

Start Strong, Finish Stronger: Classroom Warm-Ups as a Bridge to Student's Learning

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Abstract: Warm-up activities are considered to be an effective way of engaging students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes for enhanced and quality learning. If the class begins with a warm-up activity, the rest of the class time could be utilized to the best of the students' learning. This paper intends to explore students' perceptions towards the use of warm-up activities in EFL classes and to assess the extent to which warm-up activities are used in the EFL classes of Kandahar University. A quantitative survey design was used to collect data from a randomly selected sample of 136 EFL students at Kandahar University. A questionnaire was used as the primary tool for data collection. The findings revealed that the students perceive warm-up activities as beneficial in the class. It was also found that the lecturers in the EFL classes of Kandahar University do not implement warm-up activities sufficiently. This study contributes to filling the identified research gap and offering specific implications based on the study's findings for educators, lecturers, and curriculum designers regarding integrating warm-up activities as part of the teaching and learning process.

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to enhancing students' learning in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context within the classroom environment, everything counts in terms of its occurrence in the classroom, including how a classroom starts, what activities and teaching methods are used, and how the lesson is wrapped-up. Since a good and smooth start to any class plays a vital role in how the class proceeds until the end, it is, therefore, important to begin a class with a valuable and engaging activity, which is referred to as a warm-up activity (Velandia, 2008; Estalkhbijari & Khodareza, 2012).

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Having a class started with a suitable warm-up activity, students would feel more interested, engaged, and motivated to participate more in the class activities (Akther, 2014). These activities create a harmonious class atmosphere and give students a sense of belonging (Claxton, 2008). This results in inspiring students to learn well (Le, 2022). The motivation produced as a result of warm-up activity makes the students feel more ready for the tasks during the class (Savaş, 2016). Lengari and Pavita (2023) found that students had positive perceptions of using warm-up activities to foster their motivation in English Language classrooms. Likewise, the findings of another study revealed that the experiment group that experienced warm-up activities in their English Language Learning journey performed significantly well (Estalkhbijari & Khodareza, 2012).

Though it is a challenge for EFL instructors to get their students' attention and motivate them to participate in classroom activities, these activities, if they are shorter and focus oriented, can be a great way to tackle this challenge (Savaş, 2016). Moreover, the usage of these activities can prove to be boring for students if a similar type of these activities is used repeatedly (Khoirunnisaa et al., 2024). However, these activities require planning and preparation, which include materials, media, and methods (Fitria, 2023). Games as warm-up activities have the potential to effectively help students learn the intended lesson well (Zakaria, 2021).

Studying the influence of warm-up activities in the EFL classes within the unique and specific academic Afghan context of Kandahar University highlights the significance of this study. Educators, administrators, and curriculum designers need to understand the important role of warm-up activities in language classrooms as they comprehensively improve students' learning and engagement in the classroom setting. Concerning Kandahar University's context, one of the most prominent public universities in Afghanistan, it is noticed that minimal attention is given to the usage of warm-up activities by the professors or instructors in the EFL classes. Also, minimal research on using warm-up activities in classes is conducted in Afghanistan, especially at Kandahar University, presenting a research gap. The current study would address this gap by studying how warm-up activities are used in EFL classes as a class starter activity. The findings of this study would also provide an understanding of the benefits of employing warm-ups in EFL classrooms at Kandahar University.

Moreover, the findings of this research would provide insights to not only the educators of Kandahar University but also educators of all universities in Afghanistan and around the world to make informed decisions regarding the use of warm-up activities as a vital class component so that the overall quality of EFL instruction could be enhanced. The current study primarily seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. To what extent are warm-up activities used in the EFL classrooms of Kandahar University?
2. What are EFL students' perceptions towards using warm-up activities in EFL classrooms?

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to describe the trends within the target population, a survey design using a quantitative research approach was chosen as a suitable research design to guide the study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), in a survey design, one must systematically collect data from a sample or population to study or explain their attitude, knowledge, characteristics, or behavior.

Population and Sample Size

The population for the study consisted of students from the EFL Department of Education Faculty at Kandahar University. The total population of the students for the study was 220, from which a random sample size of 136 was selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Sample size table.

Instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire was newly developed, and several additions and omissions were made based on feedback from content experts to fit the current study's aims. The questionnaire was designed to have multiple Likert Scale-based questions in two main parts: Part one contained ten Likert scale questions intended to determine the availability extent of different kinds of warm-up activities in EFL classes of Kandahar University. Part two consisted of eleven Likert scale questions related to students' perceptions of using warm-up activities in EFL classes.

Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure validity, the questionnaire was shared and checked by three content experts in the relevant field. Several revisions were made to the research instrument, including additions and omissions based on the experts' suggestions to enhance its validity. The instrument's reliability was checked using SPSS software (Version 24). The reliability test scores obtained for the two parts of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Reliability of the instrument*

Variable	Items	Alpha
The Influence of warm-up activities on students' engagement in the classroom	11	0.709
The extent of warm-up activities usage in the classroom	10	0.922

Table 1 presents the questionnaire's reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha). The initial 11 items produced an alpha of $\alpha = 0.709$, whereas the final 10 items showed stronger internal consistency with an alpha of $\alpha = 0.922$. Each item contributed positively to the scale, as removing any would have lowered the overall reliability score.

Ethical Considerations

To ethically proceed with data collection, the researchers discussed the aims of the current study with the Dean of the Education Faculty. They obtained permission to conduct research in the faculty. Before the data collection, the nature and aims of the current study were thoroughly explained to the study participants, who agreed to participate voluntarily. The questionnaire was distributed to the students studying in the English Language and Literature Department of Education Faculty at Kandahar University to study their perceptions. All study participants were treated fairly and equally, data obtained from them was analyzed without manipulation, and the results were reported as found.

Data Analysis

The research examined data by calculating both the mean scores and standard deviations. Using SPSS software version 24's descriptive statistics package eased this analysis, which is renowned for its strong analytical features. This approach yielded succinct insights into the dataset, guiding subsequent decision-making rooted in the study's outcomes.

FINDINGS

This part presents the specific findings that address the research questions of the current study. Each research question has been addressed in a separate section, and the findings are divided into various subtitles.

The Availability Extent of Warm-up Activities in EFL Classes

The study's first objective sought to determine the extent to which warm-up activities are used in the EFL classes at Kandahar University. The relevant findings are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: *The extent of warm-up activities usage in the classroom*

Item	M	SD
1. Our class starts with "Warm-up Question and Answer" as a warm-up activity.	3.29	1.223
2. Our class starts with "Read and discuss a short passage" as a warm-up activity.	3.24	1.319
3. Our class starts with a "Riddle" as a warm-up activity.	3.16	1.284
4. Our class starts with "a 2-5 minute debate" as a warm-up activity.	3.09	1.220
5. Our class starts with a "Short Class discussion about an interesting issue" as a warm-up activity.	3.02	1.302
6. Our class starts with a "Free writing activity " as a warm-up activity.	2.70	1.467
7. Our class starts with "Philosophical questions " as a warm-up activity.	2.60	1.335
8. Our class starts with "Describe a picture" as a warm-up activity.	2.57	1.433
9. Our class starts with "Listen to short audio or watch a short video and discuss it as a class " as a warm-up activity.	2.46	1.490
10. Our class starts with a "warm-up game" as a warm-up activity.	2.46	1.408

Scale. 1=No lecturer 2=very few lecturers 3=few lecture 4=some lecturers 5=all lecturers

Table 2 reveals that respondents' answers predominantly fall within the range of two to three on the Likert scale. This pattern suggests that, on average, the use of warm-up activities by lecturers is relatively limited. Nonetheless, a few items yielded comparatively higher mean scores, indicating a slightly more frequent implementation. Specifically, the statement *"Our class starts with a warm-up question and answer"* received a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.319), which was mirrored by the item *"Our class starts with reading and discussing a short passage"* (M = 3.24, SD = 1.319). Similarly, the activity involving riddles also garnered a relatively high score, with *"Our class starts with a riddle"* averaging 3.16 (SD = 1.284).

Perceptions of Students Toward the Use of Warm-up Activities in EFL Classes

The study's second objective was to find out the perceptions of EFL students toward the use of warm-up activities in EFL classes. The relevant findings are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: *The perceptions of EFL students towards the use of warm-up activities in EFL classes*

Item	Mean	SD
1. Warm-up activities promote motivation among students	4.40	.783
2. Warm-up activities fully engage students' brains as soon as possible	4.35	.744
3. Warm-up activities promote interest among students	4.34	.712
4. Warm-up activities help review the lesson studied in the last class	4.32	.788
5. Warm-up activities Inspire my creativity	4.32	.631
6. Warm-up activities Boost self-confidence and eradicate the fear of participating	4.29	.769
7. Warm-up activities make students focused from the beginning of the class	4.28	.858
8. Warm-up activities establish rapport between teacher and students	4.26	.623
9. Warm-up activities establish the level of respect between students and teacher	4.23	.666
10. Warm-up activities help set goals for the lesson early	4.19	.890
11. Warm-up activities promote peer trust as they get to know each other	4.01	.856

Scale. 1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=neutral 4=agree 5=strongly agree

Table 3 demonstrates a marked shift in responses, with all items falling within the four-point range on the Likert scale. This indicates a general consensus among participants, reflecting agreement with the value of warm-up activities. Among the items, the statement *"Warm-up activities promote motivation among students"* was rated highest, with a mean of 4.40 (SD = 0.783). Following closely were *"Warm-up activities fully engage students' brains as soon as possible"* (M = 4.35, SD = 0.744) and *"Warm-up activities promote interest among students"* (M = 4.34, SD = 0.712).

DISCUSSION

Warm-up activities in different forms benefit students mainly in their motivation to stay engaged in classroom learning according to the current study's findings. This finding aligns with the finding of other similar studies in which it is found that warm-ups, when applied with the appropriate principles, are beneficial in the English Language Teaching context in terms of student engagement, establishing a connection between new and old knowledge and

production of interaction among students (Abata et al., 2024; Velandia, 2008). Likewise, the results of a study found that in a language teaching context, warm-up activities enhance the enthusiasm needed for language skills (Tuliakova, et al., 2020). These activities are considered a significant component for enhancing students' motivation in the classroom (Velandia, 2008). Specifically, its usage can result in students' enhanced topic awareness, activation of pre-existing language knowledge, and calming of students (Tosun & Yildiz, 2015). They can also significantly improve the target language performance by getting the learners' attention, improving their interaction and motivation, and ability to experiment with language through extensive practice (Karpushyna et al., 2019). Students can feel relaxed and think actively about the intended activity, allowing the instructor to observe the students' abilities and reassess the lesson plan (Farmer, 2010). Though it takes only five to ten minutes for the class to begin, it influences the students' behavior until the end of the session (Aniuranti, 2021).

However, based on the current study's findings, it is evident that warm-up activities are not frequently used as a primary starter in the EFL classes at Kandahar University. Incorporating a well-planned warm-up activity at the beginning of the lesson can provide a smooth and engaging transition into the main content, benefiting both teachers and students. A similar study by Tuliakova et al (2020) also found that teachers are reluctant to dedicate classroom time to warm-ups, and some of the reasons identified are fear of receiving negative student feedback, the necessity to spend time planning the activity and limited warm-up recommendation for the class. However, the findings of another study indicate that English Language teachers held positive perceptions toward using warm-up activities in their classes (Le, 2022). Diril (2015) identifies these activities as a springboard for all the other class activities and compares them to a runner preparing for a race, emphasizing that just as a runner cannot begin sprinting without first engaging in slow and gradual warm-up exercises, students also need a gentle mental transition to engage in learning thoroughly. This warm-up depends on how well they are provided from the teacher's side (Jun 2000). Seçer, Şahin, and Alcı (2015) argue that audiovisual materials in warm-up activities are an effective classroom icebreaker for teenagers in today's digital and technology-driven world. Some of these activities proposed by Kasimova (2022) are storytelling, English songs, jumbled sentences, mistake correction, and English humor.

Most importantly, games can be introduced as warm-up activities in EFL classes as these activities in the form of games reduce students' language learning anxiety, improve positive feelings, and foster self-confidence (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). As potentially very few studies have been conducted in the particular Afghanistan context of Kandahar University in Afghanistan regarding the extent to which warm-up activities are used in the EFL classes, this represents a notable gap in the existing literature. Understanding the extent to which these activities are used in classes is crucial for several reasons. First, warm-up activities can significantly enhance the classroom atmosphere by making students more engaged and productive. Second, the cultural context of Afghanistan may influence the effectiveness and appropriateness of various warm-up activities. Therefore, conducting an in-depth exploration

of this phenomenon within this specific context is important. Moreover, the study and use of warm-up activities in the aforementioned context can educate policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers on providing more needs-specific language education and adopt appropriate teaching methodologies within the language learning context. Hence, contributing to filling the identified gap through practical research is important for advancing the academic research community and significant for making a meaningful impact on language teaching and education.

There are several implications for the EFL classes of Kandahar University and other relevant contexts. First, the limited usage of warm-up activities in the EFL classes of Kandahar University suggests the need to provide better awareness and professional development opportunities regarding the merit of warm-up activities as a pedagogical tool for the lecturers of Kandahar University. Professional development programs could focus on providing effective insights to lecturers to integrate warm-up strategies into their lesson plans effectively.

Secondly, as warm-up activities are missing to a greater extent in the EFL classes of Kandahar University based on the current study's findings, chances are that students' learning and teachers' teaching processes are undermined by it. The lecturers' efforts to dedicate their beginning of class time could make the learning and teaching of the class process smoother and better.

Finally, there is a vital need for warm-up activities to be integrated into the syllabuses and curriculums of EFL degrees in Afghan Universities. Curriculum designers, who are the lecturers of various universities in Afghanistan, could regard the warm-ups as an essential part of curriculums and syllabuses and should integrate these activities in the best possible way.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

1. Studying the perceptions of EFL students towards the use of warm-up activities in EFL classes using a questionnaire as a primary data collection tool is recognized as a limitation of the current study, as it may not capture the full depth of students' experiences and insights.
2. The current study's findings are influenced by the cultural and contextual factors specific to Kandahar University. Therefore, it is suggested that generalizing the findings of this research to other settings should be done with caution. Conducting a similar future study using a qualitative research approach, particularly through classroom observation as the primary data collection method, is recommended. Observing students' performance and engagement firsthand would offer a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the impact of warm-up activities in EFL classes. This approach is suggested as a valuable direction for future research on this topic.
3. Future studies could also focus on exploring the effectiveness of teacher training related to warm-up activities. Such research would help determine whether

enhanced teacher knowledge and training in implementing warm-up strategies leads to an actual increase in the use of these activities in the classroom.

4. Moreover, students' perspectives on the effectiveness of warm-up activities should be studied using interviews or focus groups, allowing a deeper understanding of their perceptions, attitudes, and preferences.

CONCLUSION

Warm-up activities are an important part of a classroom as they can influence flow and effectiveness. The current paper found that warm-up activities are beneficial in the classroom context from the EFL students' perspective. However, it was also evident that these activities are not used to the required extent in the EFL classes at Kandahar University. These findings can bring to the attention of lecturers, educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers the need to consider employing warm-up activities as an important element of the class beginning. Implementing capacity-building and awareness programs for the lecturers at Kandahar University could potentially improve the lecturers' ability to recognize the effectiveness of warm-up activities. Also, future studies would further signify the importance of these activities and could influence teachers' decision to consider the activities as part of their classes. For teachers, experimenting with the first five minutes of the class could be a matter of experimenting, which might result in a classroom with more engaged students.

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