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Integrating Current Issues of Interest into Class Materials in Teaching Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

The studies on the integrating out of class materials with class materials mostly show the crucial role of this task for teachers and its benefits for students. The following study investigated the effect of the integrating currents issues of interest into class materials on the students' reading comprehension. The following question was proposed. Is relating current issues of interest to class materials useful on students reading comprehension? A true and a null hypothesis were given. The true hypothesis was that integrating current issues of interest with class materials in teaching reading has a positive effect on reading comprehension. The study was performed at Islamic Azad University in Hidaj with 60 participants--male and female-- who were majoring in 'mechanical' and 'electrical' engineering. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups, each with 30 students. One of the groups was used as the experimental group (G1) and the other one as the control group (G2). The subjects were taught for two weeks and finally took an achievement test. After analyzing the results of the test, and by comparing the means of the scores using t-test, the null hypothesis was rejected and it was proved that integrating current issues of interest with class materials improves reading comprehension of students.

Key words: Current Issues of Interest, Motivation, Interest, Reading Comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is now regarded to be an important skill which is most needed for both academic purposes and lifetime learning. As Dreyer and Nel (2003) state: "Reading comprehension has come to be the essence of reading, essential not only for academic learning in all subject areas but also to professional success and, indeed to lifelong learning. In order to meet reading needs of students within the 20th century, educators are pressed to develop effective instructional means for teaching reading comprehension." Teaching reading comprehension is an important aspect in TEFL. Ur (1996) believes that reading means understanding, and a foreign language learner who says, ' I can read the words but I don't know what they mean' is not, therefore, reading. Nuttall (1996) says that reading means getting out of the text as nearly as possible the message the writer put into it. Richards et al. (1992) define 'reading' as, perceiving a written text in order to understand its contents. They divide it into 'silent' reading where understanding results, and reading 'aloud' which can be done with or without understanding of the contents. Reading is sometimes imagined to be the first and major level of literacy. It looks that teachers, by helping students to improve their skills of developing reading, can lead them to better learn a foreign language. Chastain (1988) argues that reading is a process involving the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information. It requires the reader to focus attention on the reading materials and integrate previous acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend what someone else has written. He also states that reading is a complementary skill in language learning, and second language learners need to use reading materials as a primary source of comprehensible input as they learn the language. Richards and Renadya (2002) discuss that in many second or foreign language situations reading receives a special focus for a number of reasons and the first one is that many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals. They want to be able to read for information and pleasure, for their career and for their purposes.

In EFL classes, class materials are usually those that have been included in the textbooks, but, according to the results of some studies (Stout, 1987; Brinton, 1991; Gebhard, 1996; Melvin& Jacobson et al. 2003) in ESL/EFL, they have better results if they include materials from out of the textbooks, too. Furthermore, some researchers believe that foreign language learners attain more motivation to learn when out-of-class materials are integrated with class materials. It seems that if EFL teachers integrate current interesting issues into the textbook materials, the students learn the language better. According to Brinton (1991), authentic materials and media can reinforce for students the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world. In every society, there are often some issues which attract people's attention, and so create some common topics for them. There are a lot of important happenings which are usually known by both teachers and students in the society the study will be performed. These issues are often with the students even when they are in their class. Students usually think about them so that they are active in their mentality. As many research findings (Barlett, 1932; Widdowson, 1983; Mendelsohn, 1994; Anderson, Spiro & Montague, 1977; Vacca&Vacca, 2005)

suggest, learning occurs by integrating new materials to the existing prior knowledge. Ur (1996) claims that the construction of meaning that occurs in reading is a combination of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes (our expectations, previous knowledge constructs (schemata) of the text content and genre). It is very difficult, sometimes impossible, to read successfully a text where our own schemata cannot be brought to bear. Current issues of interest may help readers to develop the schemata which is helpful in top-down learning. For example, students often know famous actors, actresses, athletes or politicians; most of them watch popular programs of TV, read common magazines or newspapers, and go to common popular websites. Generally, students usually follow the important economic, social or political news about their city, province or country. So, relating such issues to class materials will probably strengthen student's attention and interest to learn. Thus, studying the probable efficacy of using these common issues looks to be necessary.

Studies on the Topic

Integrating out-of-class materials with class materials in FL teaching has been usually studied and discussed under the terms 'interest,' 'motivation,' 'authenticity,' or 'relevance.' They are directly or indirectly related to the desire and determination of learners for learning. Research findings mostly state that language learners have better performance in their learning when they are interested to the topic or process of learning. Eidswick (2010) in a study examined interest and prior knowledge in relation to reading comprehension. In this study, analysis of multiple-choice comprehension test results revealed significantly higher scores for the high interest-high prior knowledge (HH) text than for those of the other texts, but no significant differences between the test scores for high interest-low prior knowledge (HL) and low interest-low prior knowledge (LL) texts. One interpretation of these results was that they provided support for a positive influence of prior knowledge on reading comprehension, and do not provide support for a similar influence by interest. Another interpretation was that, given that the HH text was based on one of the three topics that rated highest for both interest and prior knowledge and for correlation between them, the interaction ofinterest and prior knowledge facilitated comprehension in ways in which insignificantly correlated configurations did not. Magliano et al. (2011), in a study assessed the impact of topic interest on comprehension process. This study demonstrated that topic interest affected performance in a standardized text. The study indicated that this effect happens by increasing the engagement with the text. The presence of interest led to better comprehension because it facilitated the processes that supported comprehension. Interest is an important end in itself: Tasks that are interesting offer personal meaning and fulfillment in their own right (Renninger, 2000). There is a link between interest and performance, but this relationship is complex (Bray & Baron, 2004). Moreover, this relationship may be reciprocal, that is; interest may facilitate performance and task performance may facilitate subsequent interest.

Learners are in fact encouraged to use all their potential in language learning when the materials are authentic, interesting, and relevant. They become motivated to do their best when they are attentive and have a good concentration in their learning. Most researchers argue that the language aspects like interest, relevance and authenticity has a motivating effect on learners. Longman dictionary of language and applied linguistics define motivation as the factor that determines a person's desire to do something. It also argues that in second language and foreign language learning, learning may be affected by different types of motivation. Two types of motivation are sometimes distinguished: a) Instrumental motivation: wanting to learn a language because it will be useful for certain "instrumental goals" such as getting a job, reading a foreign newspaper, passing an examination. b) Integrative motivation: wanting to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it. Ghutrie (2006) studied the influences of stimulating tasks on reading motivation and comprehension. The results of this study showed that students with a high number of stimulating tasks increased their reading comprehension after controlling for initial comprehension more than did students in comparable intervention classrooms with fewer stimulating tasks. Students' motivation predicted their level of reading comprehension after controlling for initial comprehension. Lau and Chan (2003) compared eighty-three good readers and 76 poor readers on their ability to use reading strategies in Chinese reading comprehension and on various reading motivation variables. Poor readers scored lower than good readers in using all reading strategies. Poor readers also had lower intrinsic motivation in reading than good readers. While the ability to use reading strategies had the strongest relation with reading comprehension, intrinsic motivation and strategy attribution might facilitate reading development through their positive relations with strategy use. The results of a study performed by Habibian (2011) showed that educational setting type had an influence over reading motivation and reading comprehension. This study concluded that when learners are hopeful and confident in their learning condition, and feel enjoyable and relax with their surroundings, they become motivated and begin to grow in terms of emotion and socialization. And one of the important points is teacher's role in combination of above guidelines in reading instructions which are focusing on motivation and needs of students. With respect to the relations of reading motivation and reading comprehension, Ghutrie and Wigfield's (2000) theoretical model suggests that motivation influences reading comprehension growth.

In FL teaching, teachers are usually suggested to keep their learners motivated and the materials interesting so that learners are highly determined to learn. Stern (1991) citing from Gardner contends that an integrative motivation is needed for successful language learning. Brown (1987) discusses that motivation is an inner drive or stimulus which can, like self-esteem, be global, situational, or task oriented. Learning a foreign language clearly requires some of all three levels of motivation. A number of instructional, individual and sociocultural factors were considered which can enhance motivation. Among learner factors for example, was included intelligence, aptitude, perseverance, learning strategies, interference and self-evaluation. Motivation seen as the fulfillment of needs is closely connected to behaviorist reinforcement theory. In as much as certain needs are being satisfactorily met in a person, reinforcement occurs. If learning to speak a foreign language enhances one's ego, for example the ego enhancement is in itself an internal reinforcement of the desired behavior.

On authenticity in language teaching and learning, there are numerous research results. Some of them result in a support of its role in the field and others come up with some skepticism about its effectiveness. Even a difference can be simply seen in its definition where different arguments appear on the definition of this term and the ways of using it in language teaching. The term authentic materials may mean different things for different people; for some, materials generated by native speakers (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability, undisputed credibility, and legitimacy are just some of the words that are used when we talk about authenticity. Frankly there is a lot of confusion connected to the idea of "authenticity" (Tatsuki, 2006). Nunan (1999) defines authentic materials as spoken or written language data that has been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for the purposes of language teaching. There is also a strong literature on the significance of authenticity. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000:129), one of the characteristics of the communicative language teaching is the use of authentic materials. It is necessary to give language learners opportunities to learn the language the way it is actually used in the real world. Gebhard (1996) sees authentic materials as a way to contextualize language learning. He continues when lessons are centered on comprehending a menu or a TV weather report, students tend to focus more on content and meaning rather than the language itself and this offers the students a valuable source of language input. In addition to improving students' English language skills; using authentic language would expand their real-world knowledge about their chosen field of study (Knox, 2007). Omaggio (2003) referring to Grellet (1981) states that authentic written materials should be presented, if possible, in the original form to allow students to use nonlinguistic cues to interpret meaning. Carter and Nunan (2001) citing Little et al. (1994) say that most researchers argue for authenticity and stress its motivating effect on learners. They also talk about the benefits of the use of computer aids by allowing language learners to communicate with native speakers around the world over the internet. Laniro (2007) states that authentic materials help students bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world. Many students enroll in school to learn or improve a languagerelated task, such as helping a child with homework or speaking English at work. Others enroll because they have personal long-term goals that involve education, such as becoming an engineer or business owner. In working with new students, teachers need to identify why students have come to class. When teachers know learners' motivations, they can target instruction to meet those goals. A key way to help learners reach their goals is to use authentic, goal-directed materials.

According to some research findings showing that there are also negative aspects of using authentic materials in teaching ESL/EFL. Berardo (2006) citing from Martinez (2002) contends that authentic materials can be too culturally biased, and often a good knowledge of cultural background is required when reading, as well as too many structures being mixed, causing lower levels problems when decoding the texts. Students often bring copies of newspaper articles (in particular the tabloids) or song lyrics to the classroom, asking to translate them after having looked up each word in the dictionary and not understood a single word. He also quotes from Richards (2001) who notes that authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which can often create problems for the teacher too. They can also become very dated, very quickly but unlike textbooks can be updated or replaced much easier and more cost effectively. The biggest problem with authentic materials is that if the wrong type of text is chosen, the vocabulary may not be relevant to the learner's needs and too many structures can create difficulty. This can have the opposite effect, rather than motivate the learner; it can de-motivate and in Krashenite terms "put up the affective filter".

The results of the study conducted by Jacobson et al. (2003) reveals that using authentic materials and activities, while not always easy, does result in easy learning so that for the student, it does make learning to read and write easier, faster, and much more immediately meaningful. The study provides empirical evidence that using authentic materials and activities results in important changes in out-of-school literacy practices, and that this approach is more likely to be associated with these changes than teaching that relies upon the use of school-only materials and activities.

Pietila (2009), in a study to find out foreign language learners' opinions and thoughts on using authentic materials, concluded language learners consider authentic material to be helpful in learning a foreign language. However, the learners feel that the help of the artificially created material is needed in order to learn a language

in the classroom environment. It is interesting to notice that the respondents considered authentic materials to be sufficiently offered in the Finnish comprehensive school.

Knox (2007) and his colleagues in a study in Thailand found that learners benefited from a 'temple tour project' where they had to communicate in English to collect information. They found that the experience of interviewing foreign tourists and of designing, implementing, and reporting on a research project in English by the learners would provide an authentic context for using English which improved their learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

60 students were recruited for this study. They were studying at IAU-Hidaj (Islamic Azad university-Hidaj Branch) in Iran. All of the students were taking the course of 'General English.' They were both male and female non-English speaking and their age ranged from 20-35. The subjects were majoring in such fields as 'mechanical engineering' and 'electrical engineering.' The subjects were randomly divided into two groups: each with 30 students. In fact, one of the groups was used as the experimental group (G1) and the other one as the control group (G2).

In order to see whether there is any difference between the two groups regarding their basic English knowledge, the 'Nelson Test,' (050 D) which is used to determine the examinees' English proficiency level was administered. The test results showed that the two groups had nearly the same level of initial English knowledge; that is, the subjects in the two groups appeared to be at the same level of general English. This is clearly shown in the following tables 1 and 2 which demonstrate statistics and graphic representations of the results for the proficiency test (pre-test) for both groups of G1 and G2. It has to be clarified that the score scale is 0-50, that is, the perfect score is 50. N refers to the number of the students in a group, SD is the Standard Deviation of the scores and Sum is the total of the scores for all of the students in a group.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Proficiency Test (Pre-test) G1

N	•	30
Mean		29.53
Mode		29.5
SD		5.2767
Variance		27.84
Range		20
Minimum		20
Maximum		40
Sum		886

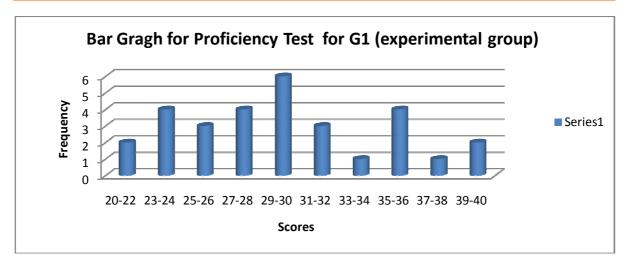


Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Proficiency Test (Pre-test) G2

N	30
Mean	29.6
Mode	None
SD	5.069
Variance	25.69
Range	18
Minimum	21
Maximum	39
Sum	888

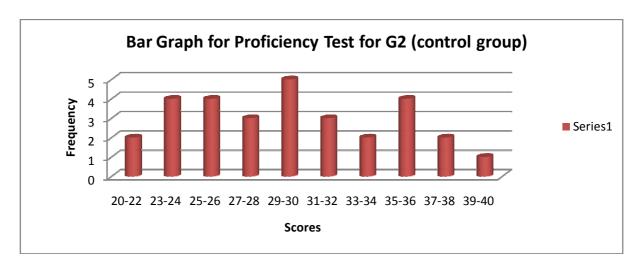
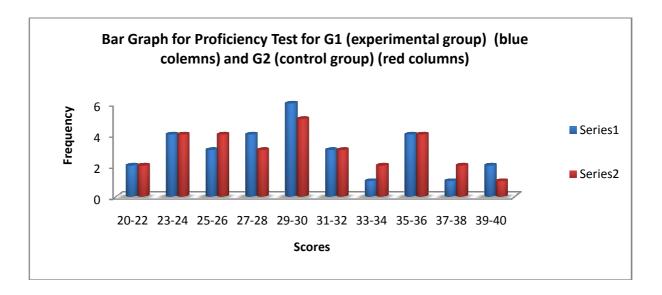


Table 3. Comparative Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Proficiency Test (Pre-test) G1 and G2

N	30
Mean	29.53
Mode	29.5
SD	5.2767
Variance	27.84
Range	20
Minimum	20
Maximum	40
Sum	886

N	30
Mean	29.6
Mode	None
SD	5.069
Variance	25.69
Range	18
Minimum	21
Maximum	39
Sum	888



As it is evidenced in the tables above, the two groups of subjects have scored very similar results. The mean for both groups is nearly the same: 29.53 for G1 and 29.6 for G2. The Standard Deviation (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects is also very close: 5.27 for G1 and 5.06 for G2. Other measures also show high similarity between scores of the subjects in the two groups. While the scores could range from 0—50, the highest score for G1 is 40; the lowest is 20 so the Range is 20. For G2 the highest score is 39; the lowest is 21 so the Range is 18. The total of scores for G1 is 886 and for G2, it is 888. Administering the Pre-test and evaluating the related data here was an attempt to find out if the subjects in the two groups were similar or the same with regard to their basic English knowledge before presenting the treatment. After analyzing the results of the Proficiency test (Pre-test), it was concluded that there were not any major differences between the two groups concerning their background English knowledge.

The subjects who had been randomly divided into two groups of G1 (experimental group) and G2 (control group) were separated and placed into different classes. They were taught in two one-hour sessions in different classes in two weeks. Each group was taught for one hour; G1 (experimental group was taught from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. and G2 (control group) was taught from 9: 15 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. The materials that were taught included two passages entitled 'Are you getting enough sleep?' and 'Computers in the modern world' from the book 'A Basic Course in Reading' by Sirous Izapanah and his colleagues. This book was intermediate level and provided learners of English with high-interest reading passages from authentic sources that contained reading comprehension activities, reading skills development, vocabulary building and grammatical analysis and practice. In fact, the same passages were taught for both groups and the teacher was the same. The only difference was that for G1 (experimental group) the teacher attempted to relate certain words and points in the passage to "current issues of interest in the students' society." These issues included popular state TV programs that the subjects often watched, and the news and reports from newspapers, and interesting issues of the university and city where the study took place. In other words, some interesting happenings of TV, newspapers, the university or city had already been studied and selected to be contributed to new words in the passages in G1 class. Most of the students in G1 class could easily remember the mentioned points or characters that were being referred from state TV programs, newspapers, and students' university or city. This was probably because people of this country (Iran) usually watch TV and follow news from newspapers or other sources. Perhaps one more reason to this interest is the fact that they are more careful about the current happenings in their country since they are usually expecting some changes to occur. It needs to be pointed out that in teaching the passages in G1 class, certain words of the passage had already been determined as the words to which interesting issues were related. Actually, the new words of the passages were the same for both G1 and G2 students. On the other hand, for the students of G2, the passages were taught without any attempt of contributing any materials from outside of the class; that is, the passages and their new words were taught by definition of the words that had already been determined as new words of the passage or by providing explanations and examples from the passages themselves, not from out of the class.

The teaching was performed for two sessions for each group; two one-hour sessions were held for G1 and two other one-hour sessions for G2. The week after the second session, all subjects, students of G1 and G2 took an achievement test (post-test) to determine any difference in students' success in achieving the objectives of the course. The achievement test had been individually (course) developed on the reading passages ('Are You Getting Enough Sleep?' and 'Computers in the Modern World' from the book 'A Basic Course in Reading' by Sirous Izapanah and his colleagues) taught during two one-hour sessions. The achievement test was the same for both groups and began and finished equally regarding testing time. The results of the achievement test for both groups were collected and organized. Then, these results were analyzed and compared to show any probable differences. The following tables show the statistics and graphic representations of the results for the achievement test.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test (Post-test) G1

N	30	
Mean	34.5	
Mode	36	
SD	5.456	
Variance	29.76	
Range	23	
Minimum	23	
Maximum	46	
Sum	1035	

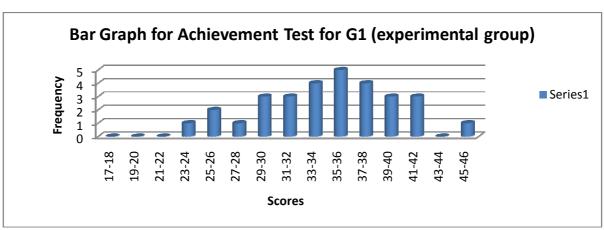


Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test (Post-test) G2

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N			30		
Mean			29.6		
Mode			27		
SD			6.851		
Variance			46.93		
Range			27		
Minimum			17		
Maximum			44		
Sum			888		

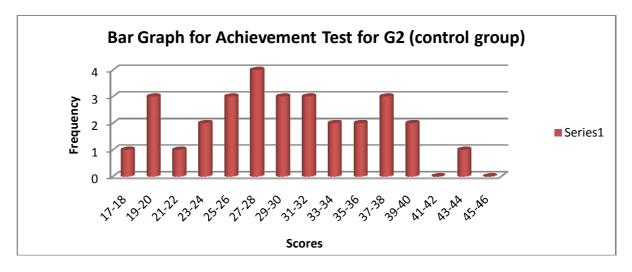
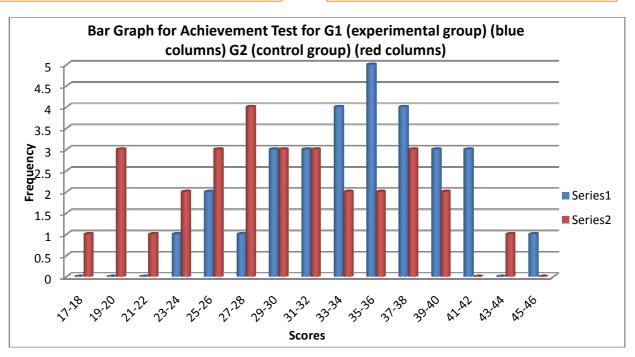


Table 6. Comparative Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test (Post-test) G1 and G2

N	30
Mean	34.5
Mode	36
SD	5.456
Variance	29.76
Range	23
Minimum	23
Maximum	46
Sum	1035

N	30
Mean	29.6
Mode	27
SD	6.851
Variance	46.93
Range	27
Minimum	17
Maximum	44
Sum	888



The two groups of subjects have scored different results which is shown the tables above evidently. The means for the two groups are different: 34.5 for G1 and 29.6 for G2. The Standard Deviations (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects are also a little different: 5.456 for G1 and 6.851 for G2. Other measures also show difference between scores of the subjects in the two groups. While the scores could range from 0—50, the highest score for G1 is 46; the lowest is 23 so the Range is 23. For G2 the highest score is 44; the lowest is 17 so the Range is 27. The total of scores for G1 is 1035 and for G2, it is 888. Administering the achievement test (Post-test) and evaluating the related data here was an attempt to find out if the subjects in the two groups were different with regard to their level of achievement of the materials of the passage after treatment. After analyzing the results of the achievement test (Post-test), it could be shown that there were differences between the two groups concerning the students' achievement in vocabulary learning.

To show if the difference between the means of the scores of two groups (G1, the experimental group, and G2, the control group) in the achievement test (Post-test) was significant enough, a t-test was used. The purpose of t-test was also to assess the hypothesis which assumed that "teacher's using current issues of interest in society with class materials has a positive effect on students' reading comprehension in English class at university." In t-table, it was observed that when the 'level of significance for two-tailed test' was 0.05, with the 'df' of 58, the critical value would be 2.00. As it is shown in the table below the t-observed value is 3.08. Fortunately, the t-value is enough above t-critical that we are quite safe in rejecting the research null hypothesis, "teacher's integrating current issues of interest in the society in teaching reading has no effect on students' reading comprehension in English class at university." Our two groups have scored differently on the achievement test (Post-test). The difference is statistically significant. This is a support for our claim that relating current issues of interest from out of class to class materials by teachers in English class can help students comprehend reading passages better.

Table 5. T-observed and T-critical for Scores Means of the Two Groups (G1 and G2) in the Achievement Test

t-critical	two-tailed	df	t-observed
2.00	0.05	58	3.08

It is demonstrated by analyzing the results that learners do differently depending on teacher's bringing issues of interest into class. The data analysis provides evidence that this difference is significant enough. Actually the findings of the study approve that when teachers use current important matters of their society in their teaching in class, the consequence is the learners can learn the new words better and have better accomplishments in their learning. This clearly supports the idea that teachers should attempt to study more about this issue and put more values for it in their career. They are suggested to study and determine some issues which look to be interested by students because of any possible importance. Then, they can contribute those interesting issues to the materials of their class, which will end in promoting better learning by students. Undoubtedly, this work will encourage students to attend the class happily and with high motivation. It is really useful for teachers, to attempt to keep their students happy, and know that in this way teaching and learning in class can be easily and efficiently performed. The major reason to this improvement in learning is the fact that teachers by relating the points of the passages in lessons being taught in class to issues of interest out of the class are helping students to build up stronger schematic relationships in their mind. This, in turn, leads to easier comprehension of the reading text for students.

Because of teachers continually contribution of interesting issues to class materials in the reading passage, student's performance improved in reading comprehension. This result implied that learning becomes promoted when lessons are mixed with issues of their life. Generally, issues of interest in a society are a common point for both teachers and students. A lot of research findings claim that the learning process can take place much better if the materials of lessons are presented with information that is shared by the teacher and students, so that the learning becomes meaningful for learners. Omaggio (2003) contends that learning and practicing language in meaningful contexts is more appealing to both students and teachers than learning isolated bits of language. When teachers bring examples, explanations or etc. from TV programs, newspapers, the students' city or university, they provide learning environment that is easily comprehensible by learners, and facilitates their learning. According to different language teaching experts, one way to facilitate learning for learners is by keeping them attentive and encouraged in class which is one of the vital responsibilities of teachers. Chastain (1986) discusses that those teachers who strive to keep students interested, occupied, and reasonably content are the most affective. There is no doubt that addressing and reminding the issues the society where the students live in the middle of their lesson easily assist them to keep attentive in their learning.

According to the results of this study, integrating current issues of interest into class materials by teachers helps students understand reading passages easier and better. This finding highlights the need for teachers to try to keep updated with issues of interest in the society. In fact, teachers have to be informed about the interesting or important issues that are happening currently in the society. For example, they are suggested to watch popular TV programs, read significant news of newspapers and try to know about important and interesting things that

are taking place in their city or university where the teaching goes on. Otherwise, teachers can hardly find things that are interesting and common for themselves (teachers) and their students. Therefore, teachers are required to have pre-planning about choosing issues of interest to be used in classes, and this will create a demand in teacher education for teachers to be taught in this regard. Also, special care should be taken on development of language teaching books and syllabuses. Let's say, for example, in any unit of the language teaching book special sections should be predicted for teachers using current issues of interest in class and subsequently certain time should be allotted for performing those sections.

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