

APPLYING WARM-UP ACTIVITIES TO INCREASE STUDENT'S EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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Abstract

Applying various warm-up activities in the classroom can become one of the appropriate strategies in order to engage students' interest, create a good atmosphere in the classroom, practice the language, and to make them feel more confident and excited to learn English better. This study was conducted at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam with the participation of 133 the first year students. The data was collected by means of survey questionnaires administered to the students, and interview done to the students. The study used the descriptive method of research design, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of data collected.

Key words: *Applying warm - up activities, increase students' effective learning, the first year students, Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF).*

Introduction

Many students complain that they feel bored doing same thing again and again from the beginning to end of a class. As they do not feel interested in class, they cannot progress much in learning a language. Unfortunately, many teachers do not pay attention whether or not students feel interested and motivated to work with the activities they provide in classes. It is needed to find out how to keep students' interest in learning (Jun, 2000). Using warm up activities can be one way to bring variation in class activity and to make the students curious, focus their attention, provide them purpose and motivation (Eragamreddy, 2013).

Nowadays, the Communicative Language Teaching Approach seems to be dominant, and the communicative competence is the goal of language teaching. Many great changes have been made in classroom atmosphere: learners play active and positive roles during the class time and learners-centered classroom is reached. However, in fact, in Vietnamese Universities, teachers and students still find it difficult to start enjoying the very first moment of a lesson in the target language. Actually, it is not easy to get students start participating the beginning activity of the class. How to encourage students to enjoy English and actively join learning activities is the worry of many teachers.

Recently, the use of warm-up activities has been a topic commonly mentioned in methodologies; since they are considered as an essential ingredient for an effective period in language learning classroom and play an indispensable part in leading to the success of a lesson. Nonetheless, they often receive less attention than they should. Teachers spend a lot of time preparing explanations to introduce and practice the target language, and seem do not prepare carefully for the first five-minute activity of each lesson. This can cause the boredom in classroom for it cannot involve students and attract them to the next contents of the lesson.

With the widely application communicative language teaching where the primary function of language is interaction and communication, and the main aim is to be able to train students who are communicatively competent, the traditional teaching style no longer takes its dominant place in classroom. In other words, in communicative language classroom, students expect to be involved in more activities to develop proficiency in language use. The traditional reading-writing teaching form is no longer appropriate with students. Instead, they need some practical activities which motivate and inspire them as much as possible. Among all of those activities, warm-up activities should be the first element to care about at the beginning of each lesson. The core reason is that to be "the first activity of

the lesson, the warm up sets the tone for the next ninety minutes” (Chris Cotter, 2012). This means whether students are motivated to enjoy the rest of the lesson or not, to some extent, depends on the warm-up activity. From this point of view, using warm up activities to motivate and engage students is critical.

Research questions

The research questions that the study addressed are:

1. What are the perceptions of the first students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry towards warm-up activities?
2. What kind of types of warm-up activities which enhance the first year students’ effective English learning?
3. In what ways are warm-up activities used for the first year students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry?

Research Design

This study is mainly an exploratory study in which a number of 'what' questions need to be answered. Since both numerical and non-numerical data are required to answer the questions being addressed and to understand the phenomenon from different angles, a multi-method research strategy combining quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted.

One reason for adopting this design is that a mixed strategy could best serve the purpose of the study in answering the research questions. Quantitative data, for instance, allow one to code and quantify any discourse acts which take place in the classroom. In my view, numerical data help in providing an overall picture of the nature of classroom interaction, especially when comparison is involved. Qualitative data, on the other hand, supplement the findings of quantitative research by providing examples from transcripts of learning in action and in obtaining explanations for teachers' behavior in class. Thus, both quantitative and qualitative data can be used to supplement and support each other.

Results and Discussion

The Questionnaire for Students

The students’ experience in learning English

To get insight into the level of English proficiency of the students, the researcher incorporated a question in the questionnaire about the students’ experience in learning English.

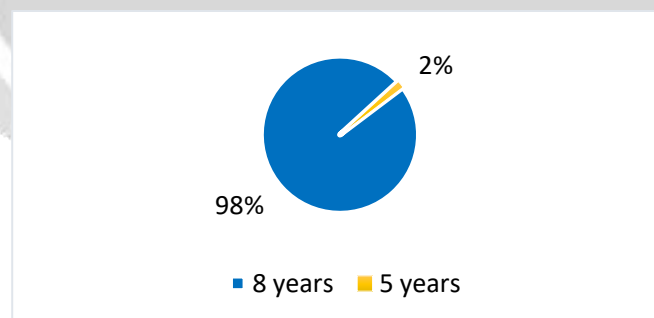


Figure 1. Student’s experience in learning English

According to Figure 1, we can see that 111 of 133 students (98%) have been learning English for 8 years as part of formal education, whereas 2 students (2%) said that they started learning English 5 years ago. This can be implied that the almost the students had the same duration learning English. Despite that fact, some students had good background with solid knowledge of English language and communication skills, while some was less proficient user of English. This situation was confirmed by the academic records of the students in the first semester of the academic year 2022 – 2023.

Students’ perception towards the warm-up activities

The questionnaire consists of items to determine the students’ perception toward the warm-up activities. According to the results of the survey, the students’ perception toward the importance of warm-up activities in English class is shown in Figure 2.

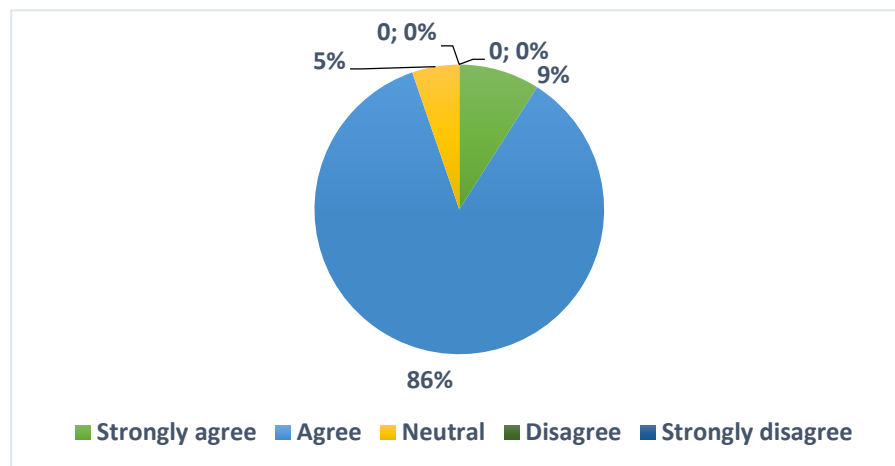


Figure 2. Students' perception towards the importance of warm-up activities

114 students (86%) agreed that using warm-up activities in their class is important to help them learn English better. 12 other students (9%) added more confirmation of the importance of using warm-up activities in English class as they ticked "Strongly agree". While 07 (5%) of the students showed a neutral attitude toward the importance of warm-up activities, no students disagreed or even strongly disagreed with the mentioned statement in the questionnaire. The result implies that the students accept the importance of using warm-up activities in enhancing their effective English learning.

In order to understand why the students confirmed the importance of warm-up activities, the researcher raised a question in the questionnaire about the benefits of warm-up activities as perceived by the students. The data collected is represented in the table below.

Table 1. Students' perception towards the benefits of warm-up activities

<i>What advantages do you think warm-up activities bring about when they are used before the lesson?</i>	<i>No. of responses</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
A. Waking students up	98	73,7
B. Helping students understand each other better	43	32,3
C. Marking the shift when students have finished learning about one topic before starting on a new topic	72	54,1
D. Making the tasks more exciting	117	88,0
E. Increasing the involvement of students	101	75,9
F. Releasing stress	89	66,9
G. Creating a happy atmosphere	125	94,0
H. Others:	15	11,3

As shown in Table 1, the majority (94%) of the students accepted that warm-up activities create a happy atmosphere. At the same time, 117 students (88%) believed warm-up activities make the tasks more exciting, whereas 76% of the students assumed that these activities increase their involvement in the lesson. Regarding mental benefits of warm-up activities, 67% of the students reported that warm-up activities help release stress, while 98 students (73,7%) thought they wake the students up for a better state of mind. Around half of the students thought that activities in warm-up stage mark the shift when students have finished learning about one topic before starting on a new topic and only a third of the students assumed that warm-up activities help the students understand each other better. Besides, 15 students wanted to add more advantages of warm-up activities and their specification mainly covers reviewing the previous lessons and removing laziness. The result of the survey indicates that among the perceived benefits of warm-up activities, creating a happy atmosphere, making the tasks more exciting and increasing the involvement of the students are the most outstanding.

The teaching method have vital impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning English. Nowadays, the students are more active and dynamic to participate in learning activities and more attention should be paid on individual learning styles. Thus, the class arrangement that reflects part of the teaching method chosen by the teacher also reflects the learning preference of the students. Figure 3 represents the preference of the students when joining in warm-up activities in terms of class arrangement.

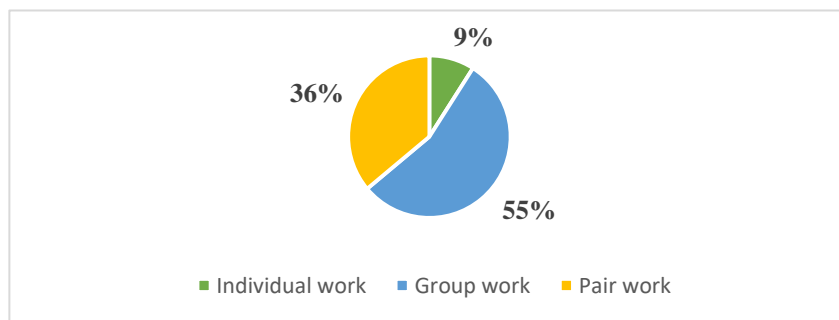


Figure 3. Students’ preference of class arrangement for warm-up activities

Whilst more than half of the surveyed students prefer group work in warm-up stage, only 9% of them enjoy working individually on warm-up activities. For those who enjoyed pair work, the group accounts for 36% of the students. This result implies that more group work and pair work tasks should be designed for the students other than tasks to be done individually.

With regard to the types of warm-up activities the students prefer, as shown in Figure 4, most of the students (124/133) like games in warm-up stage. This is consistent with the aforementioned most outstanding perceived benefit of warm-up activities (creating a happy atmosphere). Watching videos and singing or listening to songs also attract the majority of the students, represented by 101 and 89 votes, respectively. Around a third of the students enjoyed such activities as exploiting pictures, discussion and brainstorming. Activities with short stories get the least number of choices (28/133). This result may serve as a recommendation for teachers to choose warm-up activities for their English classes.

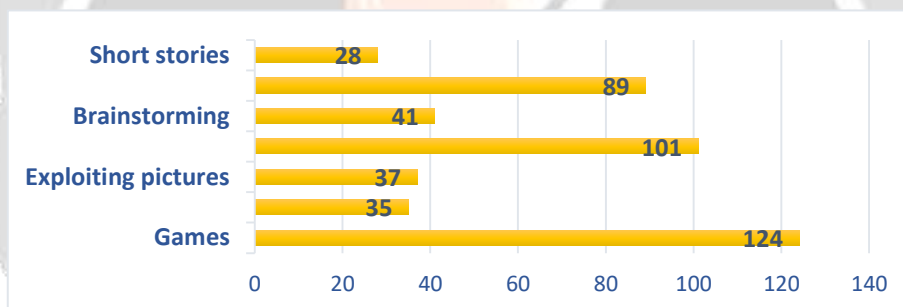


Figure 4. Students’ preference of activities for warm-up stage

Students’ perceptions towards warm-up activities used in the English classes at TUAF

In order to understand the familiarity of warm-up activities, the frequency of having warm-up activities in the surveyed English classes was enquired. The result for this is demonstrated in Figure 5.

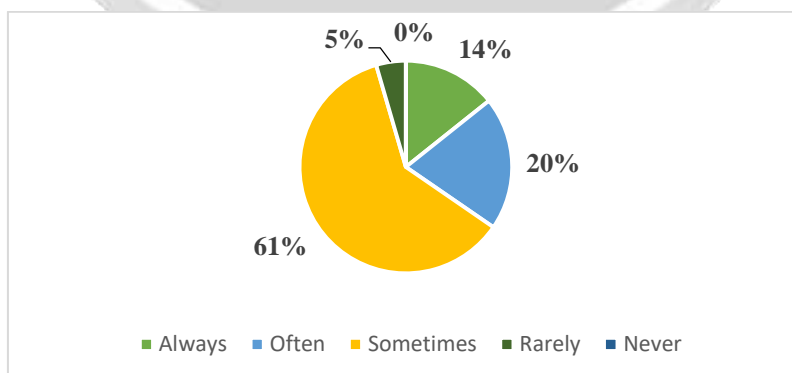


Figure 5. Frequency of having warm-up activities

As shown in Figure 5, the majority (81 of 133) of the first year students at TUAF sometimes have warm-up activities in their English lessons, while 20% of the surveyed students confirmed they often have warm-up activities in their class. On one extreme, 19 students (14%) said they always have warm-up activities in their English class; on the other one, no students reported they never have

warm-up activities. The result indicates that most of the students are familiar with the warm-up stage of a lesson. However, the frequency of having warm-up stage varies among groups of the students.

The question “What are the activities you do or the teacher does at the beginning of the class?” aspires to know the various warm-up activities that the students do in their English lessons as well as to determine the activities that are more or less commonly provided by the teachers.

It is noticeable that the activities we put as suggested answers were all ticked by students. It means that these warm-up activities can be considered as the main warm-up activities that the teacher are used to giving in class. Only 5 students ticked the option “Others”, which means other alternatives rather from the suggested list were used limitedly.



Figure 6. Representation of warm-up activities students do in class

Statistics reveal that reviewing the previous lesson is commonly done by most students (91); reviewing is actually a good warm-up activity since students need to be reminded of the previous lesson especially if the course of the day depends on the previous one. Some students have also experienced doing a game and exploiting pictures during the warm-up stage. We can infer according to this information that in the classes of students we surveyed, playing games and exploiting pictures are explicitly integrated as part of warm-up activities; the figures also show that they are more used as warm-up activities than the other ones such as singing or listening to songs and watching videos. Group work was also used modestly as compared to other types of warm-up activities.

To investigate the involvement of the students in the warm-up activities, the researcher asked them a question and the result is revealed in Figure 7.

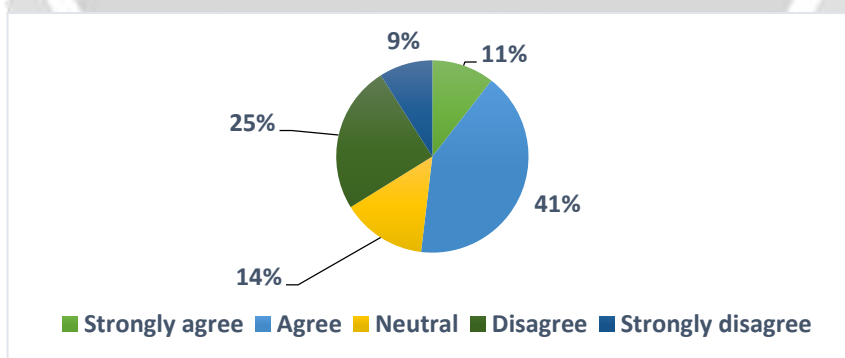


Figure 7. Representation of student’s participation in warm-up activities

It can be seen from Figure 7 that half of the students confirmed their active participation in warm-up activities delivered by the teachers at TUAUF. However, a third of them admitted they did not fully participate in these activities. At the same context, 19 students (14%) showed a neutral response about their active participation.

To get more insight into students’ perception of the impacts of the warm-up activities used in their English classes at TUAUF, the researcher designed a question in the questionnaire which requires the students to point out the aspects that warm-up activities used in their classes achieved. According to the results of the survey, the most outstanding impact is to effectively continue the lesson when 94 students (70,7%) reported. Being an interesting and enjoyable activity and focusing the student’s

attention rank the second and the third, respectively, while being related to the topic of the lesson ranks the last in terms of number of choices. The detailed picture can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Student’s perception toward the impacts of warm-up activities

<i>Which of the following aspects do warm-up activities used in your class achieve?</i>	<i>No. of response</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
Focus students’ attention	82	61,7	3
Help students begin to work	73	54,9	5
Prepare students for a period of concentration	75	56,4	4
Be an interesting and enjoyable activity	87	65,4	2
Be useful to continue the lesson	94	70,7	1
Be related to the topic	59	44,4	6

Based on the results of the survey, it can be recognized that if the teachers at TUAF follow the principles of a good warmer, they should pay attention to the students’ responses to improve the effectiveness of their designed activities. The results of the survey indicate the low effectiveness of the warm-up activities delivered by the teachers, and the situation needs to be addressed and take some measures to enhance the productivity of the warm-up activities.

The low effectiveness of the warm-up activities as perceived by the students is confirmed when Figure 7 is taking into consideration. According to the results of the survey question “You are satisfied with warm-up activities used in your English lessons”, nearly a third of the student showed satisfaction with the warm-up activities carried out by the teachers, whereas, 40% of the students (59/133) reported no satisfaction with these activities. In a mixed mind to justify their opinion, 26 of 133 students reported neutral satisfaction. These results may disclose the fact that the warm-up activities delivered by the teachers at TUAF did not meet the expectation of the students.

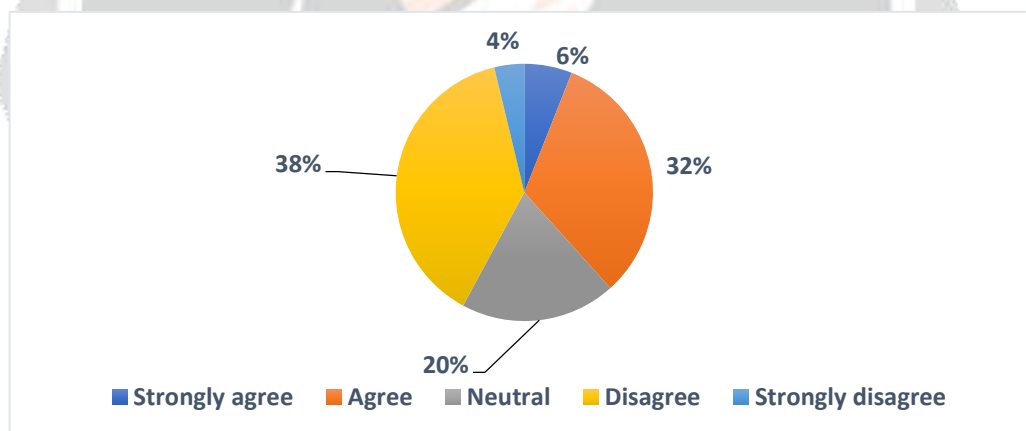


Figure 8. Representation of student’s satisfaction with warm-up activities

Certainly, the ineffectiveness of the warm-up activities carried out in the warm-up stage by the teachers at TUAF, in combination with the inactive participation and low satisfaction of the students may have certain reasons that can be explored. The researcher attempted to find out the difficulties encountered by the students while taking part in warm-up activities in their English classes. Based on the results of the survey, the students did encounter certain difficulties as represented in Figure 9.

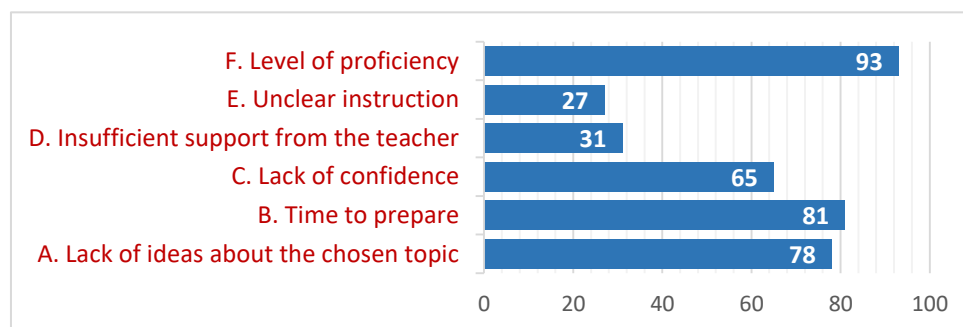


Figure 9. Difficulties encountered by the students

It can be easily seen from Figure 9 that the level of proficiency is the most problematic among the difficulties they encountered. 93 of 133 students said they had problems with their level of proficiency. This implies that the activities may be more difficult than the real level of the students. The second biggest difficulty falls on the time constraint. Obviously, the warm-up stage can be best allocated within ten minutes per 50-minute period, and the warm-up activity is normally unpredictable and cannot be prepared by the students before attending the class. Thus, the students may get confused to finish the activities in a short amount of time. Despite this fact, the teachers are advised to be well-prepared for the activities they want to deliver in the warm-up stage as well as to make them as short as possible to follow the previously discussed principles of a good warm-up activity. Besides, 78 students reported they lack ideas about the chosen topic for certain warm-up activities. This indicates the failure of the teachers in choosing topics for warm-up activities. So as to improve this situation, the teachers need to take into thorough consideration of the topics that are familiar or can exploit student's existing knowledge.

To better support the teachers with the investigated topic, the researcher examined the students' expectation of the way warm-up activities should be designed and delivered in their English classes. This is important information that may help the teachers fully understand students' expectation to adjust their teaching in a suitable way. According to the results of the survey, most of the students (94%) expect familiar types of warm-up activities. 121 students (91%) preferred the teachers to use warm-up activities more often in their lessons, whereas, only 15 of 133 students (11,3%) wanted to join fewer warm-up activities. This may imply that the students realize the vital roles of the warm-up activities in enhancing their English learning. In addition, 90,2% of the students wanted more activities which involve action and movement. It is understandable that at their young age, they prefer a dynamic learning environment to foster their learning process. Furthermore, the students do not like the monotony in their class, so most of them (88%) expected that their teachers do not always repeat the same types of warm-up activities. Instead, they wanted a variety of kinds to be used and renewed day by day. They also wanted to join more pair-work and group-work activities. This is revealed by the results of the survey as 113 students showed their responses and the desire for more warm-up activities related to pair-work and group-work should be paid attention to by the teachers. The detailed representation of student's responses is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Student's expectation about the use of warm-up activities

	<i>No. of responses</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
Shorten them	97	72,9	6
Prolong them	22	16,5	7
Use warm-up more often	121	91,0	2
Use warm-up less often	15	11,3	8
Use familiar types of warm-up activities	125	94,0	1
Renew and use a variety of types of warm-up activities	117	88,0	4
Add more activities which involve action and movement	120	90,2	3
Add more activities related to pair-work and group-work	113	85,0	5

In short, this section presents an analysis of the data collected from the students' questionnaire. The students' perceptions towards warm-up activities in general have been drawn out, and their perceptions towards the use of warm-up activities at TUAF have been justified. The findings in this section provide valuable information for teachers to innovate their teaching strategies and methods to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning English at other universities.

The Interviews

For this section, we have asked 4 questions to have a certain idea of the students' opinions toward warm-up sessions. We mainly wanted to deduce through their answers the effects of the warm-up sessions on the students and the warm-up activities they prefer to do. These pieces of information will help us to reinforce the fact that students certainly need warm up sessions; it will also serve as a means to design a warm-up session adapted to the needs of these learners.

QUESTION 1: *At the beginning of the course, does your English teacher do or give you activities to do before delivering the main lesson?*

Asking this question was necessary for the students to be able to answer the other questions. This was also to check if teachers really provide warm-up sessions in their classes since most of the teachers who answered the survey teach these students.

Within the 20 students we interviewed, 17 (85%) answered "YES", and 3 (15%) responded "NO". Since these students represent individuals from different classes, we can infer that, in a large scale, majority of classes are familiar with warm-up sessions. Nonetheless, some classes still do not receive any warm-up sessions; it means that, in a school year, some teachers do not provide any warm-up session at all.

QUESTION 2: *What kind of warming up activities (Games and competition, Discussion, Story-telling from pictures, Listening to or singing a song, Watching a video, Review your previous lessons) do you like the most? Why?*

The students' responses are summarized in Figure 10.

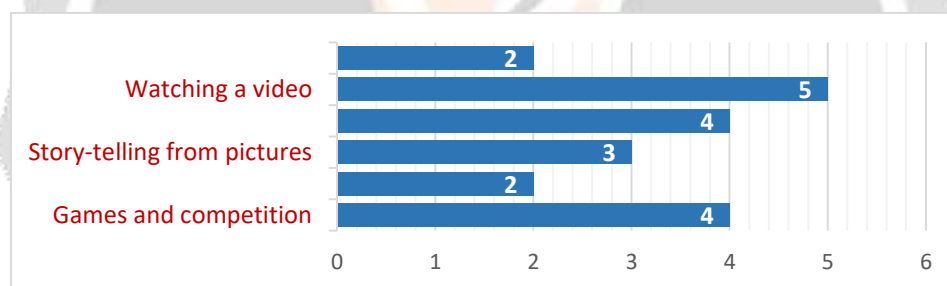


Figure 10. The most favorite warm-up activity

We can see clearly that the pupils largely prefer song listening, video watching, games and competition. These choices reinforce the fact that students need to be entertained while learning; and these 3 activities actually gives more in terms of entertainment. This reason mainly influenced most of the students to choose singing as their preferred warm-up activity. Also, if we look closely to the activity of watching videos and singing/listening to songs, both activities are more related with their daily activities; thus, these students like doing activities that remind them their daily life because these kinds of activities answer their needs and interest. Preferring to do games and competition at the beginning of the class is also understandable since the learners are interacting with their mates, and it helps them to be more confident and relaxed. Knowing this situation is essential for the teachers since they want to be sure that the warm-up activities they are delivering correspond to the students' needs.

The reasons they have given well demonstrate that doing warm-up activities bring positive effects to students, and these learners actually feel it. It is worth mentioning that the reasons below were directly given by the students without any suggestions of answers from the researcher.



Figure 11. Students' reason to like doing warm-up activities

These statements reveal all the advantages brought by warm-up sessions in English classes; the fact that these students have been able to express these reasons implicitly demonstrates again that doing warm-up activities highly affects students. And we can infer from these statistics that the learners really need this stage to be motivated; furthermore, they like the feeling of being entertained while learning, and last, they clearly need time to prepare smoothly their minds so that they can receive the lesson ahead.

QUESTION 3: *Do you want your teacher to use those activities more often in your lessons? Why? Why not?*

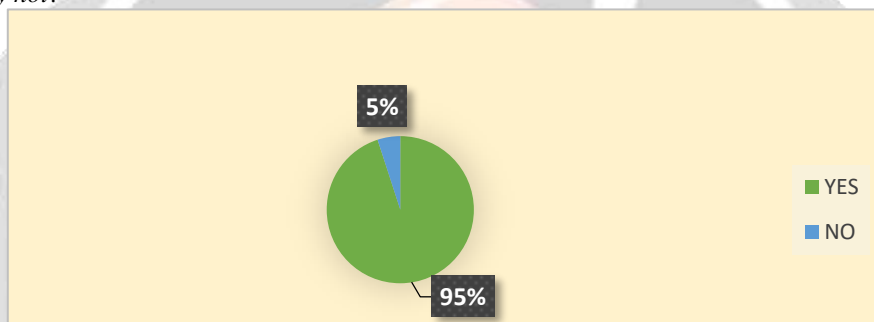


Figure 12. Students' expectation about the frequency of warm-up activities

Most of the students expressed that they wanted their teachers to use those activities in English lessons. They said that these activities helped the lessons more interesting and they felt more excited in the lessons. Among the twenty interviewed students, one said that he did not like those activities. He thought that they took a lot of time, and his friends and he spoke in Vietnamese rather than English in the activities.

QUESTION 4: *What do you think about the time your teacher spends on warm-up activities?*

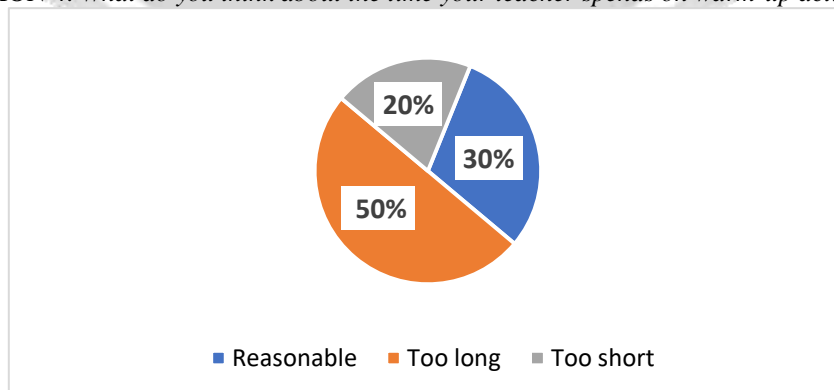


Figure 13. Students' opinion about the time for warm-up session

Taking a look at Figure 24 above, the first thing which can be illustrated is that most of students want the teachers to shorten warm-up activities to ensure that all the other parts are completed on time. Only 20 % of students wanted the warm-up session to be prolonged. Nearly a third of the students said that the time spent on warm-up activities is reasonable, though.

QUESTION 5: *What factors are needed for students to successfully engage in warm-up activities?*

When being asked this question, all the students said that the teachers should have a suitable method and the students should have a right attitude to their learning English. Most of the students also required that the activities introduced by the teachers should be suitable to students' proficiency level while 4 among 20 students thought that the school should supply good class environment and facilities such as fordable chairs and tables, small class size and interactive boards. Additionally, the students added that communicative activities and collaborative work should be used in warm-up session in order to increase students' participation and confidence. Importantly, they thought the teachers should move around to help weaker or silent students to be involved in the activities with highest attention and language exposure. In order to do this, the teachers must have clear instructions and make sure all of the students know what they are going to do, what aims they can obtain, and the teachers should control the use of the mother tongue at reasonable proportion.

In short, the result of the interviews with the students provide more insight into the current situation of using warm-up activities in at TUAf. It can also be a double check with what has been answered in the students' questionnaire and gives more valuable information about the students' perceptions toward the use of warm-up activities to enhance their effective English learning at school.

Conclusions

It is evidenced to assert that using warm-up activities is an effective way of helping students to begin the English lesson. In this regard, the researcher completely agrees with Allwright (1984) who concluded, that "with warm-ups, students paid closer attention, asked better questions and seemed a bit more excited than before" (p. 162). This author also claims that "the proper presentation of warm-ups will cause people to stop whatever they are doing or thinking and refocus their attention" (p. 164), an aspect that could be confirmed through the findings of this study.

Based on the results collected mainly in the class observations, these kinds of activities really appear to promote students' involvement in the English class. They must be used as a motivation and a means of preparing the ground for the various stages of the lesson. As pointed out in this study, they are neither long tasks nor an explanation of the topic. In the same way, they must not be considered as isolated stages in the process or be centered on only one skill. That means we can prepare the warm-up with the objective of involving students' participation and letting them communicate at an early stage of the lesson.

Some important aspects to be considered for the warm-up development are the level of proficiency, instructional strategies, class arrangement and the preferred types of activities to increase participation or involvement, confidence and entertainment.

It is also important to remark that no matter how simple warm-up activities can be, they should be well-prepared. In addition, we need to examine the connection for the later activities so that we, as teachers, can take advantage of them to develop our lessons. For example, to prepare the warm-up related to the writing of description paragraph, the teacher only has to think about the sentences the students must include in this activity and the right order to develop the activity. Consequently, it did not demand a lot of time to prepare or complicated materials to be implemented.

Teachers can promote students' involvement at the very beginning of the class by applying warm-up activities, and for warm-up activities to be effective, they should be short, be motivating, useful to continue later activities, interesting, and enjoyable. In doing so, teachers can prepare students to concentrate and to help them begin to think and focus their attention on the English lesson.

To address the students' low motivation and reluctance of participating in warm-up activities, it is very important for teachers to vary their techniques and activities so as to involve their students in the lesson and reduce the boredom of the lesson. It is a good idea to use teaching aids like pictures, games, songs, funny stories to reduce tension before and during the lesson. Moreover, it is the teacher's behavior that is a decisive factor to increase students' participation. The teacher's helpfulness, enthusiasm, friendliness and sense of humor make students interested in learning.

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