Using Current Issues of Interest in Teaching Grammar

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of the integrating currents issues of interest into class materials on the students' achievement in learning grammar. The following question was proposed. Is relating current issues of interest to class materials useful on students grammar learning? It was hypothesized that integrating current issues of interest with class materials in teaching grammar has a positive effect on learning grammar. The study was performed at Islamic Azad University in Hidaj with 60 participants--male and female-- who were majoring in 'mechanical' and 'electrical' engineering. Since the researcher did not have the possibility of randomizing the subjects, 60 students of two classes who were taking their first semester at university were used for this study; one of the classes as the control group and the other as the experimental group. As Farhady (1995, p. 146) contends: "In classroom research it is unreasonable to expect the director of the courses to randomly assign students to classes for the sake of experimentation." The subjects were taught for five 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, it was found that integrating current issues of interest with class materials in teaching grammar lessons did not significantly improve students achievement in learning grammar.

Introduction

In ESL/EFL class, if materials from out of the class are included in taught materials, better results will be achieved (Stout, 1987; Brinton, 1991; Gebhard, 1996; Melvin& Jacobson et al. 2003). It is also believed that when out-of-class materials are used in teaching class materials, learners attain more motivation to learn. According to Brinton (1991), authentic materials and media can reinforce for students the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world. 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. There are often some issues attracting people's attention and creating some topics of common interest. Usually a large number of events are known to be focused by both teachers and students. As an instance, actors, actresses, athletes or politicians are often know by students and teachers; they follow the stories of popular programs of TV, common magazines or newspapers and popular websites. In this country, most of the time, important economic, social or political news are followed by most of people and students as well. Thus, integrating these issues to class materials will probably strengthen student's attention and interest to learn. Therefore, studying the probable efficacy of using these common issues on teaching and learning grammar looks to be necessary. Also, the idea that language learners usually find grammar teaching classes boring and difficult, justifies the attempt of this study to make teaching this aspect of language easier and with more interest.

In teaching English as a foreign language, there have usually been concerns about the negative feelings and attitudes that students have towards grammar. Grammar looks boring and difficult to many of language learners. There have been good improvements in teaching grammar over the years, but there is no doubt that, more work still needs to be done on how to motivate students in grammar classes. In addition, even though many students have studied English for many years in school and university, most of them have severe problems in applying grammatical rules in language production. On the other side, grammar is one of the most important aspects of language education which is needed in teaching and learning every skill of a language. Certainly, an effective way of teaching grammar will contribute both learners and teachers. So, teaching grammar demands a lot of research work. The studies carried out on this area of language teaching have tried to promote teaching and learning of grammar.

By providing some scientific results, this study, too, seeks to see if teaching and learning this part of language can be improved. The results of many research studies in EFL/ESL declare that increasing students motivation ends in improvement in learning. Interest is defined as "a unique motivational variable, as well as a psychological state that occurs during interactions between persons and their objects of interest, and it is characterized by increased attention, concentration and affect" Hidi (2006). Ebbers (2011) contends that such interest and motivation results in better strategy use, prompting inference facilitation and providing more reliable retrieval of information and deeper levels of comprehension.

Studies on the Topic

The subject of integrating issues of interest from out of class with class materials in EFL/ESL have been studied by many researchers of this field. Some of them have referred to such issues by terms like authentic, motivating or real materials. The results of such studies mostly demonstrate that language

learning is better achieved when new interesting topics are brought into students' class to be taught with their class materials. 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 socio-cultural 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.

Eun (2010) in a study on contextualizing grammar teaching using authentic materials comes to the conclusion that grammar is no longer boring, but dynamic and interesting when authentic materials are used to teach grammar. Oura (1999) in his research discusses that all of the classroom activities, utilizing authentic materials and giving students specific tasks to perform to complete a project, can be a very meaningful experience for students. Students often report gaining greater confidence in using the language during such activities. It's a way to bring real world experiences into the classroom by focusing on practical language skills. Gardner (2008) in a paper presents some new approaches to teaching grammar. This paper describes the philosophy and practice of a course which explores why teachers might wish to change their approach to teaching grammar, and how they might do so. It emphasizes that change should occur on three levels – materials, actions and beliefs – and suggests ways in which this could be done by teacher educators, or by groups of teachers engaged in autonomous professional development. 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. Vannestal et. al. (2008) carried out a project where they tried to increase student motivation and encourage learner autonomy in a university course on English grammar by introducing the use of language corpora (large databases of authentic text). The students worked with problem-solving assignments which involved formulating their own grammatical rules based on examples found in the corpus. They also explained rules to each other in small groups (peer teaching). The most important conclusion was that corpus work required a large amount of introduction and continuous support in order to make students become independent corpus users who know how to formulate relevant corpus queries and interpret the results.

There are numerous research results that are supporting the use of out-of-class and/or interesting materials in teaching EFL. However, some study results have come up with some skepticism over such effectiveness in this field. 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 language-related task, such as helping a child with homework or speaking English at work. When teachers know learners' motivations, they can target instruction to meet their goals, and thus in working with new students, teachers are required to identify why students have come to class. According to some research findings, 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".*

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

N	30
Mean	27.03
Mode	26
SD	6.27
Variance	39.31
Range	15
Minimum	14
Maximum	39
Sum	811

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

N	30
Mean	26.76
Mode	28
SD	6.94
Variance	48.16
Range	17
Minimum	15
Maximum	42
Sum	803

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

N	30
Mean	27.03
Mode	26
SD	6.27
Variance	39.31
Range	15
Minimum	14
Maximum	39
Sum	811

N	30
Mean	26.76
Mode	28
SD	6.94
Variance	48.16
Range	17
Minimum	15
Maximum	42
Sum	803

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test G1

N	30
Mean	29.4
Mode	29
SD	6.27
Variance	39.31
Range	26
Minimum	17
Maximum	43
Sum	882

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Achievement Test G2

N	30
Mean	27.83
Mode	27
SD	7.84
Variance	61.46
Range	27
Minimum	15
Maximum	42
Sum	835

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

N	30
Mean	29.4
Mode	29
SD	6.27
Variance	39.31
Range	26
Minimum	17
Maximum	43
Sum	882

N	30
Mean	27.83
Mode	27
SD	7.84
Variance	61.46
Range	27
Minimum	15
Maximum	42
Sum	835

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	0.467

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.
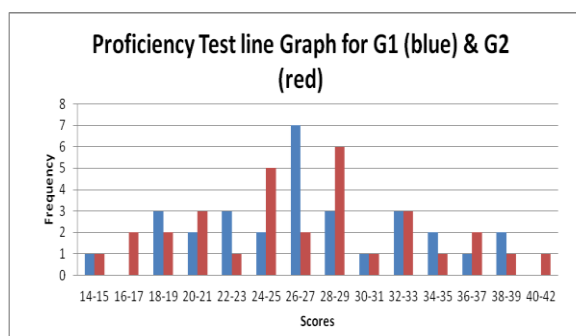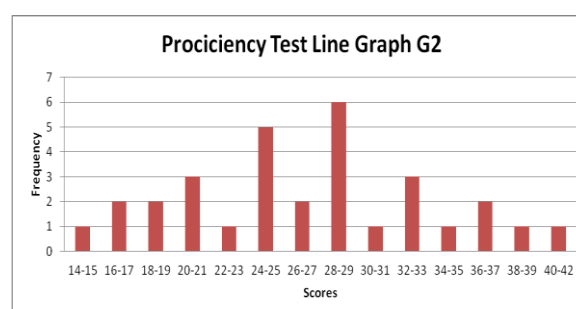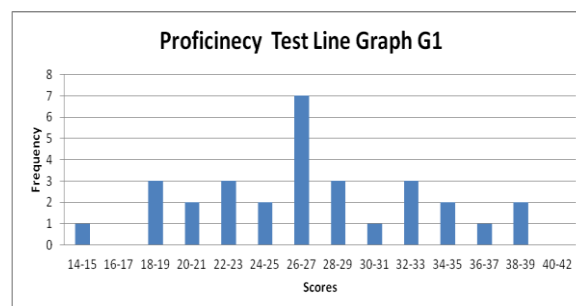
The study provides empirical evidence that using authentic materials and activities results in important changes in out-of-school literacy practices, and that this approach is more likely to be associated with these changes than teaching that relies upon the use of school-only materials and activities. Asgari (2112) in a study on using current issues of interest in teaching reading comprehension comes to the result that the students' achievement improves in their learning. He also concludes that integrating such issues to class materials makes the level of interest and attentiveness to grow which leads to better learning and achievement.

Results and Discussion

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 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.

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: 27.03 for G1 and 26.76 for G2. The Standard Deviation (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects is also very close: 6.27 for G1 and 6.94 for G2.

Proficinecy Test Line Graph G1

Prociciency Test Line Graph G2

Proficiency Test line Graph for G1 (blue) & G2 (red)

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 39; the lowest is 14 so the Range is 15. For G2 the highest score is 42; the lowest is 15
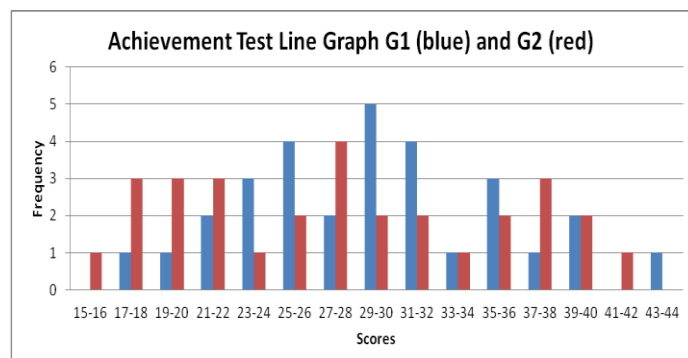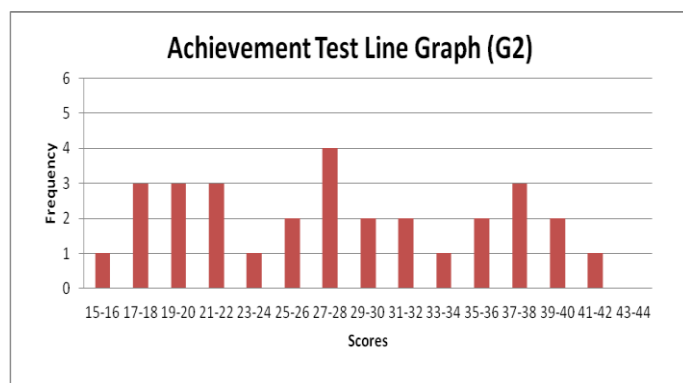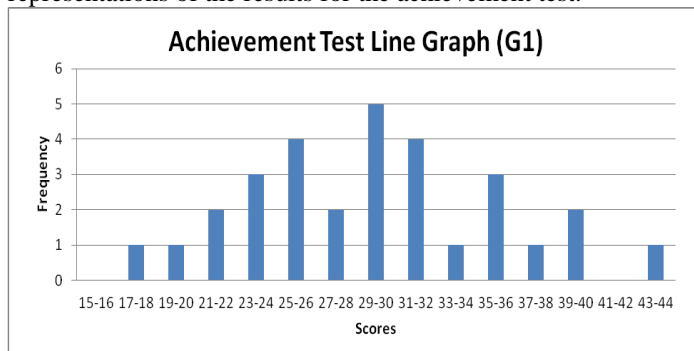
so the Range is 17. The total of scores for G1 is 811 and for G2, it is 803. Administering the proficiency test and evaluating the related data here was an attempt to find out if the subjects in the two groups were similar or the same with regard to their basic English knowledge before presenting the treatment. After analyzing the results of the Proficiency test, it was concluded that there were not any major differences between the two groups concerning their background grammar 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 different classes in five ninety-minute sessions in five weeks. Each group was taught for one and half hours: G1 (experimental group was taught from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and G2 (control group) was taught from 9: 45 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. The materials that were taught included five lessons related English sentence structure from the book 'A Basic English Course for University Students' which included topics like singular and plural nouns, simple present and past tense sentences, adverbials of place and time Wh-questions, expressions of quantity and etc.. This book was elementary level and provided the university students with high-interest grammar lessons containing explanations and directions about the grammatical points related to English sentence structure. It also had different practice activities which were intended to build the expected grammatical knowledge in learners. In fact, the same lessons 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 points in the lessons 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 the materials in grammar lessons 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 materials of lessons had already been determined as the parts to which interesting issues were related. Actually, the materials of the lessons were the same for both G1 and G2 students. On the other hand, for the students of G2, the lessons were taught without any attempt of contributing any materials from outside of the class; that is, the grammar lessons and their materials were taught merely by representing and describing the pattern of the phases, sentence and so on. In addition, to support the taught materials, some more explanations and examples were provided.

Achievement Test

The teaching was performed for five sessions for each group; five 90-minute sessions were held for G1 and five other 90-minute sessions for G2. In the sixth session, all subjects, students of G1 and G2 took an achievement test (post-test) to determine any probable differences in students' success in achieving the materials of the lessons. The achievement test had been individually (course) developed on English sentence

structure lessons from the course book named 'A Basic English Course for University Students' which had been taught during the previous five teaching 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.

The two groups of subjects have scored different results which are shown in the tables above evidently. The means for the two groups are different: 29.4 for G1 and 27.83 for G2. The Standard Deviations (SD) for the scores of the groups of subjects are also a little different: 6.27 for G1 and 7.84 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 43; the lowest is 17 so the Range is 26. For G2 the highest score is 42; the lowest is 15 so the Range is 27. The total of scores for G1 is 882 and for G2, it is 835. Administering the achievement 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, it could be shown that there were differences between the two groups

concerning the students achievement in learning the taught materials of the grammar lessons. However, the difference between the means of the scores of the two groups did not look to be high. In fact, we needed to make sure that whether or not such a difference between mean was significant, and that it was not due to chance.

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 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 with class materials has a positive effect on students' achievement of grammatical points 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 0.467. The t-value was lower than the t-critical, we were unable to reject the research null hypothesis, "teacher's integrating current issues of interest in the society in teaching reading has no effect on students achievement in learning grammar lessons in English class at university." Our two groups had scored differently on the achievement test. But, this difference was not statistically significant. This could not be 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 better learn the grammar lessons.

The analysis of the results demonstrate that learners achievements are, to some extent, different depending on teacher's bringing issues of interest into class. The data analysis provides evidence that this difference is not 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 presented grammatical points slightly better and have, to a low extent, better accomplishment in their learning.

This finding, in fact, does not clearly support the idea that teachers should attempt to study more about this issue and put more values for it in their career. Although the results of the this study did not significantly approve the improvement of learners achievement in grammar teaching classes, there are many other research results that provide evidences of positive influence of integrating out-of-class materials with class materials in language teaching. Generally, issues of interest in a society are common areas of information 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 effective. But, according to the results of this study, integrating current issues of interest into class materials by teachers helps students learn grammar lessons slightly easier and better which was not enough significant. Perhaps, based on this little difference in achievement between students, it may be suggested that teachers should try to keep updated with issues of interest in the society. This are advised 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 in order to be used in with class materials. Also, teachers may probably be 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.

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