

Perceptions and Practices of Warm-up Activities by English Teachers in Thai Nguyen

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Abstract:

Effective teaching at secondary school is a major concern in many countries of the world in which suitable teaching method selection is one of the most important factors affecting students' learning output. Although warm-up activities are not the key things in the teaching and learning method, they have contributed to creating an active learning environment and motivating them to learn English more effectively. This paper aims at investigating the perception and practice of warm-up activities by English teachers in Thai Nguyen with participation of 20 teachers at secondary schools in Thai Nguyen city. There were several data collection instruments used, including teachers' interviews, observation, and questionnaires. The results of this research showed that all teachers have a positive opinion towards using warm-up activities in their classes. They also have some similarities and principles in implementation. Hopefully, this study will make a small contribution to clarify the perception as well as the practice of teachers in using warm-up activities in English classes.

Key Word: perception, practice, secondary schools, teaching methods, warm up activities

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I. Introduction

In Vietnamese teaching context, English is not the mother tongue of the Vietnamese, so it is not easy for students to conquer this language. In fact, many Vietnamese students deal with a lot of challenges when they learn English. Many of them show their shyness and stressful feelings, which have a bad influence on their English study results. Thus, the big burden for English teachers is how to get students involved in every lesson. To attract students from the beginning, warm-up activities have been applied in English classes in Viet Nam in general and in Thai Nguyen in particular as an icebreaker to help students feel more comfortable and eager in learning English. Kay [9] expresses "warm-up activities are useful to make students get involved into learning, start thinking in English and review previous lessons as well", which means that warm-up activities are significant in motivating a positive learning environment and refreshing students' mind to get ready for new knowledge. However, not all teachers have the same opinions related to organizing warm-up activities, because some of them just want to focus on learning the lesson content only. Furthermore, there are many techniques and steps to implement warm up activities in English classroom. For all the above-mentioned reasons, this study aims to explore the perception by English teachers at Thai Nguyen towards using warm-up activities and investigate the practice of warm-up activities by English teachers.

II. Literature Review

The definition of a "warm-up"

Depending on the approach and area of learning, the term "warm-up" can mean different things. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "warm-up" as a phrasal verb, which is used prepare for a physical exercise or performance by employing certain "easing" activities. Within education, this also typically describes the very first introductory step in teaching each lesson. Also, Robertson and Acklam [15] stated that a "warm-up is a short activity for the beginning of a lesson." Even given that a warm-up activity is short in length, it still plays a vital role in the lesson. As if it was not there, then lessons could be boring and may cause students to become anxious or stressed. To clarify the definition of a "warm-up", Kay [9] defined such an activity as a set of various activities which engage the student in getting involved in learning, thinking in English and to go over previous lesson material

To sum up, such an activity can be seen as a process of using various activities before starting the main body of a lesson to grip the attention of the learners and help them prepare to engage with the rest of the lesson content.

The definition of perception

Numerous authors from around the world also have their definitions of “perceptions.” Rundell [16], defines perception as “what we think of”, or “how we understand” something in our own personal assessment. In a very similar way to Rundell, Hornby [6] shows that “perception” is directly related to what we have seen of, or understand about a process, however, Hornby has also shown how perception can be conveyed as images, ideas or beliefs. Overall, from this it can be seen that perception is what we understand, based on our own judgement about specific things which is what both Rundell and Hornby are saying. Robbins [14] put forward that perception can be perceived as being a process by which people can be involved in the organization and delivery of their own sensory ideas for the purpose of establishing meaning to the situation.

To clarify, “perception” is quite literally a sensory experience about something someone is aware of.

The definition of practice

There are various ways in which the word “practice” can be defined. In the Oxford English Dictionary, practice is defined as “doing an activity or training regularly so that you can improve your skill or the time you spend doing this.” Within this study, “practice” can be perceived as “how” the teachers can implement their warm-up activities. This being all to do with helping the learners develop their English skills and create a good working environment and atmosphere for the rest of their session.

Some examples of warm-up activities

Andy and Cortnie Brooks (2017) developed several warm-up activities which include: role play, quiz time, games, pictures and videos, brainstorming, song and dance, storytelling and many others. These form a list of the most popular warm-up activities employed by teachers delivering English lessons at all school levels.

Games

Games as warm-ups are known to be one of the most often used versions of these activities. The games can bring about a fun environment for the students which means they have a better start to a lesson, having been relaxed and put at their ease by doing this activity. In addition, games activities can help them to feel like learning is the same as playing which can reduce stress when learning.

Quiz time

A well-known activity for a warm-up session which helps provide insights into the main topic of the lesson. The teachers will come up with a number of questions which help the students go over the knowledge from previous sessions and focus their attention on those subjects. In doing this, the teachers can inspire curiosity in the students which allows them to move on into the new lesson topic seamlessly.

Role-play

In addition to the activities previously described, role-play is also a fun and enjoyable activity for a warm-up. In this method, the students will be given a newspaper or stories to read or maybe watch a video. Then, once those sources are well known, a scenario is created which they then can act out using all the realistic gestures and speech that they know. It can actually help them increase their energy and enthusiasm levels in starting their lesson and can have the opportunity to face the challenge with a new role for themselves.

Storytelling

Storytelling is introduced as an activity where the teacher starts off telling a story, and then will suddenly stop. A student will then continue telling the story, until stopped suddenly by the teacher, then another student will carry on telling it and so on.

Singing and dancing

Very popular warm-up activities where, lead by the teacher, the students will sing along to music or try some dance moves. This means a more interesting start to the classes can be had. This method may be very simple, but singing and dancing activities are extremely effective as the teacher does not need to prepare much beforehand.

Brainstorming

Here students are asked to seek some insights and thoughts that relate to a given subject with the idea of forming some original and creative solutions to a problem. Pictures and videos are very useful for these activities as Andy and Cortnie Brooks (2017) showed in their work. The students would be shown a picture or a video sequence and then the students would have to answer questions such as “what is going on in that video or

picture?” Added to that, the teacher can also get the students to describe what they can see in a picture or a paused video frame.

III. Material And Methods

The Method

In this study, exploratory research was chosen to ascertain the teacher perceptions and their implementation practices in using warm-up activities in their English classes.

The Study Setting

The study is based in the mountainous Thai Nguyen region in the north of Viet Nam. Due to various different situations, some students are exposed to English from kindergarten whereas others first encounter English at primary level. In the schools that were chosen for this study, all the students started off at primary level in the language. They can understand basic conversation, words and phrases. They can discuss topics such as introducing their names, hometown, and their class. Some are more advanced and can converse in less familiar topics too. These students have 3 classes per week with each one lasting 45 minutes. All the classrooms are well equipped with teaching tools and the teachers are equipped with their own laptops to aid their teaching.

The Participants

Due to limitations the study was concentrated in 3 secondary schools in Thai Nguyen, within Thai Nguyen City itself. Due to restrictions in place during the Covid-19 pandemic, the author could only focus on teachers from Son Cam 1, Tan Long and Hoang Van Thu secondary school. In all 20 teachers were involved in the research, and they all conformed to two primary requirements – firstly they all had to have over 2 years of experience teaching English to secondary students. They also needed to be using warm-up activities in their classes. Due to pandemic restrictions the study has focused on 6 teachers for actual observations at the three schools.

Table No 1: Details of the Participants

School	Teachers	Class
Son Cam 1 Secondary School	A	7A
	B	8A
Tan Long Secondary School	C	7A
	D	8A
Hoang Van Thu Secondary School	E	7A
	F	8A

Data Collection Instruments

This study made use of three data collection instruments:

Questionnaires: which are commonly used to gather data from a larger scale group of respondents and so these were used to acquire data from 20 teachers to find out about their perceptions and practices as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table No 2: Teacher Questionnaire Information

Type	Number of Questions	Number of Respondents
Questionnaire	8	20

These consisted of 8 questions, 7 of which were close-ended about opinions on the importance, organization and types of activity and 1 where 5 types of activity they frequently use are listed along with information on anything not listed while ranking them in order of frequency.

Class Observations: to actually see what teachers and their students are doing in their live English classes and see how the warm-up activities were actually organized and managed. In this task the author observed a different set of lessons as detailed in Table 3 below.

Table No 3: Details of Class Observations

School	Class	Lessons
Son Cam 1 Secondary School	7A	26
	8A	25
Tan Long Secondary School	7A	26
	8A	25
Hoang Van Thu Secondary School	7A	26
	8A	25

These were carried out depending on the availability of the author and the teachers at the schools. They were at the discretion of the school board in each case, but the author did manage to observe the same lesson for each grade so that their analysis would be more reliable.

Interviews: another commonly used method of information gathering which allows for some substantial answers to come from the teachers via a set of 5 open ended questions from 6 teachers, who took 10-15 minutes to answer each question, from the same three schools as per Table 4 below.

Table No 4: Teacher Interview Information

Type	Number of Questions	Number of Respondents
Interview	5	6

The first two questions focused on the opinions of the teachers about the importance of the activities, the third looked at the problems in organization. The fourth and fifth questions looked at the solutions that teachers came up with to deal with problems in class.

The Procedure for Data Collection

Preparation

All the items used with the data collection instruments were peer reviewed by fellow teaching staff to ensure there was a limit on the subjectiveness before they were used with the participants. The questionnaire was presented in an on-line form for convenience of those participants. The school boards were then contacted to gain their permission to proceed with the class observations and interviews.

Implementation

As mentioned in 3.4 this proceeded using the questionnaires on-line with instructions for the respondents and help was available afterwards if needed. For the interviews, the author met each participant, explained the procedures, then interviewed and recorded their responses. The class observations were based on agreed schedules and the author visited each school to observe the selected lessons. The warm-up parts of the sessions were videoed so they could be reviewed in later stages and the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaire was processed and all the recordings from the teacher interviews were transcribed and grouped ready to be analyzed. The processed data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software. The qualitative data from the observations and the interviews were also processed and classified as well. The data was analyzed quantitatively and illustrated in charts or tables. The analysis of these assisted in showing the perceptions and practices of the participants. The findings of which can be found in the next section.

IV. Findings and Discussion

These findings were acquired by use of interviews with teachers as well as from the questionnaire and teacher observations.

The Findings

The Interview Results

From these interviews the importance of warm-up activities was established. In fact, all the teachers questioned, agreed that such activities were vitally important to the success of teaching. They said that such activities not only helped their students recall prior learning and knowledge, but also created a fun, energetic and exciting environment for learning which can be seen to highly motivate students regardless of their age or level. In generating such positive feelings within the students, they were able to focus on their studies far more effectively. The teachers also hold the opinion that such warm-up activities are the determining factor for lesson success. One teacher pointed out that warm-up sessions do help students relax and re-engage their interest before attempting new learning as there were no gaps in their routine of daily lessons in multiple subjects. Most of the teachers also emphasized that they do not skip these warm-up sessions, even in the face of more difficult sessions, and regard these activities as indispensable.

As for the challenges faced by the teachers in setting up warm-up activities, they all found some difficulties from time to time including with students: refusing to participate, being unhappy if they lose a competition-based activity, not knowing what to do, unwilling to start after a break, overusing their first language, not getting on with their peers, dislike the activity and want to stop, becoming overexcited and noisy or doing other things instead of the tasks.

All the teachers encountered problems, but they also all had their own solutions to these problems. These included: setting up clear and simple classroom rules right from the beginning and sticking to them which was effective in keeping student misbehavior at a minimum and using signs that a teacher can point at to highlight student mistakes such as speaking Vietnamese when they are supposed to be speaking English.

Though in all this it was also pointed out that for students with personal problems, teachers could encourage them to join in, but if they continued to avoid participating, then their feelings should be respected. Teachers also thought that it was essential for them to understand their student profiles before organizing such activities. From this understanding, they can then tailor the activities to appeal to student interests, language levels etc. Although it was appreciated that solutions don't solve all problems in these sessions, they can help teachers reduce the negatives to a minimum and keep students more willing to participate in the activities.

The Questionnaire

As for the data derived from the questionnaire, 20 teachers from Thai Nguyen City participated by giving a score of how much they agreed with statements and the provided examples of which warm-up activities that they regularly used in their sessions.

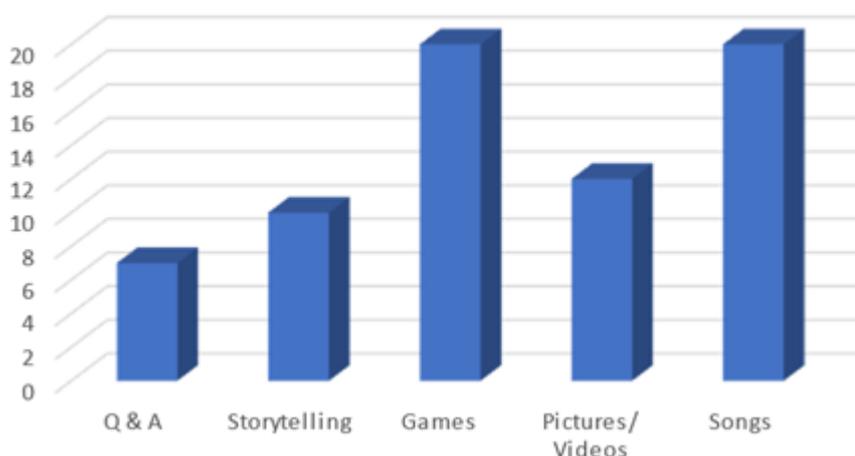
Table No 5: The Perceptions & Practice of Using Warm-up Activities in English Classes

Statements	Opinions (Unit: Person/People)				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Warm-up activities are integral to English lessons	0	0	0	2	18
2. I always organize warm-up activities for every lesson	0	0	2	2	16
3. Warm-up activities always start at the beginning of every lesson	0	0	0	0	20
4. Warm-up activities last from 5 to 7 minutes	0	1	3	5	11
5. I use different activities for the warm-up part	0	0	3	5	12
6. I can manage the whole class when organizing warm-up activities	0	3	2	14	1
7. All my students feel excited when I organize warm-up activities	0	1	3	2	14

All the teachers acknowledged how important warm-up activities are, 90% thought they were integral to English lessons with the remaining 10% also close to this opinion. From what can be seen in these results, it is obvious that teachers value these activities very highly which is great to see as they all understand the importance of these activities. It can also be seen from the results that most teachers always organize these activities for their sessions with few being neutral about the matter. This may indicate that although all teachers recognize the importance of such sessions, there are still a few that may omit such warm-ups for various reasons. All teachers agree that warm-up sessions should always be at the start of the session and 80% of them keep within the 5-7 minute range though the remaining 20% have other ideas about length. 60% of teachers varied their activity types though it can be seen from the others that some use the same type of warm-up activities from time to time. The management question about these activities shows a different picture though with only 1 teacher being fully confident about this. Though most were confident, there were 10% who had neutral opinions but another 15% were not confident with this. In the final question, 60% thought they generated a good level of excitement in their students, whilst another 10% thought they generated some excitement with another 15% being neutral about the issue. 5% had a problem with excitement level which means that sometimes they can't satisfy the whole class in this regard.

It can be seen from this that most teachers had similar thoughts about the length and variety of such activities, as well as the effective management and excitement level generated for the students. However, there were those who had other opinions on this matter but did not have much impact on the larger numbers.

Teachers were also asked about what types of warm-up activities were used in their classes. These results can be seen in the next figure below where teachers were asked to list in order which of the five popular methods they used the most:



From this it can be concluded that Games and Songs were the top activities used by 60% of teachers, with another 20% favoring storytelling with 12% using questions and answers.

4.1.3 Classroom Observation Results

From the observation task that was also conducted, data on the type of warm-up activities used, the timing, the level of student participation and the teacher solutions to problems were investigated. The results of which can be seen in the table below:

Table No 6: The Types of Warm-up Activities

Types of Warm-up Activity	Percentage (%)
Games	33.3
Songs	33.3
Question and Answer	16.7
Pictures/Videos	16.7
Storytelling	0
Role Play	0
Others:	0

During these observations it has been seen that teachers used mostly songs and games, with some using question and answer and pictures and videos. None of the observed sessions employed storytelling, role play or games.

Table No 7: The Length of Time Given to Warm-up Activity

Average Time of Warm-up Part	Percentage (%)
< 3 minutes	1
3-5 minutes	4
5-7 minutes	1
>7 minutes	0

None of the sessions exceeded the 7 minute barrier though the timings did vary. Two thirds of the teachers held sessions within the 3-5 minute range though one was noticeably short and one other going over 5 minutes.

As for the level of student participation, they were split into different categories. Those who fully and eagerly participated and contributed were in the first category. Those who followed the provided instructions and did the activity but left other matters to their more enthusiastic peers were in the second category. Those who did not participate were in the third where some pretended to do things but did something else or did not understand what was going on.

Table No 8: Student Participation in Warm-up Activities

Student Participation	Percentage (%)
1. Students actively participate in activities	67.5
2. Students participate in activities	23.9
3. Students do not participate in the activities	8.6

As can be seen in the table above, over two thirds of the students actively joined in with the activities which is a very positive observation. However, some were not so enthusiastic, but only a small percentage of the students did not participate. Special note was taken as to what the non-participating students were doing at the time. As for the problems encountered by teachers during the observation sessions, they included situations where students did other things including talking to each other, did exercises from other subjects or even slept. Sometimes students did not like the activities and after listening to their instructions, lost interest and became discouraged from joining in. Some students made a lot of noise, and some did not understand what they were meant to do.

Teachers responded to these problems by asking student peers to keep an eye on others or used their signs to indicate students to stop or standing nearby to make sure students start the activities or even getting students to stand up and answer questions. Also giving students special roles such as referees seemed to get some students more engaged. Some encouraged students to join in but observed them losing interest again after a short while or joined in passively without really contributing to conversations. Sometimes acceptance that they were not going to join in was taken if they did not disturb the others. Another teacher opted to speak quite softly so that students would lower their own voices to hear them, whilst another played some music to get their attention. As for misunderstanding what they had to do, the teacher would repeat the instructions again or would delegate another student to explain the instructions to those who had not understood them. In short, all the teachers had their own methods for solving these problems which would arise in their warm-up sessions.

Discussion

What are English teacher's perceptions on the use of warm-up activities in English classes?

A warm-up is an "initial orientation" towards the lesson in hand, and therefore is a significant component of teaching and learning English. The idea being to orient students at the beginning of a session. That is to get learners interested in and to enjoy their learning experience. The results that have been drawn from the interviews, questionnaire, and observations of classes, show the value that English teachers place on these activities and their understanding of the positive impact that warm-ups have on their students and learning environment. Some still see them as an optional component of a lesson, but the large majority see it as an essential one.

Most teachers make use of several types of warm-up activities in their classes, including the most popular – songs, games, question and answers, pictures and videos or role play sessions. Songs and games do seem to be the most popular though, based on the questionnaire and class observations.

How do the English teachers implement warm-up activities in their classes?

Alongside looking at teaching staff perceptions, the actual practice of these activities has been clearly seen to vary slightly between the teachers. Some make use of these every day whilst others do not. Depending on the circumstances, some teachers opt to miss out the warm-up if they have a need to save some time – even though they all see these activities as important and include them when they can.

The time taken up by the warm-up also varies though most of them tend to be between 3 and 5 minutes in duration. All these teachers realize that these sessions should be less than 7 minutes to prevent it impacting on the time needed to deliver the rest of the lesson content.

Most of the teachers also reported that the warm-up activities did excite students and get them motivated. The main concern for them is an appreciation of the need to make sure that these activities are well managed. They could show the problems that were encountered during sessions, but they could also provide good solutions for getting around these issues too. These problems tended to relate to student understanding and behavior. Most of the solutions included simplified instructions for the class, giving encouragement, setting rules and understanding student feelings and what interests them. The conclusion to this being that during sessions, when problems occur, the teachers spotted them and employed their own methods to solve them, though some methods worked better than others.

V. Conclusion

Making use of warm-up activities is an excellent way to gain student attention and achieve class objectives. When organizing such sessions, teachers should get to know student profiles in order to tailor these activities to their audience. As they are a useful tool for revision of prior learning, creating a good class atmosphere and laying out good conditions for student learning, warm-ups should not be skipped. Teachers should carry out time management correctly to make sure it is not too long to fit in with the main lesson content. A variety of activities should be used to develop different student skills and to help avoid problems in the running of the class. Instructions should be clear and simple so that those with lesser abilities can understand them and classroom rules should be implemented to limit any negative behavior from the students.

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