Porter, Paninos, and Linnell, 1996) and all of them proved the existence of a definite direct relationship between language learning and activities which result in successful oral interactions. Elly (1986) also, confirmed the direct relation between class participation and oral correctness. A major problem that language teachers face in the classroom is the difficulty in encouraging students to join the conversation (Beeb, 1983; White and Lightbown, 1984; Katz, 1996; Tsui, 1996). Research studies that have been done (Satto, 1982; Pica, Young, and Daughy, 1987; Chaudron, 1988; Tomizawa, 1990; Song, 1994; Flowerdew and Miller, 1995) pointed out that the problem of students' reticence in East Asian countries was more serious than their western counterparts. John and Hymes (1972), Sato (1982) confirmed cultural parameters as a factor in students' passiveness. Peregoy and Boyle (2001) by considering these problems stated that speaking like the other language skills has the same importance. They said that despite traditional methods that each skill was taught separately, now all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) appear simultaneously in every English class and EFL context.

Shumin (1997) explained that knowing grammar and vocabulary of a language is not enough for being able to speak that language. He claimed that language acquisition will be possible if learners interact with each other in a class environment. However, English has limited use in learners' real life and, it is difficult for them to speak English in the classroom appropriately. So, it is the task of language teachers to persuade students to use English for social interaction in classroom. For creating motivation in EFL context, teacher should maintain different kinds of strategies and activities for attracting students' attention and making them interested in the lesson. By this way, s/he can support and help language learners. Krashen and Terrel (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) mentioned that through interaction, students will be able to make their own easy and meaningful conversation. Then, communication and interaction lead students to use the language instead of focusing and talking about its grammar.

Celce-Murcia (2001) stated that activities must be student-centered and communication should be authentic, that means students must do an activity because it is interesting for them, not because teacher asks them to do. In addition, Peck (1978) summarized some factors that teachers must take into consideration. When the teacher chooses the communication activities, s/he must focus on meaning, collaboration and social interaction. An effective teacher encourages students to speak English inside and outside of the classroom.

Krashen and Terrel (1983) emphasized that rather than teaching and talking about the structure of language, we should focus on language use. Therefore, topics and activities in the classroom should capture students' attention and encourage them for making meaning and more interaction with each other. Brown (1994) confirmed that if interaction strategies play important role in intrinsic motivation of students and when they are closely connected to students' goals and interests, they would have a positive effect on students' speaking ability.

### **Evaluation of Speaking**

Researchers (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Kayi, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002) believe that speaking is an interactive process of making meaning and, for speaking successfully, learner must be successful in linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Henning (1987), Brown (2004), Farhadi (2003), Kitao and Kitao (1996), Spolsky

(1992), Nambiar and Goon (1993), Upshur and Turner (1995), Messerklinger (1997), and MacGregor (2000) said that assessing oral ability of learners' is difficult and time-consuming. They also agreed that reliability of subjective measure is very low. They all considered grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary as evaluation scale.

Another group of researchers Harris (1997), Rolheiser and Ross (1998), Brindley & Scoffield (1989), Saito (2003), Nunan (1988), Benson (2001), Rolheiser and Ross (1998), Blue (1994), Coombe and Canning (2002), Cassidy (2007), Chamot and O'Malley (1994), Bachman and Palmer, (1989), Ariaifar and Fatemipour (2013), thought that this formal kind of assessment is traditional and students cannot monitor their progress critically, so they suggested that learners' self-assessment is much better than that kind of linguistic assessment. Learners will be trained for self-assessment for this condition. This kind of assessment is carried out by learners. When students are able to assess themselves accurately then, they would be able to inform teachers about their own needs. Figure 1 was adopted from Rolheiser and Ross (1998) theory about self-assessment.

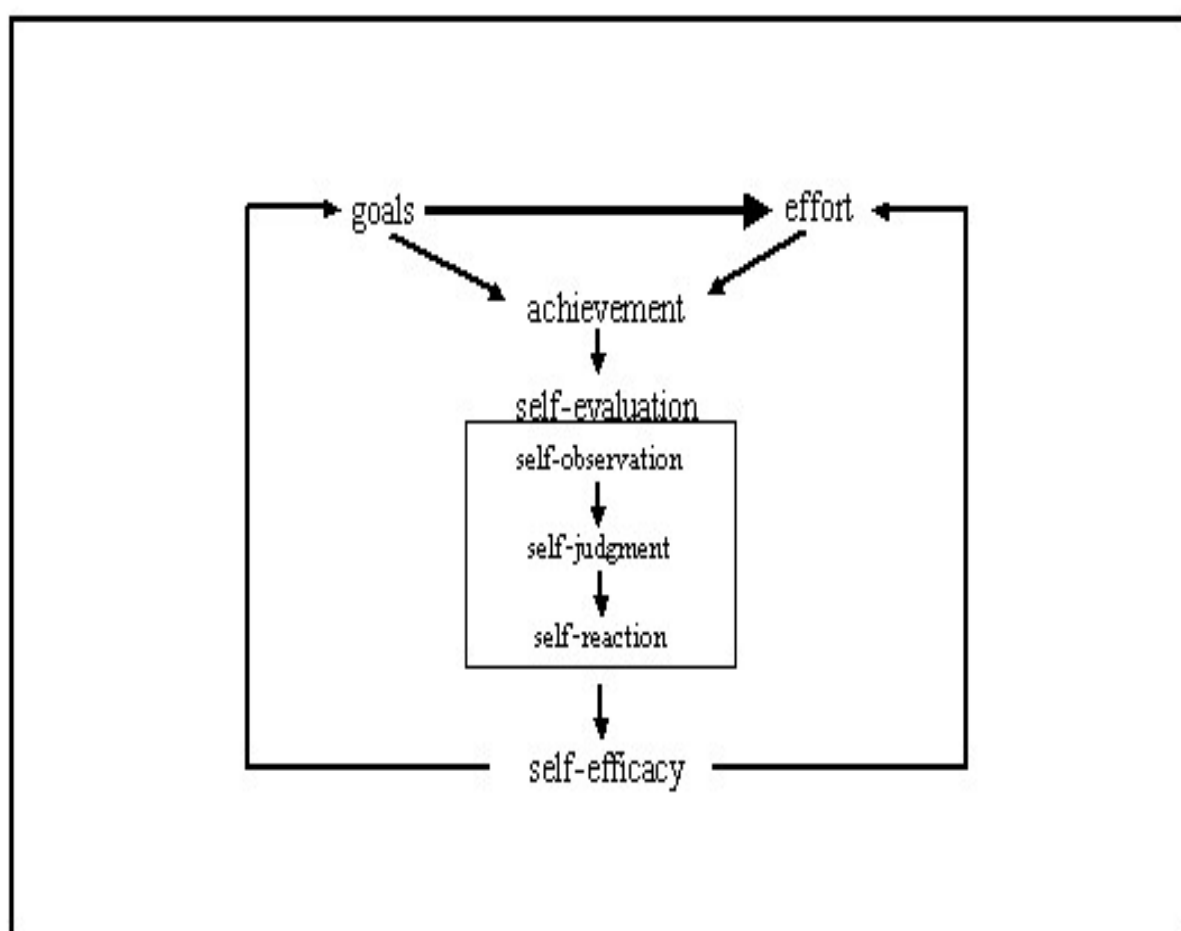


Figure 1: How Self-Evaluation Contributes to Learning

According to Rolheiser and Ross' (1998) theoretical model, students set higher goals and as a result commit more personal efforts. Blue (1994) believed that when learners would like more independence and autonomous learning, then they will be interested in self-assessment.

Another kind of assessment which was considered by some researchers is peer-assessment (Johnson & Rose, 1997; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996; Brown, 1998; Yurdabakan, 2011; Anderson, 1998; Yoshida, 2001; Stefanakis, 2002). In this kind of assessment, students judge the language performance of other student or students. All mentioned researchers agree that the most important advantage of this assessments is that students learn to

collaborate with each other. Anderson (1998) said that providing different perspectives for students is the most striking advantage of peer-assessment. Brown (1998), Johnson & Rose (1997), O'Malley & Pierce (1996), and Özdemir (2012) pointed out that peer-assessment causes development of metacognitive abilities, communication skills, student's confidence, and collaborative environment. O'Malley and Pierce (1996), and Yoshida (2001) claimed that application of this method also will create some problems such as unreliability and subjectivity. But, teachers should set criteria with students so that they could be more involved in activities. According to Stefanakis (2002), teachers must draw students' attention in multiple intelligence. Then students by promoting collaboration between themselves will be able to understand potential differences among themselves. Yurdabakan (2011) also noted a very important point. He said that students for doing peer-judgment at first must be able to do self-judgment.

In this study the researcher used formal assessment and sample IELTS test questions were used, but, it does not mean that she does not agree with other kinds of assessment.

## METHODOLOGY

This study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What factors can be considered in testing speaking ability of EFL learners?
2. What is the effect of using ice-breakers in improving every factor, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency that considered in testing learners' speaking ability?

Since real random selection of the subjects is impossible, the researcher made use of intact groups based on the results of students' previous general English test scores. Therefore, the design which can fit this research is the quasi-experimental design, besides pre-test and post-test pattern.

In the current study, ice breakers are independent variables and speaking is the dependent variable. Thus, the ice breakers' effectiveness, the amount of improvement, factors that can be considered in testing speaking ability, and effect of using icebreakers in each factor will be analyzed quantitatively by data analysis of pre-test and post-test.

### Setting and Participants

After administering the sample speaking IELTS test, on the basis of the result, 100 students, whose homogeneity was confirmed-were selected and considered as the experimental group. Coming from different departments such as Science, History, Literature, Computer Science and Civil Engineering, this group would attend English classes two times a week throughout the semester (about 18 sessions, 3 hours each session).

As it was mentioned earlier, there is a two fold purpose that will promote the present study. The main reason of this study is (a) to investigate factors that are considered in testing speaking (b) to study the effect of using ice-breakers in improving every factor; vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency.

Data for this study was obtained from pre-test and post-test. Then in order to do statistical analysis, the Lizrel software was used.

### Scoring Technique

The sample IELTS speaking test was given to the students to analyze their abilities on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. Analytical scoring of speaking which was based on "*Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices*", (Brown, 2004) can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Language Assessment

Aspects	score	Description
Vocabulary	1	Speaking vocabulary inadequate to express anything but the most elementary needs.
	2	Has speaking vocabulary sufficient to express him/ herself simply with some circumlocutions.
	3	Able to speak language with sufficient vocabulary.
	4	Can understand and participate with a high degree of precision of vocabulary.
	5	Speech on all levels is fully accepted.
Grammar	1	Errors in grammar are frequent but can be understood
	2	Can usually handle elementary construction quite accurately but does not have through or confident control of grammar
	3	Control of grammar is good
	4	Able to use language accurately and errors in grammar are quite rare.
	5	Equivalent.
Pronunciation	1	Errors in pronunciation are frequent but can be understood.
	2	Accent is intelligible though often quite faulty.
	3	Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb.
	4	Errors in pronunciation are rare.
	5	Equivalent to and fully accepted.
Fluency	1	No specific fluency description.
	2	Can handle with confidence but not with social situation.
	3	Rarely has to group words.
	4	Able to use the language fluently on all levels.
	5	Has complete fluency in the language.

Analytical scoring of speaking has four items and per item scores 5. So, the final maximum score can be 100.

#### Data Analysis

The first class of data in this research comprised of one group of scores which were got from 100 learners who took part in the study. These scores showed their general English proficiency level and were used for calculating homogeneity of data. Second set of data comprised of a group of scores which showed speaking ability of learners. In order to do statistical analysis, the researcher used the LIZREL statistical software. Scores of pre-test exposed that students in the experimental group statistically were almost in the same level and they had homogenous English speaking proficiency.

Then paired t-test showed the correlation between four factors considered in testing speaking ability (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency).

#### Homogeneity Test

Homogeneity test is a test for equality of variances and in LIZREL it can be measured by Levene's test. Löfgren (2013), pointed out that equality of variances can be computed for parametric and nonparametric statistical methods: Analysis of variance, ANOVA can be used for a parametric method and, Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis can be used for a nonparametric method.

Data of this study are normally distributed, therefore parametric Levene's test was applied for testing equality of variances.

In LIZREL, the parametric Levene's test (for normally distributed data) is built into the ANOVA procedure. So, the researcher ran the ANOVA. Tables, 2 and 3 show the results of one way ANOVA test.

Table 2: Oneway: Test of Homogeneity of Variance between Learners

PREVIOUS TEST SCORE

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.790	1	98	.376

Table 3: ANOVA: Previous Test Scores of Learners

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between <i>Learners</i>	67.240	1	67.240	1.362	.246

According to the parametric Levene's test, there must be an equality of variance. In this case, if the p-value was below 0.05, we could say that there is not equality of variances between learners, but according to Table 3, the p-value or sig is 0.246 > 0.05. So, there is equality of variances between learners.

As a result, a Levene's test verified the equality of variances in the samples of this study (homogeneity of variance) ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Martin and Bridgmon, 2012).

#### Factor Analysis: Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, and Fluency

For measuring speaking ability, different factors have been considered by different researchers, but as test questions in this study were chosen from sample IELTS speaking test questions, the researcher applied four factors of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency for scoring which was based on "*Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices*", (Brown, 2004).

In this part, researcher used paired sample t-test to measure the effect of using ice-breakers on each factor, before and after treatment. It is used to detect the difference between four dependent variables. So, Table .4, shows the correlation of each factor for experimental group in pre-test and post-test.

Table 4: Paired Samples Statistics: Difference between Four Dependent Variables

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	<b>Pre-test-vocabulary</b>	10.7000	100	2.02283	.28607
	<b>Post-test-vocabulary</b>	16.6000	100	2.35606	.33320
Pair 2	<b>Pre-test-grammar</b>	12.3000	100	2.51729	.35600
	<b>Post-test-grammar</b>	16.8000	100	2.42437	.34286
Pair 3	<b>Pre-test-pronunciation</b>	11.9000	100	2.45157	.34670
	<b>Post-test-pronunciation</b>	20.0000	100	3.35030	.47380
Pair 4	<b>Pre-test-fluency</b>	9.8000	100	2.66497	.37688
	<b>Post-test-fluency</b>	17.7000	100	3.06561	.43354
Pair 5	<b>Pre-test</b>	44.7000	100	6.88165	.97321
	<b>Post-tests</b>	71.1000	100	7.51122	1.06225

Table 5: Paired Samples Test of Four Dependent Variables

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Pair 1 <b>Pre-test-vocabulary-post-test-vocabulary</b>	-5.90000	3.45378	.48844	-6.88155	-4.91845	-12.079	49 .000	
Pair 2 <b>Pre-test-grammar-post-test-grammar</b>	-4.50000	1.82108	.25754	-5.01754	-3.98246	-17.473	49 .000	
Pair 3 <b>Pre-test- pronunciation -post-test-pronunciation</b>	-8.10000	2.65153	.37498	-8.85356	-7.34644	-21.601	49 .000	
Pair 4 <b>Pre-test- fluency -post-test-fluency</b>	-7.90000	2.49285	.35254	-8.60846	-7.19154	-22.409	49 .000	
Pair 5 <b>Pre-test-post-test</b>	-26.40000	5.89361	.83348	-28.07495	-24.72505	-31.674	49 .000	

According to the result of mean scores on Table 4. and 5., using ice-breaker activities had positive effect in improving all four factors, but the amount of improved scores for pronunciation and fluency were more than vocabulary and grammar. According to the results the most improved factor was pronunciation and the less improved factor was grammar.

Vocabulary mean= 5.90

Grammar mean= 4.50

Pronunciation mean= 8.1

Fluency mean= 7.9

The results of paired sample t-test were significant;

$p < 0.05$ , and

Vocabulary:  $t = -12.079$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p = .000$

Grammar:  $t = -17.473$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p = .000$

Pronunciation:  $t = -21.601$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p = .000$

Fluency:  $t = -22.409$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p = .000$

According to the above mentioned statistical information, it could be concluded that there is significant increase in all four factors of experimental groups' post-test scores. So, in this part again, the positive effect of using ice-breaker activities in improving upper-intermediate level students' speaking ability was proved.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There have been a few studies in Turkey about the effect of some kinds of ice-breakers on learning skills of children. But, there has been no research done, at least in Turkey, to examine the effect of ice-breaker activities on EFL adult learners. The reason, maybe, is related to teachers' or students' character and/or teaching or other local restrictions.

The main objective of this research was to learn the effect of ice-breaking activities on four factors, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. To verify this and to answer the submitted research questions, participants, after homogenization, were selected and ice-breaker activities were applied in the group during the semester. The results indicated considerable difference between the mean scores of the participants in pre-test and post-test. So, according to the results, performance and the amount of improvement of speaking ability of students are better and it may answer the research questions positively.

According to the result of factor analysis and information gained from a descriptive analysis of each factor in pre-test and post-test, using ice-breaker activities had a positive effect in improving all four factors, but this



effect for pronunciation and fluency was more than the effect for vocabulary and grammar. According to the results the most improved factor was pronunciation and the least improved factor was grammar.

According to the results of this study, it can be put in forward that using ice-breakers facilitates the communication among learners and is a good way for skipping from language barriers. As a communication strategy use of ice-breakers makes oral communication among students more easily and by suppressing the problem of linguistic knowledge of silent learners supports their attention and develops the communication among them.

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