

# The use of icebreakers and games for interactive online learning

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the teaching-learning process in all levels of education, including in higher education. The implementation of online teaching-learning process has been inevitable in the effort to reduce the people to people contact and to prevent the spread of the virus. However, there have been complaints that the interaction quality during online class or meeting is lacking of warm and meaningful communication between the participants and the teachers. This research aims to implement and evaluate some ice breaking and games during online meetings to achieve an interactive learning with the good communication quality between participants of online classes. This qualitative research used the approach of action research. The results indicated that the implementation of ice breaking and improvement of interaction has been positively perceived by the participants. Thus, using proper ice breaking and games during online meetings is suggested.

*Keywords:* online learning; interactive; ice breaking

## 1. Introduction

To reduce and break the chain of outbreaks in the Covid-19 pandemic, people are asked to reduce mobility, stay away from crowds and follow health protocols. The consequence of this restriction is that all activities related to work and education are carried out online. The pandemic has also globally boosted the increasing numbers of online learners. The data from the Centre for the New Economy and Society of the World Economic Forum (2022) showed that more people are accessing online learning to help them to enter the global changing workforce. Several online learning platforms experience a significant increase, say, Coursera that achieved 20 million new student enrollments in 2021. The rapid increase in the number of online learners comes mostly from developing countries. Online learning is becoming an important tool to overcome the gap in human resources skills in developed and developing countries.

Several video conferencing platforms for online meetings are used for meetings, classes, seminars, and other activities. However, online meetings also pose a number of problems, one of which is zoom fatigue (Williams, 2021). The term zoom fatigue applies not only to the Zoom platform but also to other video calling platforms such as Google Hangouts, Skype, FaceTime, WebEx and others (Sklar, 2020). The findings of a research team from Stanford University showed that online meeting participants might experience ‘zoom fatigue’ or fatigue following online meetings for four reasons (University, 2021).

The causes of zoom fatigue include excessively intense close eye contact, fatigue from looking at one’s self during a continuous and real-time video chat, and a dramatic reduction in mobility or movement while following a video chat. Some

of the solutions experts offer to overcome this ‘zoom fatigue’ are to avoid multitasking, take several breaks, turn off the personal camera to avoid stimulation from the screen, wisely choose the online events that follow, switch to phone calls or emails, and avoid turning on the screen in online events where many participants are unknown (Duffy, 2020).

There are more challenges when courses are delivered online. Students who struggle with time management or those who have inferior educational backgrounds typically struggle more in online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Besides, lecturers also play a significant role in facilitating the learning process. Syahmer et al. (2021) stated that the ability of the lecturers to present learning materials become the main consideration that determines student’s learning satisfaction.

Research on the solution of this inconvenience and learning barriers during online learning are not adequately available. Some research are merely limited to the use of technology (Şat et al., 2022). In fact, it is also significant to consider the learning barriers from the non-technological aspect (Chlup & Collins, 2010).

Whereas other studies have only focused on language learning (Hanggrahini, 2021). It is also significant to compare with other research on online learning during the pandemic as conducted in Malaysia (Zanuddin, Shaid, & Halim, 2021). Although the research for Indonesian context has been conducted, the study about online learning among students of communication in Indonesia, so far, is still limited. The existing studies only consider the motivational aspect as the goals of using icebreaking (Pratama et al., 2021). Whereas some studies also suggested that interaction becomes an important aspect for the active learning in online learning.

Some research already focused on the use of ice breakers in learning; however, they were mostly conducted in the context of teaching of English as Foreign Language (EFL). For instance, Aniranti (2021) studied the use of ice breakers for

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teaching grammar in online class and Astuti, Solihat, and Satriani (2020) examined the use ice breaker for offline teaching of English in High School. Thus, studies for non EFL context are needed to provide different context of ice breaking utilization in education.

Cambridge Dictionary defines icebreaker as “a game or activity used to introduce people to each other to make them all more relaxed.” According to Johnson (2012) icebreakers have a number of advantageous effects, such as involving students intellectually and emotionally, lowering anxiety levels, fostering critical thinking, and forging a sense of community inside the classroom. Additionally, the usage of icebreakers will strengthen ties between teachers and students, cross economic, social, and cultural divides, and increase students' enthusiasm for academic subjects. When using the ice breaker properly, ice breakers can also foster cooperative conduct, control the emotional "climate" of the classroom, and foster favorable attitudes about learning and education. But most importantly, each of these objectives can be met in a way that encourages students to enjoy their academic experiences.

Most icebreakers are prepared for a face-to-face meeting or offline setting. Some references only provide ice breaking activities (West, 1999). Chen (2012) suggested that the technology such as social media, smartphones, GPS, or tablets, can be incorporated into a virtual meeting to build a team.

According to Scannell & Scannell (2009) there are some benefits of using games in a learning process. Games help the facilitator to make some clear, memorable, and relevant points to the task at hand. They are a powerful tool for encouraging key ideas to emerge and can help to build a morale. The games create a new and unconventional atmosphere by incorporating some elements of fun into team meetings. They help the team members to learn to trust each other and provide some opportunities to share insights, emotions and experiences as teams develop solutions. The improved understanding and appreciation for each other's point of view can arise during discussions and question and answer during game activities. Games help the team members to be more flexible and adaptive. Team members can immediately understand and realize that there may be several options for problem solving. The games provide an opportunity for the team leader to remind them about the behavior expected to occur in the team. When collaboration occurs, creativity emerges, or when interpersonal barriers begin to crumble, a leader can show a respect for the team.

The game also gives each team member a chance to connect. Plato stated that, "One can find out more about a person in one hour of play than in one year of conversation." When participants communicate and connect with the team, obstacles can be overcome. Although technology has many benefits and provides convenience, it can sometimes also be a barrier to human relations. Games can also help to enhance the communication between people in consideration to that it is also an art (Garber, 2008).

Thus, this study aims to combine the technological and non-technological aspects. In addition, the objective of the research is targeted to improve the interaction quality between students and teachers for any setting of online learning with any subjects. The novelty of this research is on the subject of the research from non EFL context, which is communication

science students and the combination of technological and non-technological aspect.

## 2. Methodology

This is a qualitative research using the approach of action research that is by investigating and taking part in the quest for a world worthy of human aspirations (Rowell et al., 2016). According to Mertler (2019), to better understand their own classrooms and to enhance their effectiveness or quality, instructors might use action research to examine their own teaching strategies, students, and assessments. In addition, this method helps to bridge a gap between educational theory and professional practice, to investigate any challenges and to aid the researcher in improving the current methods. The subjects of this research were 319 students of first and second year in the communications department in a private university in Yogyakarta who have been learning online since the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was conducted in the second semester of academic year 2021/2022. Data were collected using interview, questionnaires, and observation. Researchers also conducted some interventions and then asked for the feedback from the participants.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The following results of this research showed how the icebreakers and games were implemented during the online learning class. The strategies were divided into some steps such as strategies to open the online meeting session, games for online classes, trust building, problem solving, physical movement and alternative platforms.

### 3.1. *Strategies in the opening session of online class*

Opening a session during the online class is very crucial since it will affect the mood of the class and the motivation of teachers and students. Some strategies used by the researcher in the beginning of online meetings are presented as follows. .

#### 3.1.1. *Renaming zoom profile*

The facilitator asked the participants to change their online default meeting profile name with nickname, hometown and typical food from that city. In addition, participants may also change their profile name to any other name that they liked. Participants were asked to explain the meaning of the name or the story behind the name. By looking at the name and the participant's hometown, other members were stimulated to give comments or questions about popular places or special foods from that city. One student commented “*from this activity, I can learn about special food from other cities and the diversity of Indonesia*”.

#### 3.1.2. *Open camera and smile*

At the beginning of the meeting, the facilitator asked the participants to voluntarily open their cameras and gave their best smile. Participants were not forced to open the camera and the facilitator persuasively encouraged them to give a smile as a form of alms or a way to make themselves and others happy.

For online class participants who have already known each other well, the facilitator invited the participants to 'hug' virtually and exchanged news.

### 3.1.3. Change profile picture with favorite things

Some participants felt uncomfortable in opening the camera during online classes. The facilitator encouraged the participants to replace their profile photo with a photo of their hometown, favorite object, or favorite character. Another strategy was to use the sticker facility on the online meeting platform. In addition, the facilitator used certain themes to make participants interested in opening the camera, for example, Mother's Day, Earth Day, and others. When the theme of the conversation was related to Mother's Day, the facilitator asked participants to replace their profile picture with a photo of their own mother. One student stated that *"in this class, I don't have to feel worried to open my camera because I can be somebody and even something else. This is fun!"*

### 3.1.4. Reasons for gratitude

The facilitator asked the representatives of the participants of the online meeting to voluntarily mention one or two things for which the participants were very grateful. The facilitator also asked other participants to give likes or positive responses with stickers to appreciate other participants' stories or to express agreement. In addition, participants who have told stories mentioned or asked other participants to tell why they were grateful for that day.

## 3.2. Games for online classes

Games were used to introduce a topic and acted as a lead into a material. They were also implemented as the icebreakers or to improve the group dynamics of the class. Below are some activities conducted in the class during this research.

### 3.2.1. Quick question about what was preferable.

In addition to provide some open-ended questions during online class interactions, the facilitator also provided two-choice questions to participants. For example, traditional food or pizza? Ice cream or cake? Beach or mountains?. The facilitator also asked participants to shout out the answer by turning on the microphone, raising their hand virtually to vote, or answering using written text via the chat box. Student stated that this game allowed them to learn more about their classmates' interest and to build connection between students.

### 3.2.2. Two truths and one lie.

One participant was asked to share 3 statements about themselves. Two statements must be true, and one statement must be false. Other participants had to guess which statement was not true. For small groups, participants can immediately submit the statements and others respond and for larger groups, statements can be displayed on slides or virtual whiteboards and ask everyone to place a dot or mark on the statement that is considered a lie. The students felt that this game could help them to know more about personal information about their

friends that they have never known during online class.

### 3.2.3. Sharing images and photos

The facilitator asked one of the participants to share the latest photo on their smartphone camera and explained it to other participants. The facilitator also varied by asking participants to share photos that they thought were very meaningful and explained why they were so important. The facilitator then asked the participants to share photos of their desk or workspace, took a picture of something they saw outside their home, sharing a funny photo or their favorite food they cooked. Participants could use photos to create variations in the guessing game. For example, guessing a baby picture of a famous character, or asking people to take a picture of an object in their house enlarged or maximized and asked other participants to guess what picture it was. Students found that this game was simple to do and exciting.

### 3.2.4. Use unique virtual backgrounds.

In this activity, the facilitator asked all participants to replace their profile photo or zoom background with a themed virtual background. Students may use background picture from their favorite vacation spot or place they want to visit the most after the pandemic is over, or a scene from their favorite TV show or movie.

### 3.2.5. Sharing objects or items

In this game, the facilitator asked participants to pick up and described an object. The facilitator could let participants be creative in explaining objects in a fun and happy way, or that could make other participants laugh. This activity can be connected with topic of class discussion.

### 3.2.6. Introducing the beloved family or pet.

The facilitator asked the participants to introduce friends, family members, or pets nearby during the online class. This activity could help students to describe people they know and their favorite animals. Students were also be able to feel attachment with other members of the class of this activity.

### 3.2.7. Virtual tour.

The facilitator took turns asking online class participants to give a tour around their home or neighborhood if their internet signal was quite good. One student said *"makes me feel refreshed because I can see other places without leaving my house"* and other student stated that *"I get inspiration for my house and room after looking at my friends' home"*.

### 3.2.8. Birth map collaboration

The facilitator created a collaborative map on Google Maps and asks everyone to pin or mark their birthplace. Then, the facilitator asked participants to explain the uniqueness or interesting facts about their hometown. Based on the feedback from the students, this activity allowed the students to learn about geography and built the sense of nationalism among them.

### 3.2.9. Essentials or favorites

The facilitator asked the class members to share the most important apps on their phones, books on the shelves, or utensils in the kitchen and compiled a list of other important things to share with other participants. The facilitator asked everyone's favorite recipes, TV shows, song lyrics, or movie plots to be told to everyone. The participants stated that this activity was useful because it could help them to get tools that help them to do their daily activities.

### 3.2.10. Wish list

The facilitator asked each participant to tell or write down their wish list about the things they want to do in life.

### 3.2.11. Unique stickers or background

The facilitator asked class members to use cute or quirky stickers and background images on the online meeting platform to build engagement and motivation. For example, the Zoom or Google Meet platforms have a lot of built-in backgrounds that attendees can download and use. Participants can also use Snapchat filters to use funny stickers and background features such as placing a cat on their head, wearing cute sunglasses, or making someone look like a superhero.

## 3.3. Trust building and meaningful relationships

One challenge in online learning is the poor communication and interaction between the students. Thus, this research occupied some following options of activities to build trust between members of the class and to have a personal connection and meaningful relationship.

### 3.3.1. Personality test.

Participants were asked to take a short and easy personality test. Facilitators could use several popular tests such as the Myers Briggs personality test, StrengthsFinder, DiSC widely available and free on the internet. One of the websites used is [www.123test.com](http://www.123test.com). After the test was done, the facilitator asked the participants to tell the most surprising thing about the test results or test results that are not correct according to each participant. The results of this study's observations indicated that taking the personality test together could help participants to learn each other.

### 3.3.2. The story of life.

The facilitator divided the participants into a breakout room and asked participants to take turns telling their life stories within 5 minutes. Then, the listeners must tell the story when the breakout room closed and rejoined the larger group.

### 3.3.3. Similarity.

The facilitator divided the participants into small groups or pairs and asked them to list as many things they have in common as possible within 5 minutes. The team with the

longest list of similarities would win.

### 3.3.4. Rapid fire team.

The facilitator divided the participants randomly into pairs in a breakout room and asked them to complete the task together in 2 minutes. Participants who finished first could perform a "special handshake" or performed a "victory dance" after completing the assigned task. This game increased the participant's desire to be involved in the team.

## 3.4. Teamwork and problem-solving exercises

The virtual space has limited the ability of the learners to do teamwork, which is easier to manage in face-to-face interaction. Some strategies used in this research are presented as follows:

### 3.4.1. Case study

The facilitator made a case for the participants to solve. The facilitator asked the participants to develop a common strategy and came up with solutions and planned to communicate and implemented them.

### 3.4.2. Foreign invasion

Participants were divided into groups and given information that aliens had landed. Each team was asked to make 5 simple pictures to explain what the team did so that the aliens understood the message they wanted to convey. Each group was asked to present a picture and find similarities with the other teams.

### 3.4.3. Playing alphabet

The facilitator created a breakout room and gave each group 5 minutes to write down the object for each letter of the alphabet (a - chicken, b - book, etc.). One person on each team would write down the objects. Teams needed to communicate well to prevent overlapping and be creative on some letters.

### 3.4.4. Birthday row.

In this challenge, the participants had to arrange their birthdays - just months and days without a year without talking or writing anything to each other. Everyone should write down the number they believed to be their birthday order (if there are 10 people and participant A thinks that his birthday is the first, participant A will write 1.) When the time was up, everyone revealed the birthday, and the facilitator checked the order correctly and asked each team's strategy to do the task.

### 3.4.5. Remote islands.

The facilitator provided each group a list of items and asked each team to choose the 3 most important items they would take to a desert island. Everyone must explain the reason for bringing the items with them.

## 3.5. Physical movement in online class

Being in front of the screen most of the time makes learners' mobility and movement limited. As this condition may lead to fatigue and physical exhaustion, some activities that have done in this research are explained below.

### 3.5.1. Dance break.

When participants showed good spirits, the facilitator played a song and asked participants to do free dance moves for 30 seconds. Participants could turn the camera on or off in this activity. The facilitator informed that participants may laugh or shout while doing the dance moves. The facilitator can also let the participants dance by turning off the camera, so they would feel free and were not worried about someone watching. In addition to this method, the facilitator asked all participants to mute their respective Zoom audio and dance to their own music.

### 3.5.2. Trivia movement.

To give participants the opportunity to enjoy a longer brain break, the facilitator asked a few yes or no trivia questions. The facilitator asked the participants to stand up for yes and to sit down for no, or to jump for yes, and to raise hand for yes. If any participant missed a question, that participant may be asked to turn off camera Zoom and be considered "out" of the game until the next round.

### 3.5.3. Spread love.

The facilitator asked everyone to activate the Gallery view on Zoom and stood up. Each participant was asked to think of something nice to share with others on the team. When it was the participant's turn to stand up, the facilitator asked him or her to pretend that they were holding a box or ball containing something pretty. The participant then passed the box to the next person in the Zoom Gallery view. The next participant received and passed the box to another participant.

## 3.6. Alternatives of online class platforms

Apart from the Zoom, Google Meet and WebEx platforms, there are also several alternatives that enable a more interactive and fun learning process.

The first alternative used by the researcher is Gather Town. By using Gather Town, online meeting participants can talk to each other easily based on the distance of their avatars when interacting. The atmosphere of the space in Gather Town with the nuances of games can make meeting participants more relaxed and feel the sensation of moving outside the room. The existence of a 'private' room allows participants to conduct discussions behind closed doors and not be listened to by other participants, including moderators or hosts. As an illustration in this space, <https://bit.ly/gatherclass100org>, participants can attend different classrooms, go to playgrounds, discussion rooms, and open spaces. Participants can easily consult with lecturers or superiors without having to worry about being heard by other participants. During the class in Gather Town, students can feel that they can move freely like in a normal situation and feel safer to talk to their friends like in a physical face to face meeting.

For intense discussions with a podcast model or accompanied by music, this research used the Discord application. Like Gather Town, Discord also provides a 'share screen' menu. However, Discord's advantage and weakness is that meeting participants can only turn on the camera if the number of participants from the online meeting does not exceed 25 people. However, the sound quality in the Discord application is much better than other applications and the bots available on Discord allow the users to set songs with an adjustable volume during the discussion so that they can enjoy the sensation of a meeting while listening to the radio or feeling the vibration of the cafe atmosphere.

During a class using discord, the students who are usually silent during zoom class becomes more active and interactive. One student stated that “*discord makes me comfortable because the sound is better and I don't have to turn on my camera. Plus, I can listen to music while listening to the lecturer.*”

Facilitator also used some game applications, quizzes, or surveys such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, or Quizizz to encourage participants to be actively involved in discussion forums. Facilitator created some quizzes or surveys according to the theme of the online meeting to encourage participant to understand and give prizes to winners when possible.

## 4. Conclusion

This research concludes that implementation of ice breaking and games during online classes can help to improve the quality of interaction between participants of the class as indicated by the communication between members of the class. In addition, these strategies may reduce physical and psychological barriers during online meetings or prevent 'zoom fatigue' and consequently can make the student satisfied in learning. Thus, the implementation of ice breaking in online meeting platform may be integrated in the curriculum and learning activities. However, it is crucial to consider the design of the activities and the characteristics of the students to make the proper strategies able to be used for the right audience and right moment. This research was limited to the online interactions using zoom platform and limited to students of communication science. Future research may explore the use of other online meeting platform among wider audiences.

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