

Using an innovative icebreaker in EFL classes to assess and enhance students' speaking competence

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 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.25411>

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Received: 16/09/2024

Revision: 14/02/2025

Accepted: 17/02/2025

Online: 01/03/2025

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Icebreaker, speaking competence, strategic competence, classroom climate, English as a foreign language, Innovative learning

Icebreakers have proved advantageous to the foreign language (L2) classroom. However, there is no known documented research on the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker activity in L2 classes. This study seeks to conduct initial research on its incorporation. The authors sought to ascertain learners' and instructors' perceptions of this icebreaker in L2 contexts. Eight undergraduate students of Applied Foreign Languages learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and their instructor at Clermont Auvergne University participated in the study. Data were collected via an Instagram poll and the instructor's checklist and observation notes, which were analyzed through the qualitative method. Major findings show that students appreciated the icebreaker and considered it entertaining, memorable, original, and engaging. The instructor found that the icebreaker preliminarily evaluated the learners' linguistic (speaking) skills. However, toilet paper as an apparatus in this icebreaker may raise concerns of potential cultural sensitivity; therefore, the instructor should be mindful of the socio-cultural learning context. In this article, the authors highlighted the benefits and concerns of using this icebreaker and ways to lessen or overcome possible challenges.

Introduction

Creating a positive, safe, and stimulating classroom climate is of utmost importance to foreign language (L2) teachers. Chiu (2021) agrees that a positive classroom climate can lead to increased student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. A positive classroom environment is essential because many L2 learners come from different backgrounds, and many are taking on a language that is completely new to them, which can cause much anxiety and fear. Tuong (2022) states that "because mastering speaking is the first aim of students when studying a language, it is crucial to discover how to assist students in improving their speaking" (p. 100). In fact, as everything is 'communicative' nowadays, effective language learning

should focus on conversation (Vo, 2022). Dinh (2023) highlights that individual speaking exercises improve students' vocabulary vastly.

The teacher, whether novice or experienced, often contemplates how to stimulate learners' interest in the L2 from the first day of the class, especially if they are meeting a completely new cohort. Teachers play an indispensable role in the course of teaching and learning (Tianjuan, 2019). However, a principle that is sometimes ignored is that interpersonal competence and pedagogical competence are interrelated; that is to say, a teacher who has a good rapport with their student and one who teaches well has a strong possibility of maintaining a positive classroom climate. Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2010) posit that a good rapport is built and a positive classroom climate is created when both instructors and students co-construct a learning environment that encourages active student participation. Ellis (2004) notes that the development of a good rapport and a positive classroom climate have been associated with positive student outcomes, such as promoting student motivation and weakening student apprehension. Additionally, engaging in rapport-building behaviors has positively influenced students' opinions of instructor credibility and students' evaluation of instruction (Schrodt et al., 2006).

One way to engage students and stimulate their speaking and general interest in the L2 learning process is by using icebreakers. Yeganehpour (2016) defines an icebreaker as a tool that involves media, physical activity, and brainteaser activities that can be a good way to break the ice in the language classroom. For Dove (2004), icebreakers are "discussion questions" or "interaction activities" that can be used to help students learn to speak easily and enjoyably. He believes the primary goal of icebreakers is to develop an environment that decreases students' anxiety and "breaks the ice" between learners while learning with fun activities. As for Pillai (2007), icebreakers help new and shy students to strike a conversation by developing interpersonal, communication, and team-building skills, breaking cultural barriers among students, promoting a sense of trust and friendship among them, and encouraging and preparing them to learn by stimulating their minds and/or their bodies.

In the L2 context, all language skills are important, including speaking, which helps boost learners' confidence. Knowing grammar and vocabulary is simply not enough; interaction is essential; hence, instructors should create fun activities to promote a positive learning environment in which students can enhance their confidence and speaking skills (Rozali & Amin, 2019). Icebreakers have been used widely in training and professional development contexts to foster a positive work environment and build public speaking and interpersonal skills. However, not much-documented research is available on the potential of using icebreakers in L2 classes. Few studies, such as Astutii et al. (2020) and Yeganehpour and Takkac (2016), provide insights into the positive effects of icebreakers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, primarily concerning pronunciation and fluency. Nevertheless, these studies lack specific details on the types of icebreakers used. Consequently, research is needed on how specific types of innovative icebreakers influence L2 students' language development and classroom climate. In this light, this paper seeks to ascertain the impact of icebreakers on classroom climate and speaking skills in (EFL) classrooms.

Literature review

Nowadays, there exists a plethora of activities and exercises available to L2 instructors in their quests to make learning more fun and engaging. These include gamified tools, such as Kahoot! (Madden, 2022a) and interactive live worksheets (Madden et al., 2023), quizzes, and Jeopardy, among many others. However, L2 educators are constantly in search of diverse methodologies and strategies that they can employ to have the best learning outcomes possible, especially given targeted objectives. Icebreakers can bridge this gap, especially as it concerns the development of speaking skills. Although icebreakers have been used in L2 classes for many decades, limited documented experiences of their impact on learners in the L2 context remain. The notion of icebreaker derives from 'ice,' which means rigid, cold, and hard nature, and 'breaker,' which means to solve. In a literal sense, an icebreaker is an "ice breaker". Therefore, an icebreaker can be interpreted as any attempt "to break or melt the atmosphere that is rigid as ice to become more comfortable flowing and relaxing" (Astuti et al., 2020, p. 211). Icebreaking is an activity that can be utilized to solve the tension and saturation of students in learning, which will help the class become fun and more conducive to learning before entering into the core activities. Compared to a tense situation, a friendly and conducive classroom situation will be more effective in helping students achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Definitions and characteristics of icebreakers

Forbes-Greene (1982) describes icebreakers as “tools” that can be used in fostering interaction among learners, thereby encouraging “creative thinking”, discussing important assumptions, explaining new topics, and elaborating on specific information. Varvel (2002) highlights that icebreaking activities help learners ease into larger group settings, while Wright (1999) states that icebreakers open communication among students as well as between teachers and students. Crowl (2024) notes that icebreakers help establish the course's tone, signaling to students that they will be expected to participate actively throughout, and initiating the process of building community in the classroom. Therefore, by creating a sense of belonging and mutual support, “icebreakers can contribute to a positive classroom climate and enhance students’ motivation and commitment to learning” (Dansou et al., 2024, p. 977).

Icebreakers, also known as ‘warmers’ in some contexts, can take various formats, such as games, short stories, and guessing. This activity is usually done at the start of a class or a training session and is often completed within five to 15 minutes. However, Sasan et al. (2023) establish that icebreakers should be dynamic and simple to satisfy students' need to develop an appropriate social relationship with peers and teachers and preview the classroom event's style and content. Numerous studies highlight principles common to icebreakers: simple, non-threatening, open-ended, relevant, and energizing (Hoseini Shavoun et al., 2024; Fitria, 2023; Şat et al., 2022). Yeganehpour (2016) provides descriptors of the aforementioned principles:

- Simple: The materials or activities must be simple. In the L2 classroom, the instructor must know the learners' needs and abilities before the instructional process begins. Simple or authentic materials are more understandable than complex ones.
- Non-threatening: No punishment should be associated with the outcome of

students' responses or participation.

- Open-ended: This considers the extent to which the instructor creates a conducive classroom climate, as evidenced by students' participation, reactions, and motivation.
- Relevant: The activity used in the learning process should be related to the specific objectives to be achieved.
- Energizing: The icebreaker should excite and increase students' energy by engaging them in physical, creative, or mental activity.

Mepieza (2023) and Şat et al. (2022) underscore that the instructor should consider the objective, audience, time management, and classroom control when designing an appropriate icebreaker in the classroom. In reality, there is a correlation between students' success and how well the instructor breaks the ice. From this perspective, EFL and L2 teachers, in general, should pay more attention to the methodology they can use in their classes and try to diversify their teaching strategies.

Advantages of icebreakers

Astuti et al. (2020: 211) cite several benefits of using icebreakers in the classroom, such as eliminating boredom, anxiety, and fatigue because students can get away from the regular routine of the lesson by doing free and cheerful activities. Other advantages include training creative thinking and broadening students' cognitive capacity, developing collaborative and interpersonal skills, promoting problem-solving skills, increasing confidence, practicing concentration, and thinking spontaneously. Patil (2020:3) outlines some advantages of icebreakers in the language-learning process. They are intended to:

1. make learners familiarize themselves with each other in the target learning group.
2. optimize the value that each learner brings to the group.
3. help learners relax and enjoy themselves.
4. help learners get motivation through group assistance and collaboration in learning foreign language.
5. help learners overcome individual fear.
6. enable learners to practice the L2 without being fearful of failure or feeling judged.

To this list, Johnson (2012) adds that an appropriately planned academic icebreaker can enhance critical-thinking skills, establish a cooperative classroom and promote cooperative behavior, develop positive teacher-student rapport, engage economic, social, and cultural boundaries, and create positive attitudes toward school and learning. Additionally, a well-designed icebreaker helps to quickly assess students, their current skill or knowledge levels, and their attitudes toward the teacher and the learning environment (Dhuhria, 2020). Kavanagh et al. (2011) suggest that icebreakers can also contribute to the development of cultural awareness and tolerance, breaking down barriers, and overcoming separation and loneliness. These benefits indicate that icebreaking activities can be effectively used in the L2 classroom to stimulate

learning as they provide a medium through which instructors can transmit knowledge in unorthodox ways to give variety to the classroom experience.

Findings from recent studies conducted on icebreakers

Dansou et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study involving eight English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and 54 EFL learners in a Beninese context, which focused on the effectiveness of icebreakers in managing foreign language anxiety (FLA) in the L2 classroom. Findings indicate that icebreakers are a valuable and effective strategy to achieve this objective, and well-designed icebreaker activities create a positive and inclusive learning environment, fostering a sense of community among learners. Additionally, icebreakers help to boost learners' confidence in the target language, which leads to reduced anxiety and an increased willingness to speak, thus leading to a supportive classroom atmosphere. This corresponds with Eragamreddy's (2024) study, conducted at a Libyan university, which found that icebreakers significantly increased students' desire and readiness to communicate orally in English.

A 2023 study conducted by Sasan et al., which examined the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation in a senior high school in the Philippines, revealed that icebreaker activities can positively impact student engagement and participation. Qualitative analysis suggests that students felt a greater sense of community and connectedness with their peers, an increased atmosphere and mood, and an increased willingness to participate and engage in class discussions. Furthermore, icebreakers provide opportunities for learners to develop important social, communication, and team-building skills. This aligns with findings from Abbas et al. (2022), who found that icebreakers significantly influenced student engagement, primarily among initially disengaged learners. Kristin et al. (2022) equally found that icebreakers increased student participation in the classroom, highlighting that those who participated in icebreaker activities at the beginning of a course were more likely to be consistent in class discussions throughout the semester.

Findings from an experiment conducted by Astuti et al. (2021) at an Indonesian high school in which 32 grade seven female students participated, revealed that icebreakers helped to increase students' motivation and interest in English and boost their academic performance. In another study conducted by Dhuhria (2020) at an Indonesian high school in which English language teachers participated, findings suggest that icebreaker activities are important to attract students' attention, establish good interaction between students and teachers, increase academic performance and language skills, especially speaking, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as well as motivation.

Specifically concerning speaking competence, Sari et al. (2023) reported on a study on the implementation of an icebreaker technique toward students' speaking skills in English language teaching at an Indonesian junior high school. Teachers reported that they used icebreakers such as brainstorming, burning questions, guessing words, sharing experiences, and quizzes to motivate and train learners to participate orally in class and motivate them to stay engaged. Findings also showed that students' speaking skills improved in components such as comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Hariati (2018) contributed to the list of icebreakers in L2 contexts, adding that the use of 'Two Truths and A Lie' helped

to improve students' speaking competence in EFL after their pre-and post-test results were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. Similarly, Saha and Singh (2021) shared findings from their study on the development of speaking skills through language games, including icebreakers, in technologically deprived EFL classrooms in an Indian context. The results showed a positive change in the classroom climate as opportunities were provided for grade seven learners to practice and improve their English-speaking skills. Likewise, Alamsyah (2017) documented results from a junior high school context in Indonesia, involving pre-test and post-test. Results showed that icebreakers were effective in enhancing students' speaking skills in areas of accuracy and fluency in L2 English when a comparison was made between their pre- and post-test grades.

As seen in the literature, the data related to using icebreakers in L2 classes is limited in terms of content, methodology, and geographical diversity. Very few studies provide examples of the types of icebreakers used in L2 classrooms, and only one study spoke to the impact of a specific type of icebreaker – 'Two Truths and A Lie'. This shows a gap in specificity, which calls for studies to deliberately focus on the interplay between particular icebreakers and the development of learners' L2 speaking skills. Additionally, most of the studies adopted a quantitative approach, examining pre-and post-test scores, which invites research to be done using the mixed-method or qualitative approach. Furthermore, most studies are situated in a certain geographical location with learners of similar cultural backgrounds; therefore, research is limited to using icebreakers in L2 contexts with students operating in a multicultural setting. This study is positioned to explore an innovative and specific icebreaker in a multiracial context, which will provide insights to serve the L2 community.

Theoretical frameworks for icebreakers

Numerous theories were researched and found to support icebreakers' use in L2 classes; these include behaviorism, cognitivism, social constructivism, self-determination theory (SDT), and theory of motivation, as summarized in Table 1. Behaviorism invites the instructor to encourage the learners to participate in the icebreaker and offer positive reinforcement where applicable. Positive reinforcement is the offering of the desired rewards or sought-after stimuli to elicit expected behavior (Ghafar, 2023). Cognitivism promotes students' metacognition and problem-solving skills (Muhajirah, 2020). Therefore, icebreakers can allow students to think about their thinking (Flavell, 1979) and work collaboratively to solve problems, which supports the theory of social constructivism; this theory supports that students develop knowledge and learn through social interactions (Kent & Rechavi, 2020). Icebreakers are designed to facilitate social interactions among students, which may lead to increased engagement and participation. Lev Vygotsky posited that learners experience development on two levels – first on a social level (interpsychological), followed by the individual level (intrapyschological) (Kukla, 2013). Vygotsky also spoke of the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD], which describes a learner achieving the next (higher) level of development through collaborative learning facilitated by either peers who are more competent or with a more knowledgeable other such as an adult (Shabani et al., 2010). The goal of ZPD is to allow students to collaborate to complete a task that is slightly above what they can currently complete independently. After this collaborative learning experience, they should be able to complete the task independently. Icebreakers allow

students of diverse backgrounds to work together and learn from each other. Albert Bandura's theory of social learning supports Vygotsky's social constructivism theory. According to Bandura (1978), people learn and develop through observing the behaviors and attitudes of others, along with the results or consequences of the observed behaviors. Through icebreaking activities, students can learn from each other. Concerning SDT, it claims that learners have three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, learners experience enhanced motivation, well-being, and growth. Otherwise, it can lead to diminished motivation and psychological distress (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Icebreakers may promote these feelings by giving students a sense of control over their learning and creating a sense of belonging in the classroom. Ryan & Deci (2017) further highlighted in their book that SDT distinguishes between different types of motivation: intrinsic motivation (engaging or participating in activities because they are enjoyable and without reward or external consequence) and extrinsic motivation (engaging or participating in activities for the reward or consequence that are associated). This is in harmony with Gardner's theory of motivation, which states that motivation is the eagerness when one individual learns a new language and the satisfaction experienced in that activity (Gardner et al., 1979). Apsari (2014) states that motivation plays a vital role in reading an L2. Thus, motivation determines the success of learning. Icebreakers are pedagogical tools that can influence students' motivation to learn and improve their language skills. However, there are noticeable gaps in the literature concerning the use of specific and innovative icebreakers in L2 pedagogy that could improve students' speaking competence and overall classroom climate. Although icebreakers contribute to collaboration and communication through social constructivism, insufficient data speaks to their usage in multilingual and multicultural contexts and their potential to impact intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions serve as a guide:

1. What are students' perceptions of the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker in the EFL classroom?
2. What lessons can teachers take away from the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker in the EFL classroom?

Table 1.

Theoretical contributions of Icebreakers to L2 classes

Contribution of Icebreakers	Primary Features	Underpinning Theories
Collaboration	-foster a sense of community and trust -create an avenue for effective community -build a supportive learning atmosphere where learners feel more connected and willing to work together	-Social constructivism -Social learning theory -Self-determination theory
Communication	-foster an environment where learners can practice their language skills in a low-pressure and non-judgmental setting -improve learners' communicative abilities -promote speaking and listening in a non-threatening environment -offer opportunities to communicate and interact with peers, improving their fluency and confidence in using the target language	-Behaviorism -Social constructivism
Critical thinking	-offer opportunities to solve the problem -promote metacognition	-Cognitivism
Participation	-create a comfortable, engaging, and safe classroom climate -encourage learners to participate actively	-Motivation theory -Behaviorism

Methods

This study employed the exploratory qualitative content analysis approach to ascertain students' perceptions of the 'How much do you use?' icebreaker in EFL classes and the teachers' takeaways from the pedagogical tool. An Instagram survey and observation notes were used as data collection instruments.

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study comprised eight undergraduate students (7 females and 1 male) from Applied Foreign Languages and English specializations from Clermont Auvergne University (UCA), who took a 10-week spoken English course, which explored everyday topics and current affairs issues with the aim of building oral competence and confidence in English. Their ages ranged between 18 and 23 years, and they were between B1 and B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The participants were chosen via convenience sampling due to the time frame in which the data was collected. Rahi (2017) states that convenience sampling describes the data collection process from a research population that is effortlessly reachable to the researcher. The 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker was used in the semester's first class as a Getting To Know You activity and for the instructor to obtain an initial perception of students' speaking competence and interests.

Below are the steps used to conduct the icebreaker. These steps are modifiable based on different contexts.

How Much Do You Use?



1. Take sufficient rolls of toilet paper to class.
2. Have students sit in a circle or semi-circle based on the configuration of the classroom.
3. Remove the toilet paper from its hidden container and ask students to identify it. (In principle, everybody knows what toilet paper is.)
4. Ask students a few questions to build suspense but ease any tension: Do you use it? What brand/color do you use? How much does it cost?
5. Pass the roll of toilet paper around and tell the students to take how much they use. (Many may take only one or two squares; however, inform them of the impracticality of taking very few plies. Some will even say the amount is dependent on the context in which the toilet paper is being used. Tell them to think about a worst-case scenario.)
6. After everyone has taken their portion, ask them to hold up the quantity. If the instructor believes a student has too few plies, they can encourage the student to take more.
7. The instructor may choose to participate to help ease the anxiety that may arise.
8. Once everyone has taken it, the instructor reveals the objective of the game: Based on the number of plies taken, each student is to introduce him or herself by presenting some basic details.
9. The instructor may ask the student seated beside the interlocutor to ask follow-up questions to practice question formation and to gather further details.

Design of the Study

This study used qualitative research design. This design was chosen because qualitative research takes into account participants' attitudes, behaviors, experiences, and perceptions. At its core, qualitative research asks open-ended questions whose answers are not easily translated into numbers, compared to quantitative research (Cleland, 2017). Given the open-ended nature of the research questions at hand, qualitative research design is often not linear in the same way quantitative design is (Cleland, 2017).

Data collection & analysis

An Instagram poll asking students to give their perceptions of the icebreaker was conducted over a one-month period between March and April of 2024. The participants were invited to

react positively or negatively to the icebreaker. The following message was posted in French (see Figure 1) on the instructor's Instagram: "Attention to all my former French students/students I taught in France. Do you remember the toilet paper game 'How much do you use?' in English class? I am writing an article on this activity in language class and therefore am seeking your feedback on both its positive and negative aspects. Overall, what do you think about this activity? Thanks in advance for responding, whether in French or in English."

Figure 1.

Screenshot of Instagram poll question



Convenience sampling was used to gather the participants. Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad (2012) note that convenience or opportunity sampling is the most common type of sampling in L2 studies, Dörnyei (2007) points out that this form of the non-probable and non-random sample includes members of the target population that meet certain specific criteria, including accessibility, availability, and proximity, and their willingness to participate in the study. All the participants consented to participate in the study.

The instructor's observation notes and checklist (See Table 2) were also used to collect data. The checklist covered aspects such as students' perceived reaction to and appreciation of the icebreaker on a scale representing none, mild, moderate, and severe.

The data in this study was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Wong (2008) states that qualitative data is usually subjective and rich and consists of comprehensive information normally presented in the form of words. The data was analyzed by reading and examining the transcripts to ascertain similarities or differences and create themes where applicable.

The research aims to document valid experiences regarding students' and instructors' perceptions of the icebreaker in L2 classes.

Table 2.

Instructor's observation checklist for toilet paper icebreaker

Description	None	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Comment
Student hesitated to participate in the game					
Student displayed annoyance, discomfort, shyness, and resistance.					
Student demonstrated confidence when speaking.					
Student appreciated the game after discovering its objective.					

Results/Findings

Research question 1: What are students' perceptions of the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker in the EFL classroom?

As seen in Table 3 below, all the respondents (N=8) positively perceived the icebreaker used in class. The icebreaker was described as (1) Fun and memorable – Many students found it enjoyable and memorable, and it helped to break the ice and build confidence among participants. (2) Humorous and educational – The icebreaker provided a humorous way to get to know each other and de-stress. The shared anecdotes helped students to feel more at ease. (3) Original and engaging – The icebreaker activity was unique and made students smile, which lightened the atmosphere and made it easier to interact. (4) Confidence building – The icebreaker activity positively impacted building learners' confidence and easing into the group dynamic. (5) Teaching style appreciation – Several learners expressed appreciation for the modern and enriching teaching style that made learning enjoyable.

On the negative side – though not many responses – there was (1) Initial hesitation – Some participants felt unsure or reluctant to fully engage at first, worried about being judged or mocked, and (2) Language barriers – There were concerns about differences in language proficiency, which made it challenging for some to express themselves fully. These findings support the instructor's observations noted in his checklist that students displayed a range of emotions and reactions from the start to the end of the game. During the process, some students in the class expressed surprise, indecision, and even excitement to explore the game.

Table 3.

Students' perceptions of the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker

Student	Excerpt
Léna	I remember this activity; it was a nice way to break the ice between us. It was fun! I enjoyed doing it; it made me feel good 👍👍👍
Sara	I personally found this activity fun and an excellent way to break the ice and build students' confidence in a humorous and educational way 😊
Julie	I admit I don't remember it very well ... But I remember it being a clever way of forcing people to give information about themselves 😊 I thought it was original!
Terry	Personally, I found this approach very interesting and fun, and it helps you de-stress because, firstly, everyone poops, and secondly, it puts everyone on an equal footing. It also makes it easier to find out what other people like.
Margaux	I still remember it! It was a great idea 💡 no one was expecting it and in the end, it forced us to be sincere and rack our brains. A good way to break the ice and get to know each other at the start of the semester. Negatives: None, it was fun, and I think a lot of people remembered it 😊
Dalya	I found this game very fun, entertaining, and interesting. Perhaps the negative point was that people didn't really dare tell the truth for fear of being mocked or judged - at least that's how I felt at first, but then I thought, no, there's nothing to be ashamed of, the game isn't designed for that. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for your ultra-enriching and modern teaching style, which made us love our English lessons.
Cécile	So on the plus side, it's an original activity because I still remember it years later! 😊 The idea made everyone smile, so when you get to know each other, it helps to lighten the atmosphere. On the negative side, I remember that the class didn't dare use it naturally because we wondered what it was going to be used for. We thought about it too much and didn't really dare take much.
Susan	On the positive side, I'd say that it clearly gave us confidence both with you (the teacher) and with our classmates, and above all it was fun to share anecdotes 😊 Negative points: I can't really think of any since I had the impression that it was really more like team building 😊 The only concern I can see is the difference in language level between everyone. Some of them, I had the impression, didn't have the words to express what they wanted to say, but well, in the end, we tried to understand otherwise, but putting myself in their shoes, it must have been very frustrating 😊

Research question 2: What lessons can teachers take away from the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker in the EFL classroom?

Based on the instructor's (primary author) observation notes, there are a few takeaways to note.

1. **Classroom climate:** The 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker has the potential to contribute to a positive classroom climate at the start of an academic semester. It allows students and teachers to learn about and warm up to each other, which helps create comfort, which is important for the flow throughout the system. As the icebreaker can be sensitive – since it involves toilet paper – it may be useful for the instructor to get involved in the game in a practical way. The instructor observed during class (20 students) that most students felt relieved when they decided to participate in the game. This helped to ease the tension, given that there was a lot of suspense leading up to the actual objective of the game.
2. **Cultural sensitivity:** Although toilet paper is universally used, the instructor needs to gauge cultural sensitivity. If the instrument used (toilet paper) might be offensive to the majority of learners, it might be useful to use another item, such as marbles, squares of scrap paper, or sticky notes.
3. **Language proficiency:** The icebreaker helped the instructor understand the learners' background and interests and conduct an instant preliminary assessment of their language proficiency. Therefore, the instructor could evaluate learners based on language register, syntax, intonation, fluency, and accent. This assessment helped the instructor with the pedagogical activities and grouping arrangements done throughout the semester. For instance, for certain activities, he could pair a weaker student with a more competent one.
4. **Strategic competence:** The icebreaker helped some students develop confidence in speaking in public and use strategic competence to overcome communication barriers. As established earlier, students were situated at different levels on the CEFR. The icebreaker required them to think spontaneously, and strategic competence allowed the weaker ones to express themselves with their limited language knowledge. Scaffolding from the instructor helped them to navigate foreign language anxiety.

Discussion

The findings show that all students have a positive perception of the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker in EFL classes. Students appreciate the icebreaker because it is humorous, memorable, educational, original, and engaging. In addition, they highlighted its potential to improve self-confidence, which is a creative and innovative pedagogical tool. These findings support a number of studies previously conducted, such as Dansou et al. (2024) who highlighted the role of icebreakers in helping learners gain self-confidence, reduce anxiety, and increase their willingness to speak, Sasan et al. (2023), Abbas et al. (2022) and Astuti et al. (2021) who spoke about the role of icebreakers in impacting student engagement, participation and motivation, and Duhria (2020) who noted the potential of icebreakers in establishing a

positive rapport between students and teachers and increasing speaking skills in areas such as pronunciation and vocabulary. Students' appreciation for the originality of the pedagogical tool highlights the need for instructors to move away from a stoic and inflexible classroom to one where the students get an opportunity to engage in free and cheerful activities, as a friendly and conducive learning environment will be more effective in helping learners achieve the learning objectives (Astuti et al., 2020). Icebreaking activities can thus be utilized in the L2 classroom to stimulate learning through unorthodox ways to give variety to the classroom experience.

In addition, the findings support Patil's (2020) position that icebreakers in the language learning process help to make learners familiarize themselves with each other in the target language, optimize the value that each person brings to the group, help learners relax and enjoy themselves, help learners overcome individual fear, and empower learners to practice the L2 without being fearful of failure or feeling judged. As pointed out under the possible drawbacks of the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker, some learners might have hesitated to participate fully because of fear of being judged or mocked due to their language level or inability to speak fluently like others. In such cases, the onus is on the instructor to help relax the atmosphere and scaffold learners to engage in strategic competence. Importantly, instructors are to be mindful of the learners' level of comfort and the cultural contexts in which they operate. Consequently, instructors must be flexible and culturally aware so as to propose adaptable icebreaker solutions for diverse classroom settings. If the learner is shy, the instructor could ask him or her to say very little, but gradually throughout the semester, the instructor can demand more as the learner gets more comfortable. Importantly, the instructor should not employ punitive measures. As Yeganehpour (2016) established, icebreakers should be non-threatening, meaning there should be no punishment associated with the outcome of students' responses or participation.

Furthermore, icebreakers help the instructor quickly assess learners' proficiency in the language (Dhuhria, 2020). As the instructor indicated, he was able to assess students preliminarily based on language register, use of grammar, intonation, and fluency. Consequently, icebreakers can influence the didactic approach and depth of content to be covered.

Moreover, as students get an opportunity to learn about each other at the start of the semester, it helps them to cultivate and develop cultural awareness, tolerance for diversity (Kavanagh et al., 2011), and intercultural communicative competence (Madden, 2022b; Madden et al., 2024). Language classes, especially at the university level, can be very diverse with students from different languages and cultural backgrounds. Icebreakers can, therefore, help them to develop their intercultural communicative competence and collaborative skills.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker is a welcome activity in the EFL classroom. It is considered entertaining, memorable, original, and engaging. Additionally, learners consider this icebreaker innovative and note its potential to aid in developing self-confidence in L2 oral communication. The icebreaker sets the tone for the overall semester, as it helps both students and teachers to familiarize themselves with each

other, which helps to build trust, foster an appreciation for cultural diversity, and improve intercultural communicative competence. For the teacher, the icebreaker can serve as a preliminary form of assessment to evaluate learners' linguistic skills, such as vocabulary level, use of language (syntax), intonation, and fluency. This assessment can serve to guide future pedagogical interventions and the type and depth of content covered.

Although there are notable advantages to using the icebreaker in EFL classes, some learners may feel apprehensive about participating because they do not want to feel ridiculed or judged. In such a case, the instructor should be understanding and not employ any punitive measures. In the same vein, instructors should assess whether the icebreaker is appropriate within the students' cultural environment. Otherwise, the instructor could adopt other more receivable and socio-culturally and socio-institutionally acceptable alternatives.

The 'How much do you use?' toilet paper icebreaker presents an additional didactic option for L2 instructors and could be considered a useful alternative in spaces limited by technology integration. However, teachers could replace the toilet paper apparatus with sticky notes or marbles, for example, to ensure inclusivity and avoid potential discomfort.

The sample size for this study (N=8) is very small; therefore, the results do not allow for generalizations to be made. Additionally, only one form of data collection tool was used to gather data from the participants, and the number of questions asked was also limited. Future studies could consider other data collection tools such as questionnaires, reflective entries, and interviews. The observation notes from the instructor are also subjective, as they are from one person's perspective and interpretation.

Going forward, it would be interesting for L2 instructors to replicate this study with a larger number of learners across different languages and levels of the education system. In addition, L2 instructors could consider using this icebreaker as a revision activity or as a course evaluation.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the eight former students from Clermont Auvergne University who volunteered to participate in the study.

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