

# Extended Icebreaker

by ALEX BARRETT

Icebreakers are first-day activities that are meant to give students and the teacher an opportunity to get to know one another. They are helpful activities for taking a class full of strangers and turning them into friends (or at least acquaintances). However, icebreaker activities tend to be short and limited in the extent to which students can interact. How well can we really get to know someone during a 30-minute activity on the first day of class?

I have used the activity described below across a variety of contexts and levels, most recently at the university level in China. It started when I noticed that students in my classes expected an icebreaker activity on the first day, participated begrudgingly, and then seemingly tried their best to limit their interaction with most of their classmates throughout the rest of the course. This was a problem for me, especially since I wanted them interacting and using English as much as possible. So I decided to extend my icebreaker.

## SETUP

This activity takes a few minutes per day and can be used for a few weeks or throughout the entire course. I think this activity works best at the beginning of the lesson because it serves as a warm-up that gets students speaking right away. It is ideal for English learners who are at least at a level where they can carry on a simple conversation for a couple of minutes, but it can be adapted for lower-level students as well.

Before the class, you just need to select a speaking prompt. I have always used *would you rather* questions as my prompts because

they are fun and personal, and they can easily generate conversation for a few minutes or more, depending on your students. You can find long lists of *would you rather* questions with an online search or come up with your own (in fact, Activate Games has a board game with many examples: <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-board-games#child-1482>). Here are some of my favorites:

- Would you rather have thumbs on your feet or a tail? Why?
- Would you rather be able to fly or to breathe under water? Why?
- Would you rather leave your country but never be able to return, or stay in your country but never be able to leave? Why?

In my opinion, sillier questions make the activity better; they allow personalities to shine through, and that helps students get to know one another faster and better. Also, remember that it's important to add *why* to the end of the question so that students have to justify their answers, which helps them talk more extensively.

## PROCEDURE

On the first day of class, write your speaking prompt on the board so that students can see it. Then say or write the following directions:

1. Stand up and find a student you do not know or have not spoken to.
2. Introduce yourself—and be sure to learn that student's name.

---

**This activity takes a few minutes per day and can be used for a few weeks or throughout the entire course.**

---

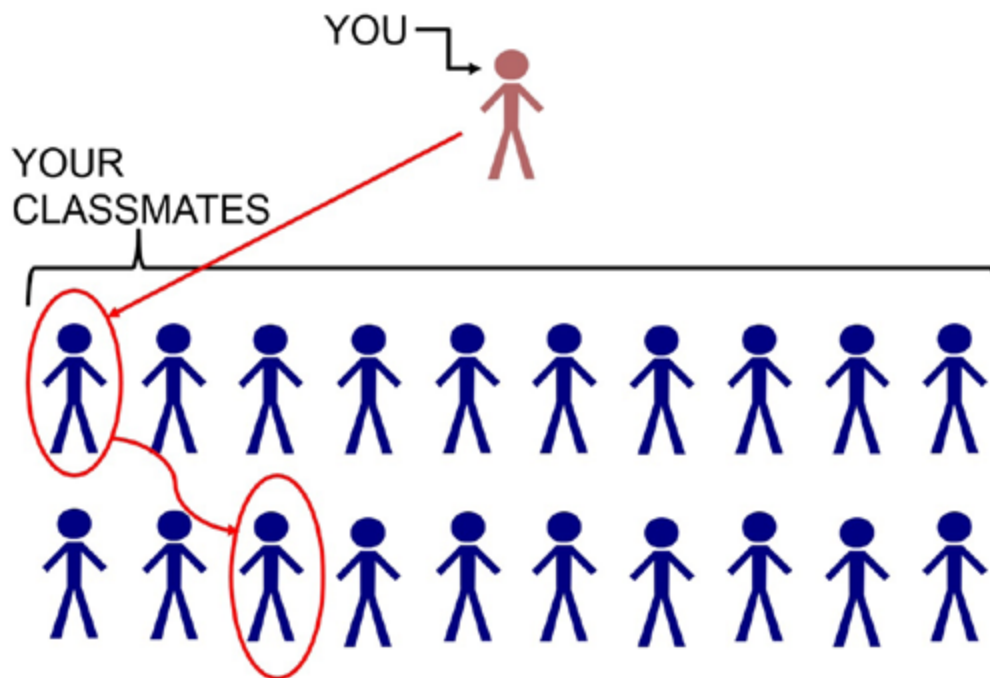
3. Ask that student this very important question [*point to your speaking prompt here*], listen to the answer, and answer the question that student asks you.
4. Keep the conversation going by asking and answering more questions.
5. Continue the conversation for a few minutes, until I say, “Stop.” Then you may return to your seat.

Seems easy, right? Here’s the catch: you do the same thing in the very next lesson, but with one minor change (besides having a new speaking prompt). In the next lesson, you will write the new speaking prompt on the board, but you will add one step in the directions. After Step 3, when both students have had a chance to respond to the prompt, they must point out to their new partner the person with whom they spoke in the previous lesson, then tell their new partner that person’s name and how he or she answered the previous prompt.

Yes, this means that students actually have to remember the names and answers of their

partners. On the first day, they may not have realized that they would be held accountable for this, or they may have forgotten their partner’s name. If that’s the case, encourage them to do their best to memorize the names and answers for the next lesson, when they will do the activity again. Knowing they will continue this activity daily will inspire them to remember more actively. It’s not necessary to have students go back to ask previous partners their names if they have forgotten. However, if your class seems to have a lot of difficulty remembering their classmates’ names, be sure to remind them not to be embarrassed and to reintroduce themselves if they need to. You can even plan for this one day by changing the first step to *find a student whose name you have forgotten!*

After the second day, the speaking prompt will change, but the instructions will stay the same. Students will find someone they haven’t yet spoken with, respond to the prompt, and then point out and name the person they spoke with in the previous lesson (see Figure 1). Although there may be some overlap, in a class of 21 students, one student can learn the



Graphic by Alex Barrett

**Figure 1. In each lesson, a student will meet one new classmate directly; that classmate will point out, identify, and say something about a second classmate.**

---

## Students actually have to remember the names and answers of their partners.

---

names of the entire class within ten lessons by just spending a few minutes at the beginning of each lesson. Not only that, but everyone will have gotten to know something personal about all the students in the class.

Remember to get yourself involved, too. Students will appreciate getting to know you just as well as their fellow classmates, and getting to know your students better is always a benefit. Plus, by participating, you can not only gain insight into your students' language performance but also secretly test students to make sure they are remembering names!

### VARIATIONS

The easiest element to change in this activity is the speaking prompt. Although *would you rather* questions work well, you may also want to use a prompt that prepares students for that day's lesson or one that allows them to review the previous day's topic. For example, if you are studying the present progressive, you can have students ask, "What colors are you wearing today?" That prompts students to answer with specific vocabulary or a targeted grammar point: "I am wearing a red shirt." Simple responses like this can then be extended with follow-up questions about color or fashion choices. After students have become familiar with the activity, you can even have them suggest their own prompts.

If the students are lower-level speakers, you can give simpler prompts that require them to brainstorm about a topic. Prompts such as "Name three things you know about kangaroos" and "What do you want to eat for dinner tonight?" are good for beginners and upper beginners. On the first day of class, you may also need to show them how to do the steps by demonstrating a simple introduction, followed by a sample question and response.

You can also speed up the process of name-remembering by having students recall two or even three of their classmates' names each time. This works well for larger classes, where there might not be enough lessons in the course for students to get all of their classmates' names. Or you can extend the activity by having students mingle with more than one student. For example, a pair of students can meet and discuss the prompt for a minute or so before moving on to new partners; this can continue for a few rounds or for a specific amount of time.

### CONCLUSION

When I started doing this activity, I noticed immediate positive effects. As more and more students became familiar with one another, the level of interactivity in the class increased, doing pair and group activities became much easier and more productive, and students were more supportive of one another. Overall, there was a sense of community in the classroom, and students felt at ease in that community.

Additionally, while doing the activity, students are able to practice several language skills, such as reporting, asking questions, and making small talk. Language is a tool for communicating and forming relationships between people; this activity makes those two things much more accessible by creating and sustaining the opportunity for connection.

**Alex Barrett** is an English for Academic Purposes teacher at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in China. He has also taught English in Honduras and Japan, and he has served as an English Language Fellow in Uzbekistan.