

Easy and Effective Icebreakers for the Japanese EFL Classroom

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要旨

本稿は、講義型授業によって学習者同士のやり取りが制限されがちな日本の EFL 教室を対象に、簡単かつ準備負担の少ないアイスブレイク活動を提示する。先行研究を踏まえ、ランダムな座席配置、Two Truths One Lie 型活動、ビンゴ型活動の三つを取り上げる。

Abstract

This paper presents a set of easy, low-preparation icebreaker activities designed for Japanese EFL classrooms, where lecture-style instruction often limits student interaction. Drawing on previous research, the report highlights three practices: randomly assigned seating, Two Truths One Lie-like activities, and bingo-like activities.

Randomly Assigned Seating

In Japanese EFL classrooms, structure is king. There is nothing worse than stepping into an English classroom in Japan without a clear plan for how to organize students. This is critical, as English classrooms must be structured differently from lecture-style classrooms, where interaction is not only non-existent but often discouraged. In order to break the cycle of students sitting, listening, and not interacting with anyone, teachers must be able to organize students in ways that encourage them to speak with their classmates. There are several steps involved in creating a speaking-focused classroom, and this is just the first step. Without this critical component, teaching in a Japanese EFL classroom can feel like an uphill battle. Figure 1 shows an example of how to easily organize students into pairs that can be flexibly converted into groups.

Figure 1. Seating for students in a classroom.

Student	Student		
		Student	Student
Student	Student		
		Student	Student

Seating can be determined simply by passing out name cards at the beginning of class using the structure shown in Figure 1. Students seated next to one another can immediately form pairs and begin an icebreaker activity. After this initial stage, students can easily form groups with those seated in front of or behind them. This setup is ideal for teachers who wish to create pairs and groups efficiently with minimal preparation, as the name cards can be distributed randomly at the start of class.

Two Truths One Lie-like

This activity serves as an introduction to gamification, making it particularly effective for students who already have diminished interest in English. To break the cycle of traditional lecture-style classrooms, teachers can introduce games such as Two Truths and One Lie. There are many variations of this well-known activity, which is why the suffix “-like” is used to indicate its adaptability. The key component of these games is that students must think of a set number of truths and, ideally, one lie that is difficult for their partner to identify. These statements should relate to the students themselves, as this personal focus allows learners to get to know their peers, which is another critical function of icebreakers.

When students feel they can learn about their classmates through a classroom activity and have a positive experience, they are more likely to be motivated to participate in future classes, particularly in speaking activities. Although students are often highly motivated to get to know their peers, taking the first step can be difficult. Icebreakers such as Two Truths and One Lie help lower this barrier and facilitate initial interaction. While relationship building often occurs naturally over time, it frequently benefits from structured activities like this.

One of the major advantages of Two Truths and One Lie is that it requires minimal effort from the teacher. The activity can be introduced with little to no preparation, making it especially suitable for instructors who teach a large number of classes. Figure 2 shows an example of the Two Truths and One Lie activity.

Figure 2. An example of Two Truths and One Lie.

Write three things about yourself! Your partner guesses which one is the lie!

Truth 1

Truth 2

Lie

Bingo-like

Aspects of bingo make it one of the most flexible and effective icebreaker activities in the EFL classroom. The competitive nature of bingo-like games is valuable for maintaining student interest, especially among learners who already lack motivation for language learning. More importantly, students in Japan are often very familiar with bingo, as it is a game they have likely encountered in other social settings. This familiarity reduces the amount of explanation required from the teacher when the activity is implemented in class.

This is particularly beneficial for newer teachers who may not yet be experienced in giving clear instructions to lower-level EFL students, who often struggle to understand extended explanations. The term “bingo-like” is used to reflect the activity’s high degree of variation and flexibility, as it can

be easily adapted to meet the teacher’s instructional goals. Figure 3 shows an example of a bingo-like activity designed to help students get to know one another.

Figure 3. An example of a bingo activity.

Have you ever visited the US? Partner’s answer:	Do you have a pet? Partner’s answer:	What is your favorite color? Partner’s answer:
Who is your favorite singer? Partner’s answer:	FREE SPACE	What is your favorite sport? Partner’s answer:
Do you enjoy cooking? Partner’s answer:	What is your favorite subject? Partner’s answer:	What is your hobby? Partner’s answer:

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