

The Role of Using Current Issues of Interest on Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract: This study attempted to investigate the effect of the teacher's using currents issues of interest in the society in English classes on the students' achievement of the vocabulary in reading comprehension. It was hypothesized that using awareness of current issues of interest has a positive influence on the students' achievement of the vocabulary in English class at the university. The research was conducted at Islamic Azad University in Hidaj with participants--male and female-- who were majoring at courses other than English. The research method which was employed was an experimental pre-test post-test control group design, and t-test was used to analyze the data. After analyzing the data, it was proved that when teachers contribute current issues of interest in the society to the class materials in teaching reading passages, their students learn vocabulary better.

Key Words: Current issues of interest, vocabulary learning

Introduction

Teachers often teach only the materials which are in the textbooks while according to the findings of some research, they will have better achievements if they use authentic materials in their classes. Also, some research findings show that students become more interested to learn when their teachers integrate materials outside of class to class materials. Some studies claim that if teachers have good information about the issues of interest in the society, and use them in their teaching by referring to those issues as authentic materials they will help the students learn their lessons more successfully. According to research findings, teachers' using awareness of current issues of interest in the society in teaching helps them as it is an issue of common interest for both teachers and learners. Using such awareness in teaching usually leads to learner's interaction and increases their concentration and motivation to learn. Studies support that it helps teachers to have dynamic classes as the learners are being reminded and informed of the issues—regarding the life affairs and the society in which they live or with which they are in immediate contact. The learners see that keeping concentrative helps stay in a state of alertness, which in turn, helps the process of learning. To encounter new and different discussions in any session often leads to keep and increase class dynamism. Generally, most of the studies on this area of language teaching suggest that teachers' using awareness of current issues of interest in the society in language teaching classes has important role in language teaching and requires a close attention.

The topic of this research-- teacher's using awareness of current issues of interest in the society-- has been usually studied and discussed under the term 'authenticity' and 'motivation' in language teaching. It has also been somehow related to the issues of 'relevance' and 'interest.' These topics directly and indirectly are related to the desire and determination of learners to learn. Research findings mostly state that language learners have better performance in their learning when they are interested to the topic or process of learning. 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. According to most of the results of studies carried out on this area of language teaching, teachers are 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. Making learners face authentic and interesting materials can probably help them experience their learning meaningfully and communicatively.

There are different arguments over the definition of the term and the ways of using authenticity 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. Pcolinska(2009) states that authenticity is clearly a relative matter and different aspects of it can be present in different degrees. Bax (2003) contends that Authenticity

has been a major feature in syllabus design, task-based approaches, materials development and the main focus of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the past. 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). According to Brinton (1991), authentic materials and media can reinforce for students the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world.

Current issues of interest are also related to 'motivation' in language learning. Longman dictionary of language and applied linguistics define motivation as the factors that determine 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.

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.

The independent variable in this study is vocabulary learning. In the past, vocabulary teaching and learning were often given little significance in second or foreign language programs. Recently a good interest has been put on the role of vocabulary in language learning and teaching process. Vocabulary learning was usually limited itself and received only incidental attention in textbooks and language programs. More attention was given to the aspects of teaching like grammar, reading and speaking and less importance was given to vocabulary teaching or learning. But the research on this aspect of language revealed its significant place in language learning process. Now it is obvious that without good vocabulary knowledge level, and good strategies for vocabulary learning, learners will have little success in their language learning performance and then may be discouraged from using language learning opportunities around them like watching movies, reading newspapers and going into websites. Richards Renandya (2002) believes that Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write.

In recent years, research on vocabulary has done a lot to make clear what levels of vocabulary learners need to perform successfully in different language aspects. There are different discussions on the using of appropriate approaches and strategies to learn and teach vocabulary. Hunt and Beglar discuss three approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning: incidental learning where learning vocabulary is a product of doing other things such as reading or listening, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development. Nation discusses a systematic rather than and incidental approach to the teaching of vocabulary and argues that such a focus is an essential part of a language course. He points out the limitations of incidental learning and the fact that second language learners are often unable to benefit from incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading because of limitations in their vocabulary knowledge.

Learning vocabulary through different approaches requires teachers to plan different activities and exercises, and subsequently demands learners to use different strategies. The amount of attention placed on vocabulary teaching programs depend on the learners' and the educational goal of the teaching program. Generally, there is no doubt that as learners' vocabulary expands in size and depth a high amount of success occurs in all aspects of language, such as reading, listening, speaking and etc. Therefore, This highlights the importance of trying to improve strategies of vocabulary learning.

Method of Study

The study is designed in quantitative research approach where the research method, an experimental pre-test post-test control group design, is used to examine the research question. The proposed thesis is examined experimentally by giving pre-test and post-test and comparing the means of two groups of the students. The design has been used because the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable has to be experimented.

Sampling

40 students were recruited for this study. They were students of one class 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. The subjects' age ranged from 20-28. The subjects were majoring in such fields as ' mechanical engineering,' ' computer sciences,' and ' electrical engineering.' The subjects were randomly divided into two groups: each with 20 students. In fact, one of the groups was used as the experimental group (G1) and the other one as the control group (G2).

Data Analysis Process

The data have been gathered through two tests (pre-test and post-test). The performance of the subjects of the two groups has been compared through analyzing their scores in the post-test which is the achievement test. A t-test has been used to verify the significance of the difference between the means of the scores of two groups (G1, the experimental group, and G2, the control group) in the post-test.

Findings and Discussion

Pre-test

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	20
Mean	37.75
Mode	38
SD	2.0487
Variance	4.197
Minimum	34
Maximum	42
Sum	755

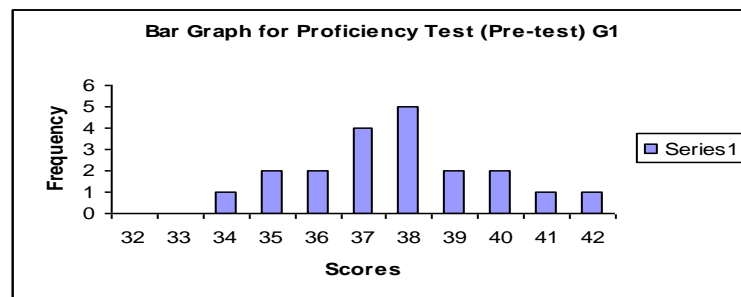
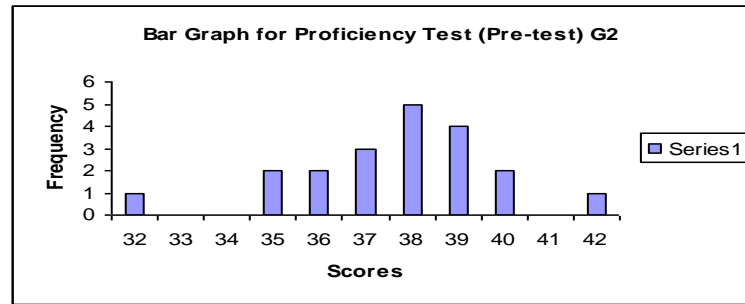


Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Proficiency Test (Pre-test) G2

N	20
Mean	37.35
Mode	38
SD	2.183
Variance	4.765
Minimum	32
Maximum	42
Sum	753



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: 37.75 for G1 and 37.65 for G2. The Standard Deviation (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects is also very close: 2.048 for G1 and 2.183 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 42; the lowest is 34 so the Range is 8. For G2 the highest score is 42; the lowest is 32 so the Range is 10. The total of scores for G1 is 755 and for G2, it is 753. 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.

Treatment (Teaching the Materials)

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 different one-hour sessions. 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 a passage entitled ‘Culture Shock’ from the book ‘Select Reading’ by Linda Lee and Erik Gunderson. 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. The same passage (Culture Shock) was 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 passage 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 passage 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 passage were the same for both G1 and G2 students. On the other hand, for the students of G2, the passage was taught without any attempt of contributing any materials from outside of the class; that is, the passage and its 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 passage itself, not from out of the class.

Post-test

The teaching was one session for each group; a one-hour session was held for G1 and another one-hour session for G2. Immediately after teaching, 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 passage (Culture Shock) taught during one-hour session. 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 3 and 4 show the statistics and graphic representations of the results for the achievement test for both groups.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test (Post-test) G1

N	20
Mean	13.6
Mode	14
SD	3.1689
Variance	10.042
Minimum	7
Maximum	19
Sum	272

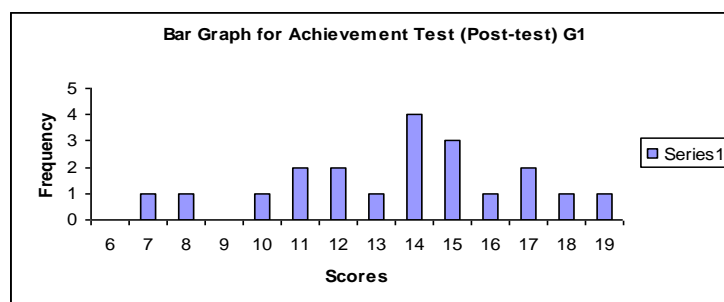
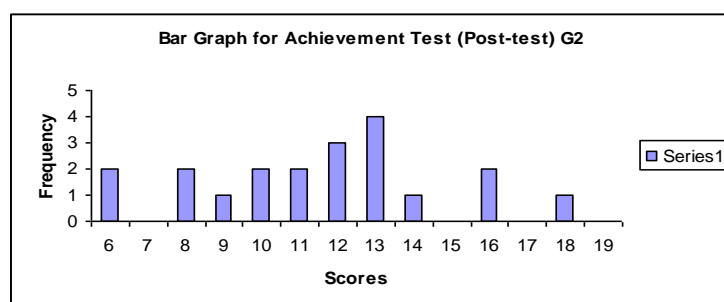


Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test (Post-test) G2

N	20
Mean	11.55
Mode	13
SD	3.2032
Variance	10.4
Minimum	6
Maximum	18
Sum	231



The tables above evidently show that the two groups of subjects have scored different results. The means for the two groups are different: 13.6 for G1 and 11.55 for G2. The Standard Deviations (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects are also a little different: 3.1689 for G1 and 3.2032 for G2. Other measures also show difference between scores of the subjects in the two groups. While the scores could range from 0—20, the highest score for G1 is 19; the lowest is 7 so the Range is 12. For G2 the highest score is 18; the lowest is 6 so the Range is 12. The total of scores for G1 is 272 and for G2, it is 231. 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.

T-test

A t-test was also used to show whether or not 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. The purpose of t-test was also to assess the hypothesis which assumed that “teacher’s using awareness of current issues of interest in the society in teaching new vocabulary has a positive effect on students’ leaning vocabulary in English classes 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 38, the critical value would be 2.021. As it is shown in the table below the t-observed value is 2.07. Fortunately, the t-value is enough above t-critical that we are quite safe in rejecting the null hypothesis, “teacher’s using awareness of current issues of interest in the society in teaching new vocabulary has no effect on students’ leaning vocabulary in English classroom at university,” and approving the positive hypothesis. 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 using awareness of current issues of interest in the society by the teacher in English class can help students learn vocabulary of the 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
2.021	0.05	38	2.07

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that learners do differently depending on teacher’s using awareness of issues of interest in the society. The analyzed data 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 know that by keeping their students happy and attentive, as one of their main tasks, 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 passage being taught in class to issues of interest out of the class help their students to build up stronger schematic relationships in their mind. This, in turn, leads to easy increase of the vocabulary knowledge for students.

As the results showed students’ performance became better in learning vocabulary because of teacher’s continually contribution of interesting issues of the society to the materials in the reading passage. This implied that learning becomes promoted when students’ 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 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 issues of the society where students live in the middle of their lesson easily assists them to keep attentive in their learning.

The fact that according to the results of this study teacher’s using awareness of current issues of interest helps students learn vocabulary better 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 both themselves (teachers) and 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 the 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 teacher's using current issues of interest in class, and subsequently certain time should be allotted for performing those sections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Authenticity, Motivation, Relevance and Interest are the topics where integrating issues of interest is discussed to be helpful for students, facilitating their language learning. This research investigated a special aspect, related to those topics. The focus was on using current issues of interest on vocabulary learning in reading comprehension. The findings and results showed that contributing current issues of interest in the society to the class materials in teaching reading passages, significantly improves students vocabulary learning. In fact, the findings revealed that integrating some very important events of students' society that are currently significant, like those that are on TV or newspapers, creates interest and motivation in students to learn and be attentive in class. Then, such interest leads to easily domain of class materials, including the vocabulary in lessons, as well.

As the most previous studies on using issues of interest have shown, the results of the present study showed a significant role of it on students' vocabulary learning. So, it can be concluded that to have better and improved vocabulary learning, teachers and also students should take some points into consideration. The found positive effect of using current issues of interest suggests teachers to try to increase the integration of currently interesting issues to class materials. Actually, the more a teacher blends newly important materials with lessons the more encouraged the students become to learn. For example, it will be helpful to watch the mostly-viewed programs of the television or the popular movies; to read important news of the newspapers or web-sites which are often seen by many people. Teachers are strongly suggested to try to be informed that what programs are currently followed as favorite ones and/or what issues are considered as important ones by their students. Teachers are especially suggested to explain about the significance of this integrating life materials with class materials to the students so that they are convinced and keep informed of the current issues of interest. Thus, both teachers and students will experience more success in their language teaching and learning if they are aware of current interesting topics of the society they live in

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*1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics
May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

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