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WARM-UP ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT UNIVERSITY: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

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Abstract

The article studies the role of warm-ups during foreign language classes at the tertiary level and the factors that influence teachers’ decisions regarding this lesson stage. While it is generally acknowledged that warm-ups constitute an essential part of any lesson and cater for teachers’ and students’ needs, university context often makes teachers refrain from this stage. The aim of the paper is to outline the reasons for skipping the initial state of the lesson and assess the grounds for these reasons, as well as to give some practical recommendations. The research is based on the 2019 survey of teachers of the Higher School of Economics – St.Petersburg and identifies some negative scenarios that induce teachers to skip warm-ups. They are connected with reluctance to spend classroom time on warm-ups, fear of students’ negative reaction to a non-academic task, necessity to invest time in designing activities, and insufficiency of recommendations concerning warm-ups. However, the students’ answers reveal their positive attitude to warm-ups and show that teachers’ concerns are futile. The responses of those teachers who regularly conduct warm-ups demonstrate that the setbacks can be easily overcome if teachers are offered initial training and support. The benefits of warm-ups definitely outweigh the predicted (anticipated, involved, associated) drawbacks and this stage should not be neglected in adult classroom.

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that when teaching a foreign language to groups of children and teenagers, it is necessary to begin a lesson with a warm-up, the same being true for teaching of many other subjects, especially the ones focused on the development of skills and abilities (e.g. physical training, drawing, singing, etc.). Peculiarities of warm-ups and their functions in teaching English for general purposes to young learners are widely researched (Velandia, 2008).

Warm-ups, as well as ice-breakers and fillers, are traditionally defined as short and entertaining activities whose main aim is to prepare students for other activities (Allwright, 1984) and to increase their motivation (Dornyei, 2001; Riddell, 2014). While ice-breakers are used only once at the beginning of the course to get acquainted with students and fillers can occur at any lesson stage, warm-ups are supposed to start every lesson. What is more, it is not obligatory for warm-ups to be connected with the main topic of a lesson. Warm-ups can fulfil several functions, many of which are of primary importance for different levels of education:

- to occupy students while latecomers are arriving;
- to offset stress factors caused by the necessity to speak and fear to make mistakes;
- to increase students' interest in the lesson by giving an entertaining task;
- to develop students' cognitive skills;
- to create a friendly atmosphere in the group;
- to vary students' patterns of communication and cooperation

2. Problem Statement

However, when it comes to using warm-ups at a higher level of education, such as university or corporate teaching of adults, they remain underestimated for a number of reasons.

Despite obvious benefits of using warm-ups, it was found out during the study that many university teachers of foreign languages refrain from this stage for a number of reasons. Their apprehensions are refuted by teachers with positive experience and by students' response to this lesson stage, which shows there is not enough awareness of efficiency of warm-ups in adult education.

3. Research Questions

The situation leads to the main question of how sufficient the reasons mentioned by the teachers are to prevent them from beginning their lessons with warm-ups. In addition, the study aims to analyze the drawbacks of using warm-ups and weigh them up against benefits of this lesson stage in order to decide whether positive effects of conducting warm-ups at the higher school level justify additional preparation for a lesson and the sacrifice of some of the lesson time.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is, first, to identify the main reasons for low popularity of warm-ups in the English language classes in the higher school, and, secondly, to analyse how sufficient these reasons are

for avoiding the use of warm-ups. The paper also aims at providing recommendations on how to overcome the problems with conducting warm-ups outlined by the English language teachers.

5. Research Methods

The research is based on the questionnaire answered by 46 teachers of the foreign languages department and 420 undergraduates of the National Research University – Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg in 2019. The questions addressed to the teachers were related to the frequency of using warm-ups in the university context, to the types of activities preferred by instructors, to the sources of the tasks, to the attitude of teachers to this stage of the lesson and their possible reservations. The students, in turn, were asked about their view on this part of the lesson, which could clarify their general attitude to warm-ups.

The results of the survey were then classified as to the reasons to refrain from warm-ups. The answers of teachers with the negative view were compared with the responses of those with the positive attitude. We also tried to establish the correlation between the teachers' and the students' responses so as to ascertain if the former's fears were justified.

6. Findings

On the whole, it was identified that the students' attitude to warm-ups is positive notwithstanding their teachers' views on this lesson stage.

As for teachers with a generally negative attitude to warm-ups, we identified several categories of reasons to abstain from using warm-ups in university education.

The questionnaire demonstrated that not all teachers began university lessons with that stage. Only 46% of respondents regularly began lessons with warm-ups, while 42% reported to use them sometimes and 12% - seldom or never. The main reasons to neglect warm-ups at the foreign language lessons in the university were the following:

- lack of time during the lesson (84%);
- absence of students' positive reaction to warm-ups (52%);
- disproportion of time spent on creating warm-ups and achieved results (30%);
- absence of recommendations on how to conduct warm-ups (26%).

Nevertheless, analysis of the answers of those teachers who consider their experience of starting lessons with warm-ups successful and that of their students proved that the above-mentioned worries are groundless in the majority of cases. Teachers' fears are caused mainly by the lack of practice of conducting warm-ups, absence of positive experience and clear instructions. We will now analyse each of these problems.

Impracticality of wasting classroom time

It is typically recommended by educators that warm-ups should take about five minutes. Many teachers, however, are willing to devote them up to ten minutes (46%), whereas only 8% think that a warm-up should be given for no longer than two minutes. Thus, a warm-up takes from 2 to 10% of the classroom time. It is universally acknowledged that university students tend to be late for classes (more than 80%

come five or ten minutes late) for a number of reasons (Maile & Olowoyo, 2017). For this reason, teachers cannot start the class adequately with reviewing important information or starting a new topic.

Teachers themselves note that the alternatives to a warm-up when dealing with the nuisance of waiting for latecomers are small talk (46%), discussion of news (23%), homework check (52%), information about the grades or upcoming exams (36%), etc. It means they are forced to waste classroom time anyway. Moreover, a student's being late for an academic activity either prevents them from joining the class for a while or requires clarifying the material / assignment again, which slows down the learning process. This can lead to even greater time losses.

As for the students, they were asked what emotions they had about being late for classes. Most (62%) of them replied that the opportunity to be involved in the learning process immediately after entering the classroom was causing anxiety and stress, while involvement with an entertainment phase was not associated with any negative emotions.

Lack of positive reaction to a warm-up from students

This fear is primarily due to the widespread belief that university students are adults and will not be interested in performing tasks unrelated to the topic of the class.

In this regard, many teachers complicate their task by trying to link a warm-up with the lesson aim: 80% of teachers whose experience with warm-ups seems negative use them to introduce a new topic or test students' knowledge.

In fact, for several decades, there has been a tendency that students do not perceive themselves as adults (Arnett, 1994) and thus respond positively to "entertainment learning" (De Freitas, 2018; Whitton & Langan, 2019). At the same time, university students tend to associate themselves with schoolchildren, and react negatively to trivial tasks (Klippel, 1985), so warm-ups should present some complexity not in relation to the language studied, but in connection with cognitive abilities, critical thinking skills or tasks that are similar to real-life situations (Knowles et al., 2015). What is even more important, warm-ups are a means to adapt the material to the needs of the digital generation.

As for the indispensable link between warm-up activities and the topic of the lesson, some researchers believe that it does not necessarily ensure the success of this stage and therefore can be ignored (Riddell, 2014).

The opinion poll of students shows that teachers' fears are groundless: the majority of reactions to warm-ups are "positive" (65%), and about a quarter are "very positive" (15%).

It should be added that students who have not given a positive answer to this question often miss the warm-up stages of the classes due to late arrivals, so it is no exaggeration to say that warm-ups arouse students' interest and certainly increase their motivation.

Disproportion between the time consumed by designing the activities and the achieved results

Teachers believe that designing an entertaining activity which would take about five to ten minutes of the classroom time would require considerable temporal investment, while the attained academic results would be insignificant. This misconception stems from the inaccurate idea of what could constitute an appropriate warm-up, and unawareness of what could serve a source of activities. Besides, teachers

frequently assume that iteration of warm-ups will inevitably lead to a decrease in their appeal, that is why they need to prepare a different type of task for every lesson.

The instructors' positive experience reveals that the opposite is true: designing warm-up tasks is generally not time-consuming. Teachers use a variety of activities – from more traditional discussion questions (75%) to visual tasks (72%), games (36%), tests and quizzes (24%). Some of these activities do require preparation, because students tend to perceive questions offered by their textbooks as the main part of the lesson, which means the teachers may have to formulate their own questions. However, many activities may be spontaneous. They involve riddles and tasks aimed at developing cognitive abilities and more sophisticated thinking skills: finding similarities between two objects (for example, a mirror and a watch), making a list of ways to use an object (for instance, a microwave), etc. These activities switch the students' attention from a language task over to a cognitive one, thus diminishing the stress factor. Further on, the positive impact may be supported by a competition between students or teams.

It is difficult to overestimate the webpage of The New York Times newspaper titled 'What is going on in the picture', which offers eye-catching pictures stripped of captions (published later). An alternative could be a video played without the soundtrack or an audio track played without the video, the task being to restore the missing component, or to guess what preceded the fragment or followed it. Thus, the teacher can even choose the skills – listening, speaking, reading – to focus on during this stage of the lesson.

The repetition of activities is not forbidden. Although it would be beneficial to alternate the assignments, students react positively to the tasks they performed before, as they recall the positive emotions from them and feel more confident about their skills when able to predict the task. The teacher is free to find their own balance between “new” and “old” tasks depending on the students' preferences.

As for the results attained, warm-ups should not be underrated. They generally sustain students' involvement in the lesson and heighten their contribution to the lesson, create and maintain relaxed atmosphere and rapport, ignite students and teachers with positive emotions. It is also important that using a foreign language during warm-up activities is functional rather than instructive, which benefits students in terms of language skills development.

Lack of recommendations on conducting warm-ups

While mentioning the positive effect of warm-ups on the next parts of the lesson and its outcomes, researchers do not always provide practical recommendations on their design and adapting them for higher education institutions. About a quarter of the surveyed teachers responded they were not aware of the most efficient ways to conduct warm-up. The analysis of advanced level foreign languages coursebooks, as well as of that of teacher's book materials, reveals that their authors mainly restrict the role of warm-ups to assessing the previous knowledge of students and introducing a new topic, adding nothing new to the textbook activities. It demonstrates that the approach to warm-ups in teaching young and older adults is not consistent enough. Meanwhile, the Internet, albeit offering numerous resources and activities, sometimes fails to provide a methodological and theoretical basis for their effective usage.

Obviously, this problem can be solved primarily institutionally by conducting seminars for instructors. Teaching the basics of warm-up design does not require much time, but involves certain efforts related to preparing the material and demonstrating the principles of its usage.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, we identified several negative scenarios connected with using warm-ups in foreign language adult classes, such as lack of students' positive reaction to warm-ups and fear to waste time impractically. These reservations are compounded by practical setbacks related to the lack of instructions and unawareness of how to design relevant activities without significant time investment. However, the positive experience of teachers who use warm-ups on a regular basis proves these apprehensions erroneous, and setbacks easily surmountable. A warm-up, which seems an insignificant phase of a lesson, can be a powerful motivating factor and contribute noticeably to the efficiency of classes. Thus, it is worthy of the time and effort spent.

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