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Let's start with something silly! The use of icebreaker questions in synchronous online education



Photo: Tim Hufner, Unsplash

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At this point, all teachers have been there: an online lesson starting and all you see in front of you is just a grid of black squares with names on them: no video, no pictures, no sounds – if even names, sometimes just “iPhone” text. How can you engage the students from the get-go?

One way is to start with something silly. One such silly way is to start each online session with an icebreaker question.

As a teacher, I tried two different methods, depending mostly on the size of the group. With the larger (over 30 students) group, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its worst, I started every single online meeting with using the Zoom poll to ask three simple questions:

1. Have you already had breakfast?
 - Yes, of course! I can't live without breakfast!
 - Yes, but just some coffee
 - Nah, I never eat breakfast anyway
2. Have you already got dressed?
 - I'm looking very professional today!
 - Yes, but only the part that's visible to the camera
 - No, I'm still in my PJs
3. How are you feeling today?

- I actually prefer online classes
- I don't mind studying from home, but I miss my classmates
- I can't wait to get back to campus!
- Urgh...

This took about 2 minutes, and it was an easy way to activate everybody, without anybody having to answer anything through their microphones if they did not want to. But having something immediately after the "class" started got the students into the mindset that they were now supposed to be focusing on this particular class, not something else.

With a smaller group – 15 maximum – of Ukrainian students in the PrepProg project with a very high focus on speaking, I tried something similar, but by using microphones. This also enabled me to both check that my own camera and microphone worked, and also gave the students the opportunity to do the same. For context, there was another teacher in the course with me, and he also took part in the activity.

I would start each lesson with an icebreaker question, and then first answer it myself and then ask the other teacher present to also answer it – he did not know beforehand what I would be asking, putting him in the same situation with the students. The questions usually had very little to do with the topic of the class, but instead contained, for example, the following:

- What book are you reading now?
- What's your favourite animal?
- What is your everyday "superpower"?
- Would you rather listen to country or classical music?
- If you could have any new skill instantly, what would you choose?
- What time of day are you most productive?
- What activity helps you relieve stress?
- What's the best movie you've ever seen?
- What's the first thing you do when you get home from school/work?
- What would be your ideal time to wake up every day?
- What was your favourite food as a child?
- How old were you when you got your first cell phone?
 - The students' ages varied quite a bit, so this created a lot of good discussion with students and teachers sharing images of their first phones in Zoom

To make things much easier for myself, I had collected a curated list of potential questions from various online sources and saved them as a list of my own beforehand. This meant I did not have to think of a question myself every single time. It also enabled making sure I would not ask the same question twice.

In the beginning, the students hated this, especially since I made sure to ask everybody to participate. Answering through chat was also permitted, as sometimes the students were not in places where they could speak. But after a surprisingly short while, this seemed to become something the students were even looking forward to. It enabled them to get their mind into the “we’re now speaking English” gear, without having to start immediately talking about professional topics. As the aim of the course was to improve the students’ fluency in spoken English, getting them over the initial hurdle of starting to speak each class proved to be very efficient. As mostly everybody spoke, they were also able to hear each other and to hear that not everybody spoke perfect English in the class. And as the other teacher was also caught off-guard by the question each time, it also created a fun “teachers are people, too” feeling.

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