



WORLD QUARTERLY

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Teaching L2 Writing: Ice-breakers and Note-taking Approaches

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As an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor and a writing tutor, I have realized that note-taking and brainstorming are important skills. Note-taking is beneficial in an ESL class, as students get to practice listening, writing and comprehending the materials; all at the same time. Brainstorming adds on to the note-taking component, and helps students use their own written data to analyze and stimulates logical and critical thinking. One of the ways to incorporate note-taking sessions into any ESL classroom activity can be through short ice-breakers. Through brief, 5-minute exercises, teachers can lighten students and get them engaged in the class. These ice-breakers could be used in any part of the lesson plan if needed. They could also be modified and accommodated into the main tasks or post-tasks, to achieve specific learning objectives and suit the different requirements of an ESL class. I would like to share my teaching ideas to introduce effective writing and note-taking skills.

BENEFITS OF ICE-BREAKERS FOR NOTE-TAKING/ WRITING

First, I wish to discuss the benefits of teaching note-taking using ice-breakers. As a writing teacher, I perceive note-taking as an important exercise in L2 classes. In my humble opinion, note-taking has several benefits for ESL learners, including: 1) Developing vocabulary; 2) Understanding the context of their topic; 3) Organizing key ideas; 4) Developing critical appreciation and logical thinking; 5) formulating questions about the topic; and, 6) Sharing and getting feedback from peers. Ice-breakers can encourage background knowledge stimulation and also help students contextualize the learning goals of the class. They guide and create interest in students to learn new(er) ideas and make

connections with previously learnt ideas/concepts. Finally, ice-breakers could be used creatively to suit the needs of all the levels of learners.

ICE-BREAKER #1 – FREE-WRITING

The first ice-breaker technique that I use in my class is free-writing. These teacher-guided, free-writing exercises could be very resourceful for students. Teachers can consider these as a twice-a-week exercise.

Things to consider

- When selecting the free-writing theme, I try to add modern day relevance by selecting a current topic.
- I ask students to write for 3-4 minutes.
- I implement some simple guidelines. These guidelines are: the 5 sentences have to be related to each other and must have some significance for the present day reader. This approach makes certain that the students stay focused on the topic.

I enjoy this ice-breaker. Students are engaged with the theme and gather some thoughts from previous classes. They also will have some vocabulary relevant to the theme in the sentences. I also encourage them to discuss their ideas with their peers or have a class discussion after the writing. The points resurface and the entire class brainstorms in this process.

ICE-BREAKER #2 – VIDEO- VOCABULARY ANALYSIS

In this ice-breaker, I show the students a short video based on the theme and ask them to look for new information. After this, I bring up the new words/ideas on the white board or the projector and give them a different context where they have to use the words and ideas instantly. I model a sample word for them and have ideas ready for the other words. Then, I give them another word and they try to guess the meaning. This way, they go back to the video, their notes and brainstorm with their peers for a response.

Possible Benefits

- With the help of the teacher, students might be motivated to come up with a response in the limited amount of time.
- This can be a bit pressurizing or stressful, but it would feel like an engaging challenge for the students.
- The student can try and relate the words to different situations and contexts. This could help them to remember its relevance for a longer period of time.

ICE- BREAKER # 3- WORDS OF THE WEED- REVISITED

The third ice-breaker is where I make a list of all the difficult/new words that we have covered in a week and make small chits out of it. This exercise can be done every week or once a month.

There are two ways to get to this exercise:

- 1) Each student gets a word or picks one up from the bowl and writes a sentence either related to the theme or otherwise.
- 2) I put them into pairs and ask them to take 3 chits and come up with 3 sentences in 2 minutes. This exercise is followed by a quick group discussion.

Thus, ice-breakers can be designed creatively to suit the learning objectives. The teacher must have clarity and ingenuity to sense the time and space in the class. Note-taking and writing skills presented through ice-breakers can surely guide ESL students to develop a holistic outlook to appreciate learning a second language. The teacher has to follow some basic guidelines like reiterating the main concepts in the new lessons along with the old ones and carefully choosing the relevant exercises in the lesson-planning process. Also, with ample amount of revision, repeated exposure to the relevant vocabulary, similar assignments, concepts, themes, techniques and approaches, could lead to some internalizing of ideas by the students. The class discussions and follow-up homework /in-class exercises like brainstorming, small group debates and presentations, definitely help students practice writing, mold their critical thinking skills and develop their logical approaches to understanding a foreign language.