

Managing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Using Ice Breakers in Beninese English for Specific Purpose (ESP) Classes

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Abstract:- Teaching-Learning English for Specific Purpose (ESP) is really challenging in Benin Republic. To overcome those challenges, many researches are conducted to explore strategies and methods. This study investigates the efficacy of utilizing icebreakers as a pedagogical tool to manage Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in an ESP class. Recognizing FLA as a common challenge faced by language learners, this research explores the impact of incorporating carefully designed icebreaker activities on students' anxiety levels and overall language learning experience. The methodology adopted during the investigation is a mixed method. It consists in collecting information from eight (08) ESP teachers and fifty-four (54) learners through classroom observation and questionnaires distributed to them to gather reliable data. The findings provide valuable implications for educators seeking practical strategies to create a positive and inclusive learning environment, enhance student confidence, and promote active participation in language learning activities. Then the study suggests the incorporation of icebreakers during the teaching learning process to lower FLA while increasing students' motivation and outcomes.

Keywords:- Icebreakers, FLA, Management, ESP.

I. INTRODUCTORY SECTION

A. Background and Problem Statement

In an EFL context like Benin, the English language teaching/learning is hindered by many barriers. The challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) can vary depending on individual learner characteristics, learning contexts, and instructional approaches. However, some common challenges include speaking anxiety. EFL learners may experience anxiety or fear when required to speak in English, especially in front of others or in unfamiliar situations. This can manifest as nervousness, trembling, or avoidance of speaking tasks. Talking about Fear of Making Mistakes EFL learners may be hesitant to speak or participate in speaking activities due to a fear of making grammatical errors, pronunciation mistakes, or vocabulary slips in English.

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as one of the crucial affective factors in students' language learning, especially with English for Specific Purpose (ESP) learners in Benin secondary schools. For example, nervousness about communication, the fear of making mistakes, or to be laughed at, can prevent students from participating. This is a source of anxiety that has been documented in foreign language and ESP classes. The negative effect of FLA on language learning has been found by many studies. Foreign language anxiety is a common challenge in language learning, hindering students' ability to effectively learn and use a new language.

To address this issue, implementing strategic management techniques and methods is crucial. Introducing icebreakers is one of the effective methods, as they help create a supportive and relaxed environment, fostering a positive attitude towards language learning. Icebreakers can ease tension, encourage interaction, and build confidence, thus mitigating foreign language anxiety and enhancing the overall language learning experience. According to Varvel (2002:123) '*One of these methods is using icebreakers which can be used for engaging students and facilitates an instructional environment to start up a lesson, where everyone can get to know each other, and get ready to the coming lesson in interesting atmosphere*'.

The relationship between foreign language anxiety and icebreakers lies in the ability of icebreakers to alleviate the psychological barriers associated with language learning. Icebreakers, through their interactive and engaging nature, help create a comfortable atmosphere, reducing the anxiety often experienced in unfamiliar linguistic contexts. By fostering a sense of community and encouraging communication in a relaxed setting, icebreakers serve as a valuable tool to mitigate foreign language anxiety. They promote a positive mindset, build confidence, and establish a supportive foundation for learners to navigate the challenges of acquiring a new language.

B. Purposes of the Study

The main objective of this research is to examine how to manage FLA by using ice breakers in intermediate classes. This main objective is split into three (03) specific objectives:

- Investigate the challenges of teaching-learning English as a Foreign Language.
- Explore how icebreakers contribute to increased participation, collaboration, and communication among intermediate-level students.
- Evaluate how icebreaker can be used to improve oral ability in English classroom.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Concept of Icebreakers

➤ **Definition**

Icebreakers are interactive activities designed to create a positive and inclusive atmosphere, fostering a sense of community among learners. By breaking down initial barriers and promoting social interaction, icebreakers play a crucial role in reducing anxiety, building confidence, and enhancing the overall language learning experience. The idea in to use them not only in the beginning of the class, but also all along the teaching learning and evaluation process to create and maintain a conducive environment. Dweikat and Raba (2019) stated that *“Icebreakers are said to be activities that are designed to relax learners, introduce them to each other, energize them and create an educational environment based on cooperation among students and their teachers. In such a case, they are said to be a basic factor in flipping the classroom atmosphere and the whole school conditions”*. Additionally, Justin N. Crowl (2024) found that *“icebreakers help set the tone for the course, signal to students that they*

will be expected to participate actively, and begin the process of building community in the classroom”. This means that 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.

➤ **Icebreakers in Education**

According to Dover (2004) *“icebreakers are questions that allow discussions to take place among students or activities that allow interaction within the group to relax which is the primary goal for any teacher who decides to use icebreakers”*. They seek to create an environment that is anxiety free, where learners are allowed to *“break the ice”* or learn in a fun atmosphere. Then, the purpose of icebreakers is to help shy students start a conversation, enhancing interaction and communication skills, removing cultural barriers within the group, developing the feeling of friendship and trust among learners. Brown (2007) notes that *“interactive activities can significantly lower students’ affective filters, making them more willing to engage in classroom activities”*. When students feel at ease, they are more likely to contribute their ideas and take part in discussions, thereby increasing overall participation.

Icebreakers are defined as tools facilitating creative thinking through interaction by making conversations and discussions about new topics, assumptions and specific information. Pathak and Verma (2011) added that *“icebreakers are activities where learners as part of a group get closer to one another and break barriers between them gradually to develop trust and support to learn efficiently”*. So, learning effectively and efficiently by breaking the boring dull activities or lessons and turn it into fun relaxing exercises that motivate learners to be part of the learning process, is the main contribution of icebreakers.

Table 1: Contribution of Icebreakers in ESP Classes

Contribution of Icebreakers	Main Features	Teaching-learning Theories Underpinned
Participation	- create a comfortable and engaging classroom environment - encourage students to actively participate	- Theory of motivation - Behaviorism
Collaboration	- foster a sense of community and trust - pave the way for effective collaboration - build a cooperative learning atmosphere where students feel more connected and willing to work together	- Social constructivism
Communication	- encourage students to practice their language skills in a low-pressure setting - enhance their communication abilities - promote speaking and listening in a non-threatening environment - offer opportunities to speak, listen, and interact with peers, improving their fluency and confidence in using the language.	- Behaviorism - Social constructivism
Critical Thinking	- offer opportunities to solve problem	- Cognitivism

Source: Mensah & Zinsouvi (2024)

Icebreakers play a crucial role in enhancing participation, collaboration, and communication, which are the key features of competency-based approach (CBA), among students.

B. Concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) refers to the apprehension and nervousness individuals experience when attempting to learn or use a foreign language. It encompasses a range of emotional responses, including fear of making mistakes, anxiety about communication in the target

language, and apprehension in language-related situations. FLA can manifest at various proficiency levels and may impact learners' confidence, motivation, and overall language performance. Recognizing and addressing FLA is essential for creating a positive and effective language learning environment.

C. Challenges of Teaching Learning English for Specific Purpose

Teaching-learning English for Specific purpose (ESP) presents a range of challenges that can affect both instructors and students. One primary challenge is the issue of linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), “learners come to the classroom with different levels of language proficiency and varying cultural backgrounds, which makes it difficult to design lessons that meet the needs of all students”. This is a real problem in Benin context, where students often come from different linguistic backgrounds, making it difficult for teachers to address the varied levels of English proficiency and learning styles. Additionally, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and hind effective communication. Teachers must be culturally sensitive and adept at creating an inclusive environment that respects and integrates diverse cultural perspectives while teaching the language. Furthermore, large class sizes and limited resources in this developing country, can restrict the ability to provide personalized attention and support to each student, further complicating the teaching and learning process.

Finally, motivation and engagement are critical issues. Dörnyei (2001) discusses the challenge of maintaining student motivation, highlighting that “language learners frequently experience a decline in motivation due to the perceived difficulty of the language and a lack of immediate relevance to their lives”. Teachers need to employ a variety of motivational strategies, such as setting clear, achievable goals, providing positive reinforcement, and connecting language learning to students’ personal interests and future opportunities. Overcoming these challenges requires a combination of innovative teaching methods, cultural sensitivity, and a supportive learning environment. Here, icebreakers are highly recommended.

D. Relationship Between Icebreakers and FLA

Icebreakers and FLA are interrelated. Icebreakers mirror teachers’ enthusiasm and excitement toward the subject matter they are about to explain which can reflex on the students’ reactions. The best way is to link the new material to learners’ previous knowledge. When learners find out that they are familiar with the new subject their motivation increases toward building new knowledge regarding it. Overall, icebreakers can increase learners’ motivation toward learning.

According to Brown, H. D. (2007) “most English teachers adopt teaching methods that are not attractive for learners. Consequently, students become less motivated to learn”. Using icebreakers with more planning and preparation from teachers, may be the right solution and can help students adapt to new learning experience by putting emphasis on the activities used to create fun, active and inclusive language classrooms. Icebreakers works as facilitators for interaction where learners can introduce themselves and know more about their classmates to work as teams and collaboratively on the basis of semi structured communication as classrooms are social places and not only for learning.

This literature review briefly explored the different concepts and relationship between FLA, ice breakers as motivation in class and learners’ outcomes. The next section deals with the research methodology, the findings, the discussion and suggestions.

III. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

❖ *Methodology of the Study*

➤ *Research design and Sampling*

Following a mixed-method, this study incorporates qualitative and quantitative data for extensive exploration of the topic. The participants, randomly selected from Lycee Technique of Porto-Novo received purposefully designed questionnaires. Classroom observations were also conducted in the same school.

Table 2: Sampling

School	Teachers	Learners	Classroom Observations
Technical and Professional School of Porto-Novo	08	54	06

➤ *Research Instruments*

The main tools to gather trustworthy data for the research included questionnaires and classroom observations.

➤ *Questionnaires*

For this research, two kinds of questionnaires are designed for both ESP teachers and learners. Teachers’ questionnaires contain six (06) questions. The first one is about teachers’ professional and academic qualifications, the second one is to know how long they have been teaching English, the third question is to know if they find icebreaker

activities enjoyable and engaging. The fourth is to know the way that icebreakers have helped create a positive and supportive environment for language learning. Question 5 is about the frequency of incorporating icebreakers activities in their class. The last one is about the specific icebreakers they find most effective in managing FLA.

There are six questions in learners’ questionnaire. The first is designed to learn about their feeling during English course. The second question is about the aspects of language learning which causes them the most anxiety. The third

question concerns the frequency of engaging in icebreakers activities in English class. The fourth question is to know if they found icebreakers activities helpful in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment. The fifth is about the way they describe the overall classroom atmosphere after engaging in icebreaker activities and the last one is to know if they feel a sense of community and mutual support among their classmates following icebreakers activities.

➤ *Classroom Observation*

In order to collect information for this research work, classroom observations allowed me to know the ways ESP teachers deliver their classes and how they deal with learners’ motivation during activity in the class. These observations are conducted using the following observation grid:

Table 3: Classroom Observation Grid

Components	Criteria	Note / mark
1-Subject Matter Or Content	Shows good command and knowledge of subject matter, demonstrates breadth and depth of mastery Shows good command and knowledge	
2-Organization	Organizes subject matter, evidences preparation, is thought, states clear objectives, emphasizes and summarizes main points, meet class at scheduled time, regularly monitors course	
3-Lesson Presentation	Establishes classroom management conducive to learning, maintains eye contact, uses a clear voice strong projection, proper enunciation, and standard English.	
4-Classroom Management	Uses time wisely, attends to course interaction, demonstrates leadership ability, maintains discipline and control, maintains effective classroom management	
5-Learning Environment of Classroom	State location and physical attributes of classroom, number of students in attendance, layout of room, distraction if any, list any observations of how physical aspects affected content delivery	
Total Note: The Mark ranges from 1 to 5, with five the best performance		

Source: Mensah & Zinsouvi (2024)

The data collected with various tools were organized, and presented using a range of statistical compilation tables and figures for illustration. The following chapter focuses on the presentation and discussion of the results.

IV. RESULTS

Through the answers got from the different instruments, here are the results and their discussion.

➤ *Presentation of the Results*

Table 4: EFL Teachers’ Qualification

EFL Teachers’ Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Licence	02	25
Maitrise	01	12.5
BAPES	04	50
CAPES	01	12.5
Total	08	100

Results in table 4 show that twenty-five percent (25%) of teachers are teaching with bachelor degree, twelve-point five percent (25%) of them teach with Maitrise and CAPES. A ratio of fifty percent (50%) of those teachers teaches with BAPES, with different teaching experience ranging from five to fifteen teaching years.

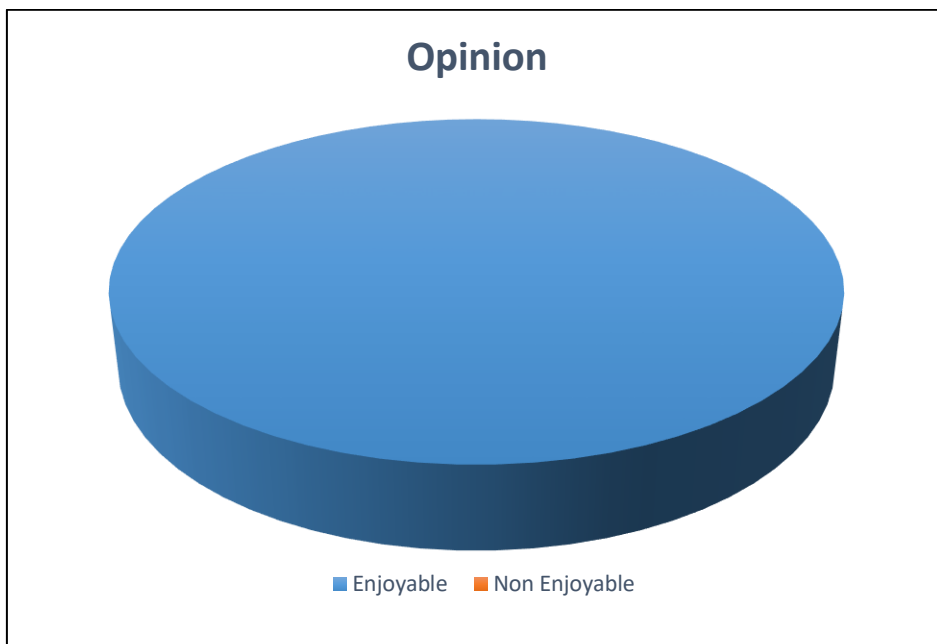


Fig 1: Teachers’ Opinion about Icebreaker

Figure 1 presents the opinion of EFL Teachers about icebreakers. It remarks that hundred percent (100%) of EFL Teachers find icebreakers activities enjoyable and engaging.

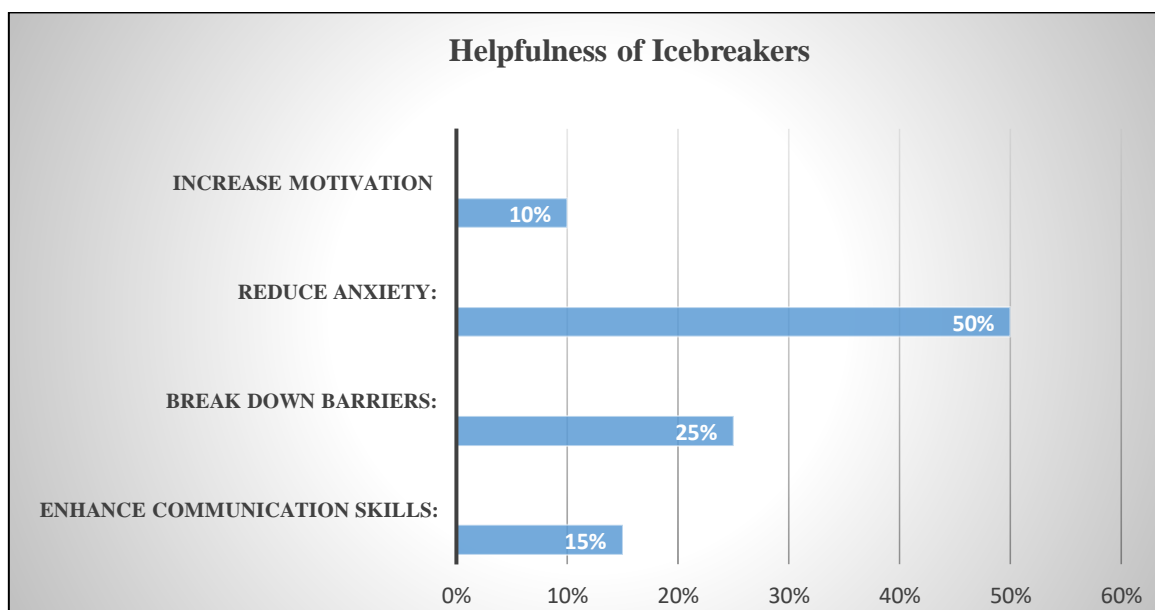


Fig 2: Helpfulness of Icebreakers

Figure 2 is about the helpfulness of icebreakers; it is noticed that icebreakers contribute to fifty percent (50%) on reducing anxiety. In twenty-five (25%) percent, icebreakers contribute to break down barriers while in fifteen (15%) percent it enhances communication skill whereas in ten percent (10%) it increases motivation.

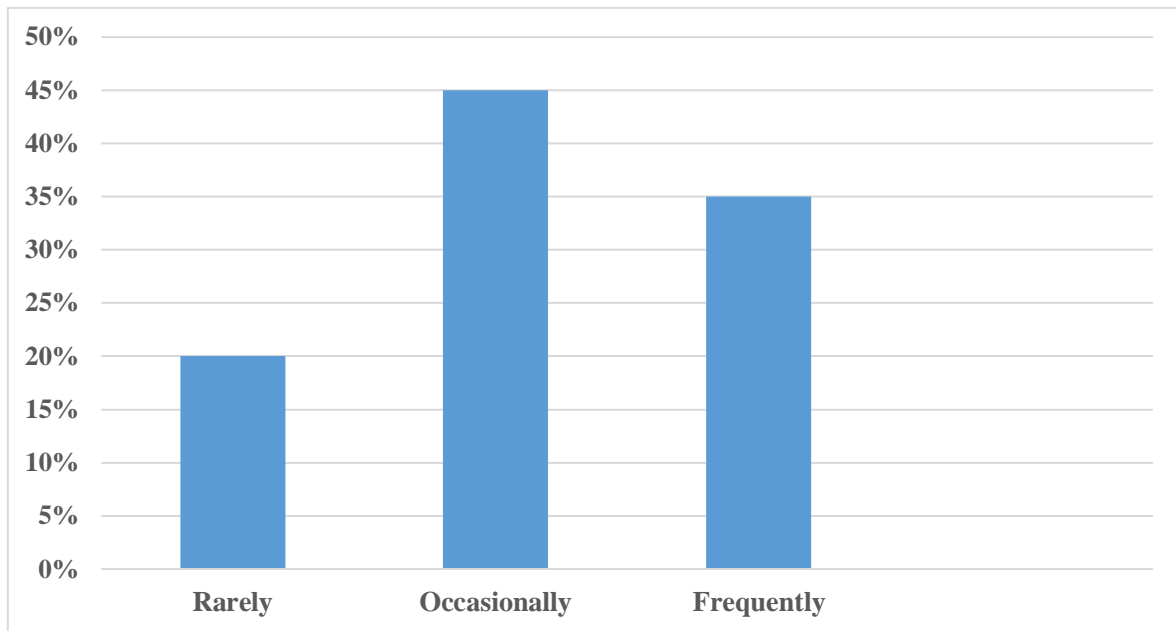


Fig 3: Frequency of Incorporation of Icebreakers

Figure 3 is relative to the frequency of incorporation of icebreakers. It is noticed that twenty percent (20%) of teachers rarely use icebreakers whereas forty-five percent (45%) of them use icebreakers occasionally and thirty-five (35%) percent use it frequently.

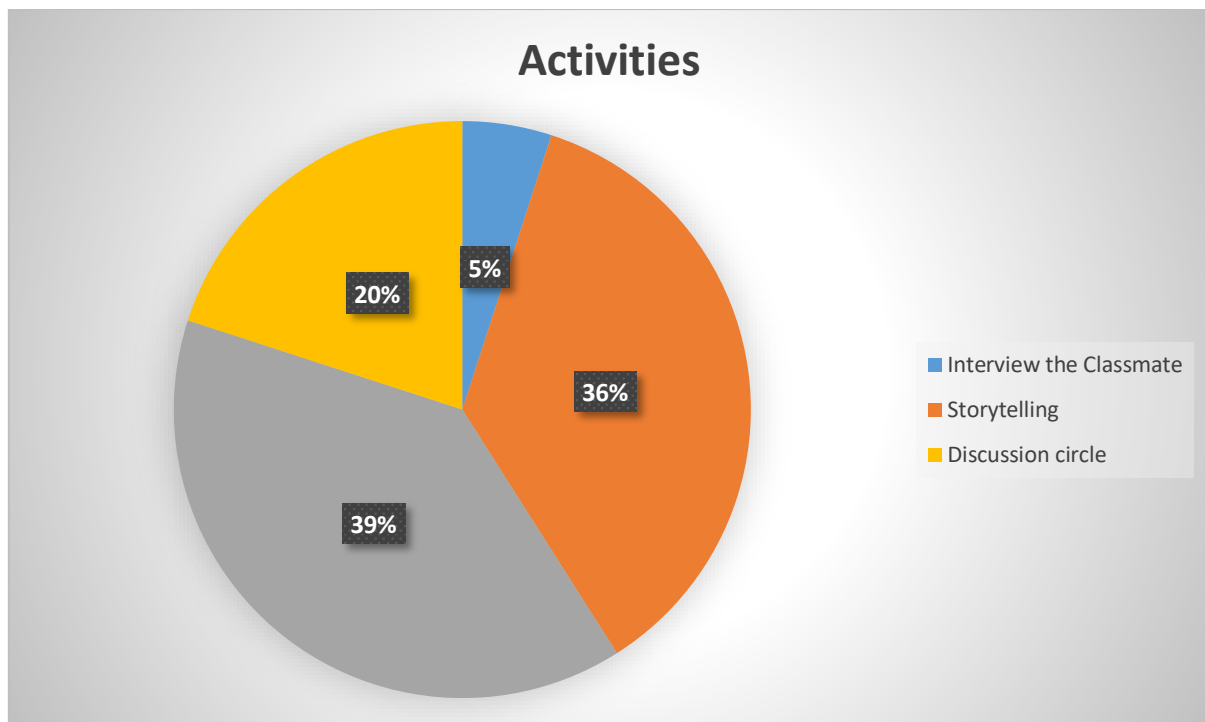


Fig 4: Specific Icebreakers Activities

Figure 4 is about the specific icebreakers activities and shows that eight percent (8%) of teachers prefer interview. Thirty-three (33%) percent of them use discussion circle while fifty-nine (59%) percent use storytelling.

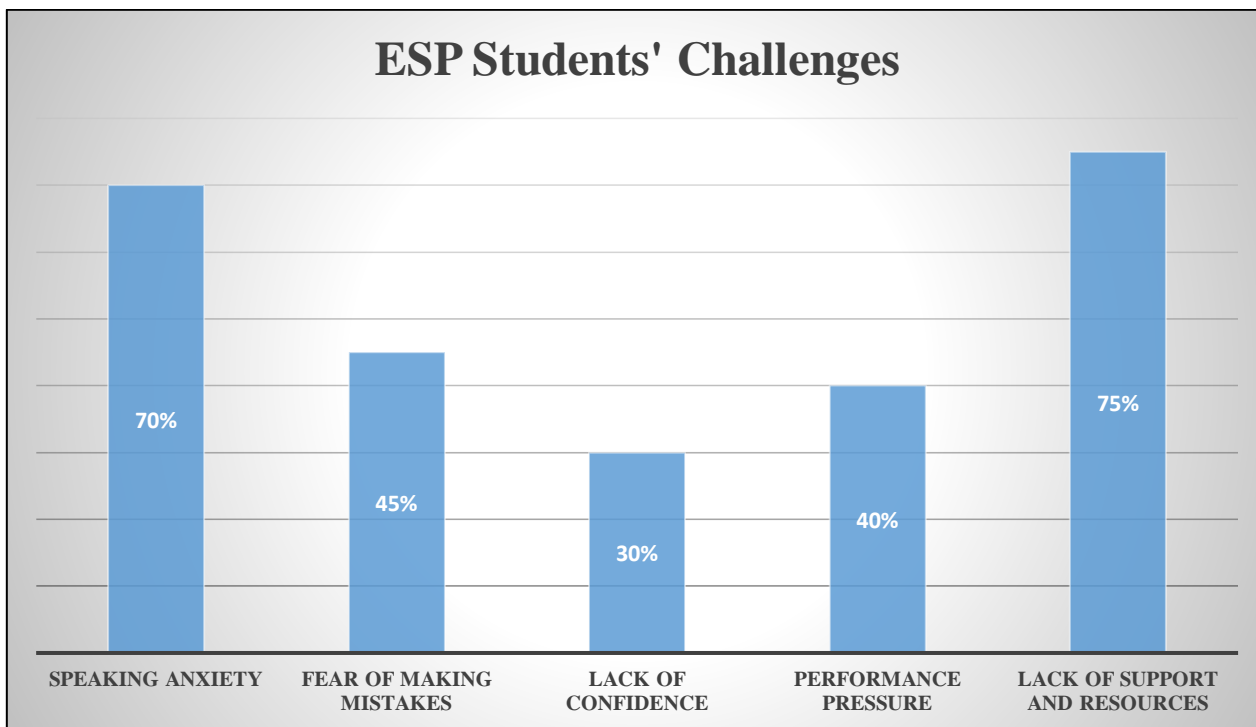


Fig 5: Students' Challenges in ESP Learning

The result of figure 5 shows that seventy percent (70%) of EFL students have speaking problem, forty-five percent (45%) have fear of making mistakes. Thirty percent (30%) of students have lack of confidence problem, forty percent (40%) have performance pressure problem whereas seventy-five percent (75%) is lack of support and resource problem.

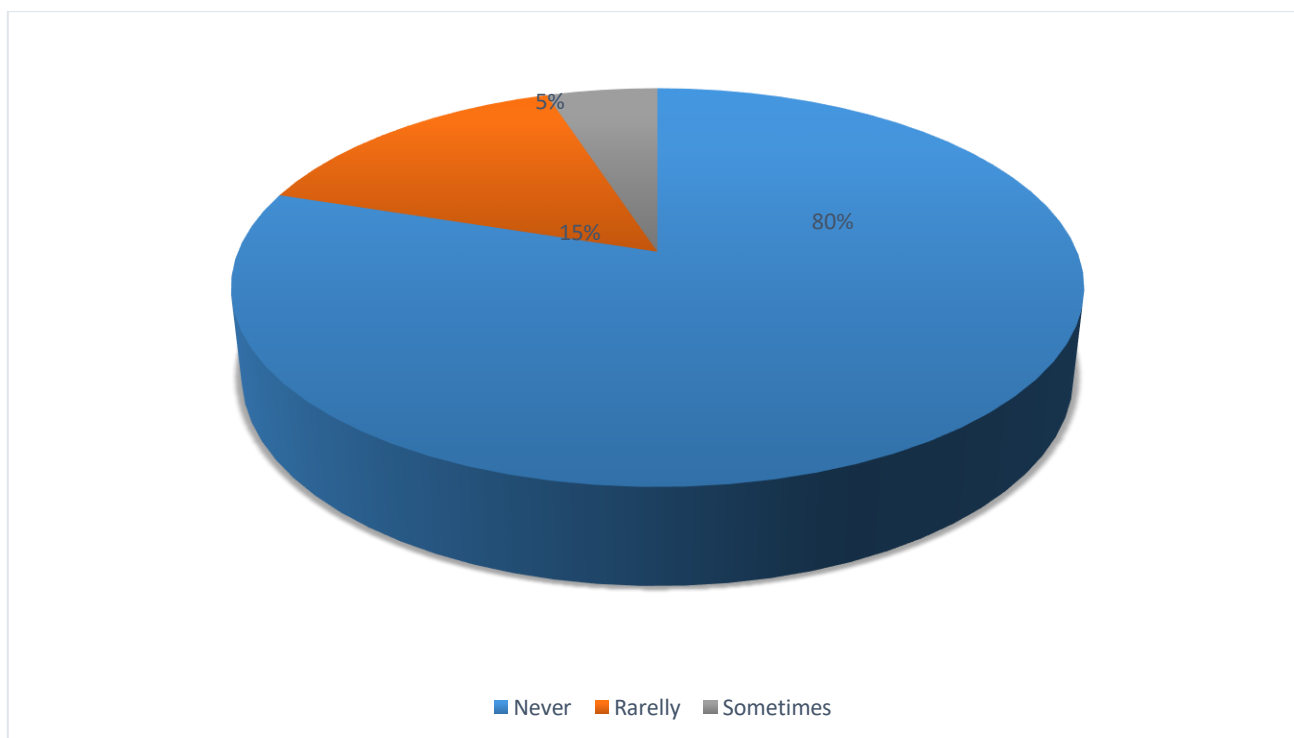


Fig 6: Frequency of Engaging in Icebreakers Activities in Class

Figure 6 help to know how often EFL students engage themselves in icebreakers activities in classroom, through this figure the remark is that eighty percent (80%) of students do not engage themselves in icebreakers activities in English classroom. Fifteen percent (15%) of them participate in icebreakers activities English rarely while just five percent (5%) participate sometimes.

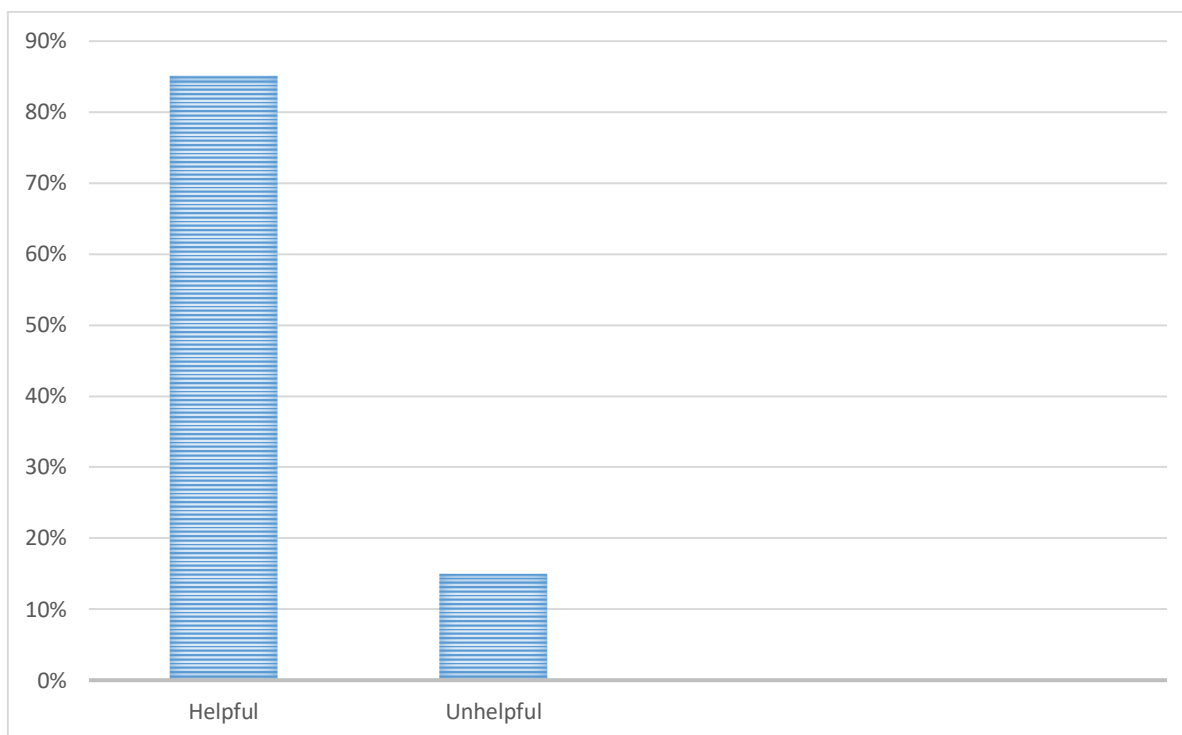


Fig 7: Opinions of Students about Icebreakers

Figure 7 is about the opinion of student about icebreakers activities. It is noticed that eighty-five percent (85%) of EFL learners find icebreakers activities helpful while fifteen percent (15%) of them find icebreakers unhelpful.

Moreover, throughout their answers to the following questions, they all recognize the benefits of icebreakers such as opening communication, bringing positive expectation, enhancing classroom dynamics, increasing willingness, and mutual support. During the period of classroom observation in the selected secondary school, it has been seen a lot of things related to learners' learning condition. As far as the explanation of their teachers is concerned, it has been noticed that most of students are not following the teacher when he starts speaking English. Some of them start sleeping because they do not master the language. But, when the teachers use some activities of icebreakers, all the students get his attention and take active part into the course.

V. RESULTS AND SUGGESTIONS

➤ *Challenges of ESP Teaching about Students Anxiety*

Many challenges stand as hindrances in Benin ESP context. Table 3 reveals the lack of training for teachers. Additionally, as recognized by the large majority (70%) of the respondents, in figure 6, teaching-learning English for Specific Purpose (ESP) often comes with challenges related to students' anxiety. The common challenges faced by ESP teachers in managing student anxiety are multifaceted. Fear of making mistakes, apprehension about pronunciation, and concerns about being negatively evaluated by peers can contribute to FLA. It can also be instigated by communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of judgement, lack of confidence, cultural anxiety, overemphasis on correctness,

linguistic intimidation limited, exposure to authentic language, inadequate support systems, or teacher-centered approaches. The main concern of this study is how to manage FLA in an ESP class.

Addressing these challenges involves adopting student-centered and inclusive teaching methods, creating a supportive learning environment, providing constructive feedback, and acknowledging the diverse needs and learning styles of students. Incorporating activities to reduce anxiety, such as icebreakers and collaborative projects, can also contribute to a more positive and effective learning experience.

➤ *Using Icebreakers to Reduce FLA and Improve Oral Ability in ESP*

Figure 7 conforms the impact of icebreakers in reducing FLA. It is noticed that eighty-five percent (85%) of ESP learners find icebreakers activities helpful while fifteen percent (15%) of them find icebreakers unhelpful. Moreover, throughout their answers to the following questions, they all recognize the benefits of icebreakers such as opening communication, bringing positive expectation, enhancing classroom dynamics, increasing willingness, and mutual support.

Furthermore, the observed lesson classes revealed in the selected secondary school, learners' learning condition. As far as the explanation of their teachers is concerned, it has been noticed that most of students are not following the teacher when he/she starts speaking English. Some of them were sleeping because they do not master the language. But, when the teachers use some activities of icebreakers, all the students get his attention and take active part into the course. Creating a comfortable and supportive environment where

students feel encouraged to use the target language and build connections with their peers, is the key. Icebreakers serve as valuable tools to achieve these goals and enhance the overall language learning experience.

Teachers can use icebreakers strategically to improve oral ability in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. They can use icebreakers to provide real-life opportunities for spontaneous, and informal conversations. Teachers can structure activities that require students to share personal information or opinions, promoting natural language use. They can use icebreakers to promote active listening, to provide pronunciation practices, to facilitate interactions and group discussions among students, to build confidence, and to expand vocabulary. By incorporating icebreakers strategically, teachers can create a supportive and engaging environment that not only helps students overcome anxiety but also cultivates improved oral ability in the English language.

➤ *Implementation of Icebreakers Activities in English Classroom*

Implementing icebreaker activities in an ESP classroom involves thoughtful planning and consideration of the learning objectives. The first step is a need analysis for better understanding of ESP learners' requirements and to tailor inclusive icebreakers respectful of diversity. Then, icebreaker activities should be connected to the learning objectives and matching with the curriculum. Another important step is to ensure that the activities contribute not only to creating a positive and supportive language learning environment, but also suitable for the proficiency level of the students and the specific context of the class. Considering integrated activities that encourage all the skills, mainly critical thinking, speaking, listening, and collaboration is essential.

Instructions are also very important. The teacher should clearly explain the purpose of the icebreaker and the instructions for participation. He/she should ensure that students understand the goals and expectations of the activity and demonstrate the icebreaker activity to the class to provide a clear example of how it works. This helps students understand the structure and expectations before they engage in the activity, and encourage participation. Brown (2007) discusses various interactive activities that can lower the affective filter and promote student participation, which includes the use of icebreakers. He emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and engaging classroom environment to enhance language acquisition based on "an early icebreaker integration, the variety of activities, the relevance to language goals and gradual complexity, the encouragement of positive reflection, the inclusive design, a peer collaboration, the provision of clear instructions, the use of real-world contexts, the flexibility and adaptation, a feedback loop, and the promotion of a growth mindset".

Incorporate icebreakers early in the course to establish a positive and supportive atmosphere, helping to alleviate initial Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). By integrating these strategies, ESP teachers can effectively manage Foreign Language Anxiety using icebreakers in our technical schools

creating a conducive environment for language learning and building students' confidence in using the target language.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study is designed to shed lights on the effectiveness of using icebreakers at schools. Utilizing icebreakers to manage Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in an ESP class proves to be a valuable and effective strategy. The collected data using a mixed-method, demonstrate that the integration of diverse and well-designed icebreaker activities creates a positive and inclusive learning environment, fostering a sense of community among learners. These activities not only address FLA by promoting active participation and collaboration but also contribute to building confidence in using the target language. The positive impact of icebreakers is evident in the reduction of anxiety levels, increased willingness to speak, and the creation of a supportive classroom atmosphere. Icebreakers form the foundations for effective conducive lessons. They can be used to achieve multiple purposes among which is providing learners with a feeling of joy, reflects on the success of learning the activity that follows.

Before applying an icebreaker, teacher should keep in mind learners' needs and relating the icebreaker in to the lesson content. Icebreakers should be chosen differently according to the specific objectives in mind. In addition, variation in icebreakers will not lead learners to feelings of boredom and depression. In essence, the use of icebreakers in managing FLA not only enhances language learning but also cultivates a positive attitude, creating a foundation for a more confident and successful language learning experience in our technical schools.

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