

## The Impact of Integrating Interest with Instructional Materials on Iraqi EFL learners' Grammar Achievement: Focus on Learners' Interest and Anxiety

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Research Paper

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**Abstract:** Affective variables play a really important role in the language learning process. Interest and anxiety are some of the emotional features, affecting language learning in general and grammar achievement in particular. This research focused on the impact of using interesting instructional materials on the grammar achievement and interest level in the EFL context. The investigation further tried to find whether selecting the reading materials based on learners' preference had any influence on the learners' anxiety level. To answer the research questions, a mixed-methods design was adopted based on the nature of the questions. The experimental group was taught with interest-based units, while the control group used traditional syllabus units. Participants were evaluated before and after the intervention with grammar tests, interest surveys, and an anxiety questionnaire. Data were analyzed with SPSS to identify differences in grammar achievement, interest, and anxiety levels. It was revealed that the employment of interest in selecting class materials helped learners have better performance in grammar achievement. Furthermore, it was shown that learners' interest level significantly grew as a result of using materials based on learners' preferences. The results also indicated that learners' anxiety level reduced due to the employment of attractive materials for teaching. EFL teachers are recommended to consider learners' interests in order to create more engaging materials and improve learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Grammar Achievement, Instructional Materials, Interest, Iraqi EFL Learners

### Introduction

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There are different variables exerting impact on English learning and teaching. One of these factors is concerned with learners' variables, covering many factors like motivation, anxiety, interest and etc. Learner variable is one of the several different variables with a key role in different areas of language teaching. This variable encompasses the emotions, attitudes, and personality traits of learners. According to recent research (e.g., Asgari, 2023; Botes et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2020;), these factors significantly influence the development and acquisition of second or foreign language skills. This impact stems from the role of emotions in regulating learners' motivation and engagement with cognitive processes essential for language learning (Shao et al., 2020). Additionally, personality traits can predict learners' emotional experiences in the language learning classroom, further

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shaping their engagement and performance (Botes et al., 2024). Motivation plays a critical role in grammar acquisition which is a boring aspect for most language learners, encouraging learners to persist despite the challenges of mastering abstract rules and complex structures (Chen et al., 2022). However, the irregularities and exceptions in grammar rules often heighten the cognitive load and anxiety level, leading to avoidance behaviors (Mudra, 2023). This highlights the importance of addressing both cognitive and affective barriers in grammar learning.

Simply stated, most language learners acquire language under the influence of cognitive or affective factors that have been shown to be effective in the learning process. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) assert that positive attitudes among learners play a crucial role in facilitating the learning process, which aligns with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. Many affective elements such as perseverance, self-concept, attitude, introversion, extroversion, interest, and autonomy assist learners in developing L2/FL skills (Asgari & Ganji, 2020; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014).

Integrating interest with instructional materials means the materials can be selected and graded in accordance with some specific factors that can ease the foreign language learning process like priority of materials in a specific context, learners' motivation, interest and etc. In EFL classes, it has been found that learners' interest can be an important factor that needs careful investigation. Many experts in education (Heilman et al., 2010; Hidi & Reninger, 2006; Safotso & Tompte, 2018) have pointed out that Interest-Based Language Teaching (IBLT) can raise learners' motivation and improve their performance. Moreover, Mzury (2023) argues that learners' common errors in grammar acquisition are often caused by factors such as overgeneralizations and simplifications. He goes on to say that tailored materials are useful in overcoming these issues.

Hendriani et al. (2023) demonstrate how engagement and personalized instruction can influence learner motivation during grammar learning. In this sense, they support the idea that interest-based approaches are more effective than other approaches. When adaptive approaches are blended with instruction and help personalize the materials, a good level of improvement happens in EFL teaching, leading to a better learning journey of abstract grammatical rules. In this way, the anxiety level of students may be reduced. This is the reason why different ways of engaging learners and addressing their emotional challenges tied to grammar learning should be explored. Hence, the teaching and selecting materials are expected to be reflected by individual learners' personal features. In line with these studies, the investigation focused on examining the impact of using interesting class materials on grammar achievement and its probable role in the learners' interest and anxiety level.

Although the issue of learner variables has been under the scrutiny of researchers, little to no research has been conducted on their use in grammar instruction. Notwithstanding the fact that grammar acquisition is a domain that is foundational but often challenging for learners (Mzury, 2023), most studies focus on general language skills such as speaking and reading. Additionally, the role of interest-based materials in reducing cognitive load and anxiety levels in grammar learning has not been adequately explored. To address these gaps, this study investigates the impact of interest-based instructional materials on grammar achievement in Iraq EFL classrooms and explores their potential to enhance learners' interest and reduce their anxiety.

### Review of the Literature

In humanistic view of language learning which takes a holistic attitude and perspective on language learning, the learner is considered as a whole, i.e. their emotional and social sides must also be considered in language learning not just their cognitive side. The approach mostly deals with affective factors with remarkable role in teaching and learning. The major issue in this school of psychology seems to be the fact that learners are the individuals who are expected to develop to the ultimate extent in their learning. Educators are regarded to provide the factors assisting learners actualize their dreams and reach their goals in learning process by working as facilitators of the learning process (Benson, 2001).

Based on humanistic psychology, one of the main principles in education is that high motivation and interest can lead learners toward the responsibility to learn (Lena et al., 2019; Lestari, 2020; Mynard & McLoughlin, 2020; Qi, 2012), which will boost the learning outcome. In a study by Pei (2023), it was discovered that there was a strong inverse relationship between motivation and anxiety among college students who were learning English. According to the study, greater intrinsic motivation significantly reduces anxiety. This indicates that motivation plays a critical role in alleviating affective barriers in learning English as a foreign language. In a similar study, Wu et al. (2023) examined how anxiety and motivation interact among Chinese high school students. They found that while anxiety may hinder motivation, if managed effectively, it can also drive learners to achieve more.

In recent studies, such as Huang (2023), it has been demonstrated that understanding learners' learning styles and intrinsic motivations can have a profound impact on their language acquisition outcomes. Cheung (2023) emphasizes that flipped classrooms enhance motivation, which ultimately leads to greater engagement among learners. Similarly, Perveen and Ikhtiar (2023) explain how gamification can make learning experiences more engaging, directly enhancing learner interest and improving students' learning outcomes. In fact, besides some usual factors like the teacher, the book, and the class, other dimensions such as self-esteem, self-evaluation and motivation also enjoy a significant take by giving willingness and confidence to learners. Furthermore, Cheung (2023) cites motivation as a crucial factor in developing learners' willingness to participate, especially in digitally mediated classrooms.

Humanistic approach, indeed, requires language teachers to be considered as the facilitators who responsibly turn the learning experience to an easy task. The approach insists that learning should be facilitated through creating friendly atmosphere, where the learners are expected and hoped to employ the learned language for real-life purposes (Dornyei, 2009). Based on this psychology, it is thought that the relaxed mind and appropriate emotional state for learners can ease the task of learning, which will facilitate teaching, too.

Some studies reported the interest's impact on language learning skills. Asgari et al. (2019) found that integrating attractive teaching materials could positively change the learning outcome for the learners so that they could have better performance in reading comprehension. In a similar manner, a study by Käsper et al. (2018) found that attractive passages help students understand and retain information better and longer. This demonstrates the importance of using attractive texts and materials in learning contexts. Ainley et al. (2002) studied psychological factors helpful in learning and found that topic interest rose learners' emotional state and increased their persistence in language learning. In their research, Frances et al. (2020) discovered that embedding vocabulary learning in a positive emotional context significantly increased engagement and retention. These findings reinforce the role of interest in the enhancement of language skills. A study by Parveen and Ikhtiar (2023) found that students have a higher level of interest and persistence when they are taught with gamified elements, which enhance their comprehension and retention.

Bray and Barron (2004) examined text assessment in language learning and discovered the connections existing among interest, gender, and verbal ability. They also found that there was a positive connection between text understanding and verbal ability regardless of learners' topic interest, and the effect was more evident on female students. However, Ainley et al. (2002) found out that proficient readers had better performance in comprehending more interesting texts, while such difference was not witnessed in understanding less attractive texts. The researchers further found that interest level was mostly influenced by affective reactions to passages through raising learners' persistence in learning. Huang (2023) and Frances et al. (2020) also demonstrated that students are more persistent and emotionally engaged when they have access to materials tailored to their interests. Thus, motivational factors need to be incorporated into instructional design.

Teaching grammar has undergone changes as a result of advances in technology and has been affected by such changes in different ways. These progresses have ended in providing learners with different online tools like educational application or programs that in some cases are more efficient than teachers and can serve as teachers and peers for learners. Digital and online tools like online

dictionaries, digital handbooks and etc., can easily assist students in improving their performance in grammatical tests, which in turn makes the teaching grammar more comfortable and efficient for language teachers. Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Skype and online dictionaries are among the abundant apps that can assist learners and teachers to conduct their assignments and jobs better. Using technology in language education not only helps grammar teaching but also enhances learner motivation through autonomous learning, according to Czerska-Andrzejewska (2021).

The anxiety under study in this research deals with the one experienced in language learning, which is naturally referred to as language learning anxiety. Similarly, MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012, p. 103) define Language learning anxiety as “the anxiety that involves the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not the learner’s native language”. Stober (2004) identifies four dimensions concerned with test anxiety, namely, emotionality, worry, interference, and lack of confidence. The results of several studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kader, 2016; Strack & Esteves, 2014) consistently approve that L2 or FL learners analyze and distinguish anxiety types they have experienced in two distinctions of debilitating and facilitative. In the same vein, Xiwei (2023) shows that when anxiety is addressed by appropriate pedagogical strategies, it can be transformed into a facilitative factor, enhancing learners’ engagement and performance.

Connecting the areas of students’ interest to instructional materials is thought to grow learners’ attention and increase their interest to learn. Hence, the focus of many studies regarding integration of learners’ interest with class materials is on using authentic or real materials, coming from different times but with low attention to the interest aspect. Furthermore, because little attention has been paid to the usefulness of learners’ participation in choosing and sequencing the instructional materials, it seems necessary to study the probable efficacy of integrating learners’ interest with lessons in improving the performance of learners in advancing grammar knowledge of Iraqi English language learners, and to check any probable effect on their interest and anxiety. Thus, the following questions have been attended to in the current research project.

**Research Question One:** Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on the learners’ grammar achievement?

**Research Question Two:** Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on the learners’ interest?

**Research Question Three:** Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on the learners’ anxiety?

## Method

### Participants

Sixty female students studying in a secondary school were selected using a convenience sampling method. The method of sampling was recruited for research practicality and participant availability. They were studying in the city of Kut, Iraq. The participants in both groups spoke Arabic as their native language. The participants were in the same level of schooling.

### Data Collection Procedure

The participants were initially checked regarding their English proficiency to assure they are in the similar level. Hence, they initially took the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), and the results showed they were not significantly different in their proficiency. The experimental group took a survey (a questionnaire) that was seeking to disclose the participants’ interest. The book, 'Guide to Facts and Figures,' that is a textbook written by Linda Lee and Patricia Ackert was used as the course material. A grammar pretest was administered to assess learners' prior knowledge of grammatical content aligned

with the textbook and to establish a baseline for grammar achievement. They also took an interest and anxiety survey using a questionnaire to identify their interest and anxiety level. The assigned units were taught to the groups differently within five weeks. The study continued by beginning the treatment for both groups (experimental and control) groups. The groups were taught using different units—the experimental group was taught units aligned with their interests, while the control group followed the standard syllabus units. The teaching was followed by posttest prepared from the course materials, testing learners' grammar achievement. The achievement test was administered, and the learners were surveyed to find out the possible changes about their interest and anxiety level. The data gathered from the testing the learners' achievement and the individual survey for both groups was analyzed using SPSS.

## **Instruments**

### ***Guide to Facts and Figures***

It is a reading and vocabulary development textbook that has been written by Linda Lee and Patricia Ackert and has been published by Thomson publications. This book was used as the main course book within the treatment period. It covers seven different areas namely Animals, Why and How, Music, Plants, Interesting People of the World, Exploration and Adventures, and Work and Leisure.

### ***Grammar Achievement Test***

In this study, a grammar achievement test was developed to assess learners' understanding of grammatical structures. The test included 40 items: 30 multiple-choice and 10 fill-in-the-blank questions. The questions were in accordance with the grammatical content covered in the textbook Facts and Figures, used as the course book. The test was piloted with a separate group of learners to ensure reliability, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. For consistency, the same test was used for both the pretest and posttest.

### ***The Reading Interest Survey***

Seven general topics coming from the used textbook were included in the survey. A Guide to Facts and Figures, the students' course book was used to provide materials matching with students' interest. This survey questionnaire followed the template of Reading Interest Survey from Heilman et al. (2010) whose reliability had been approved in previous studies. Some limited change was applied to this questionnaire to be used for this study; hence, its reliability was re-established by using the required calculations and expert judgment.

### ***Empowerment Interest Scale (EIS)***

This interest measuring scale, had been developed by Weber et al. (2005) for measuring student interest to examine participants' interest. EIS had 18 questions grouped in three subgroups to determine students' perceptions of the impact, meaningfulness or competence, which were identified as the dimensions of student interest. An internal consistency of 0.91 had already been found for this scale by Weber et al. (2005), and its validity was verified through expert assistance.

### ***Anxiety Scale***

Learners' anxiety level was measured by Horwitz Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986). The scale has 33 items listed under 3 subgroups-- communication apprehension that was shortened as CA with 11 items, test anxiety or TA with 15 items, and finally fear of negative evaluation or FNE with 7 items. The scale's reliability and validity have already been confirmed.

## Results

### Proficiency Test Results

The proficiency test, consisting of 20 items, was employed to determine the learners' proficiency level similarity. Concerning the general English proficiency, the OPT was administered, and the results did not show any remarkable difference between the scores of the participants of the two groups. Independent Samples t-test was used to test the above hypothesis because the normality of the data of the study was checked previously. The results of this test are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

**Table 1**

*Proficiency Test Descriptive Statistics*

|     | Group        | N  | Mean  | Std. Dev. | Max | Min |
|-----|--------------|----|-------|-----------|-----|-----|
| OPT | Experimental | 30 | 11.86 | 3.87      | 19  | 4   |
|     | Control      | 30 | 11.46 | 4.16      | 18  | 3   |

As seen in Table 1, the mean for proficiency test for the experimental group is 11.86 but it is 11.46 for the control group. The results of checking the significant difference between these average scores are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Independent Sample T-test for Proficiency Test (Experimental and Control)*

|                  |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |        |                 |                 |                       |                                           |         |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------|
|                  |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df     | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |         |
|                  |                             |                                         |      |                              |        |                 |                 | Lower                 |                                           | Upper   |
| Proficiency Test | Equal variances assumed     | .190                                    | .664 | .385                         | 58     | .702            | .40000          | 1.03886               | -1.67951                                  | 2.47951 |
|                  | Equal variances not assumed |                                         |      | .385                         | 57.695 | .702            | .40000          | 1.03886               | -1.67974                                  | 2.47974 |

The independent samples t-test for proficiency test means between the two compared groups revealed no significant difference in means ( $t = 0.385$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p = 0.702$ ).

### Interest Survey Results

The Reading Interest Survey was used to identify the experimental group participants' interest level in the studied topics. The interest level in each item was checked by choosing one of the seven topics, representing the book chapters. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the survey.

**Table 3**

*The Results of the Interest Survey*

| General Topics of the Textbook  | N  | Number of Students Interested | Interest in Percent |
|---------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Animals                         | 30 | 3                             | 10                  |
| How? Why?                       | 30 | 16                            | 53.34               |
| Plants                          | 30 | 1                             | 3.33                |
| Music                           | 30 | 2                             | 6.66                |
| World and Leisure               | 30 | 1                             | 3.33                |
| Interesting People of the World | 30 | 6                             | 20                  |
| Exploration and Adventure       | 30 | 1                             | 3.33                |

As evidenced in Table 3, the topic of 'how and why,' had the highest attraction level (53.34%) for the participants, while 'interesting people of the world' was the second highest (20%), and the other topics were ranked in the lower ranks.

**Research Question One**

The question “Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on learners' grammar achievement?” was the first research question. Due to the normality of the scores used to answer this research question, to compare the two groups in terms of post-test results in grammar, an independent samples t-test was run between experimental and control groups grammar post-test scores. Tables 4 and 5 present the results.

**Table 4**

*Post-test for Grammar Achievement Test*

|                   | Group        | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Max | Min |
|-------------------|--------------|----|-------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Grammar Post-test | Experimental | 30 | 14.23 | 3.29           | 19  | 6   |
|                   | Control      | 30 | 13.30 | 3.96           | 20  | 5   |

Based on the data presented in Table 4, the mean for the experimental group is 14.23, but for the control group it is 13.3. An independent samples t-test was run to check the significance of this difference. Table 5 presents the results.

**Table 5**

*Independent Sample T-Test for Grammar Post-test Scores (Experimental and Control)*

|  |  | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      |   |    |                 |                 |                       | t-test for Equality of Means              |  |       |       |
|--|--|-----------------------------------------|------|---|----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|--|-------|-------|
|  |  | F                                       | Sig. | t | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |  | Lower | Upper |
|  |  |                                         |      |   |    |                 |                 |                       |                                           |  |       |       |

|                   |                             |      |      |       |        |      |       |      |      |       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|-------|--------|------|-------|------|------|-------|
| Grammar post-test | Equal variances assumed     | .029 | .864 | 3.184 | 58     | .002 | 2.533 | .795 | .940 | 4.125 |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |      |      | 3.184 | 57.482 | .002 | 2.533 | .795 | .940 | 4.126 |

As indicated in Table 5, the t-test results for grammar post-test between the experimental and the control the groups showed a remarkable difference between the means ( $t = 3.189$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). The experimental group's performance was significantly better, which seems to be due to the use of the treatment. To confirm the results for the first research question, the experimental group's pre-test mean (14.23) and post-test mean (15.4) were compared, showing an improvement in grammar performance.

### Research Question Two

"Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact in the learners' interest?" was the second research question. This question was seeking to find if adding attraction to the instructional materials can lead to any change in learners' interest level. The descriptive statistics concerning the interest questionnaire are given in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Interest Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups*

|                    | Group        | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Max | Min |
|--------------------|--------------|----|-------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Interest Post-test | Experimental | 30 | 62.03 | 13.6520        | 86  | 37  |
|                    | Control      | 30 | 57.76 | 10.9612        | 76  | 33  |

Table 6 shows the mean for the experimental group is higher, hence an independent samples t-test was run to verify the significance of the difference.

**Table 7**

*Independent Sample T-Test for Interest Post-test Scores between Experimental and Control Groups*

|                          |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |        |                 |                 |                       |                                           |        |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------|
|                          |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df     | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |        |
|                          |                             |                                         |      |                              |        |                 |                 |                       | Lower                                     | Upper  |
| Interest Post-test Score | Equal variances assumed     | 1.821                                   | .182 | 2.419                        | 58     | .019            | 7.733           | 3.196                 | 1.334                                     | 14.131 |
|                          | Equal variances not assumed |                                         |      | 2.419                        | 55.413 | .019            | 7.733           | 3.196                 | 1.328                                     | 14.138 |

As shown in Table 7, the independent samples t-test for post-test scores of students' interest level between the compared groups revealed a significant difference in means ( $t = 2.419$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). This was indicating the effectiveness of using instructional materials tailored to students' preferences in increasing their interest.

### Research Question 3

"Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on the learners' anxiety?" was the third research question. The anxiety post-test means were compared for this purpose. Table 8 offers the related descriptive statistics.

**Table 8**

*Anxiety Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups*

|                   | Group        | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Max | Min |
|-------------------|--------------|----|-------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Anxiety Post-test | Experimental | 30 | 91.5  | 14.1512        | 117 | 68  |
|                   | Control      | 30 | 104.6 | 18.0030        | 136 | 76  |

As seen in Table 8, the mean for the experimental group is 91.5 while for the control group, it was 104.6. There is a difference, and to verify the significance of the difference, an independent samples t-test was run. Table 9 offers the results.

**Table 9**

*Independent Sample T-Test for Anxiety Post-test Scores between Experimental and Control Groups*

|                        |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |        |                 |                 |                       |                                           |        |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------|
|                        |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df     | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |        |
|                        |                             |                                         |      |                              |        |                 |                 |                       | Lower                                     | Upper  |
| Anxiety Posttest Score | Equal variances assumed     | 2.062                                   | .156 | -3.133                       | 58     | .003            | -13.100         | 4.180                 | -21.468                                   | -4.731 |
|                        | Equal variances not assumed |                                         |      | -3.133                       | 54.935 | .003            | -13.100         | 4.180                 | -21.478                                   | -4.721 |

As indicated in Table 9, the independent samples t-test for anxiety post-test scores between the studied groups revealed a significant difference in means ( $t = -3.133$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). These results approve the positive role of using instructional materials tailored to students' preferences in reducing their anxiety, which can lead into the improvement in learning.

Another comparison was made using the anxiety pre-test and post-test means. The descriptive statistics concerning pre-test and post-test results related to experimental group are given in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Anxiety Pre- and Post-test Scores for the Experimental Group*

|                | Test  | N  | Mean   | Std. Deviation | Max | Min |
|----------------|-------|----|--------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Anxiety Survey | Pre-  | 30 | 100.66 | 17.5780        | 127 | 69  |
|                | Post- | 30 | 91.5   | 14.1512        | 117 | 68  |

As seen in Table 10, the average score for the pre-test is 100.66, and the average score for the post-test is 91.5. The average score for the post-test is lower than the pre-test average score.

### Discussion

The present investigation sought to check the impact of using interesting materials on students' grammar learning, interest level, and anxiety. In regard to the first research question, the collected data and their analysis revealed better performance for learners in learning grammatical points of the lessons as part of the assigned content. This was a proof that dealing with interesting content matching with learners preferences improved grammar achievement, too. The results echo the previous research results (e.g. Eddy-U, 2015) that show the efficient role of integrating learners' preference in language learners' performance in different skills. This may be justified by the claim that learning grammatical points always needs higher level of attention and focus because it deals with some analogical thinking and relations existing in sentence structure. When the learning context is attractive to learners, the attention level is high too, which is helpful for students in learning the content. In addition, the results support that cognitive or motivational elements contribute to learners to have better performance in learning grammar that requires more mental work for having the content with more schematic structure. In fact, grammar knowledge is not attained in parts, it is mostly learned as connected parts, where learning one task or aspect is also related to learning the following (Chomsky, 1988; Levelt, 1989).

While the referred results advocated the useful impact of using preferred content in facilitating EFL learning, the results taken from some other previous studies (Joh, 2006; Sadeghpour, 2013) did not report any remarkable impact of using attractive materials on performance in language learning. This can be clarified by the idea that learners need to attain some logical relations related to the different parts of language, which are intuitively hard to learn for most language learners, thus making the acquisition of grammar an exception. Accordingly, using innovative methods or applying some constructive changes in learning or teaching process may not always result in positive changes in learners' performance in all the areas.

The second research question was attempting to see if the use of preferred instructional materials led to a growth in the interest level of learners. The results revealed the effectiveness of using the class content according to preference of learners in increasing their interest. The results, in fact, confirmed that adding the interest factor to the teaching materials boosted learners' interest level. The results agree with research conducted on the same topic and related areas (Amiryousefi, 2016; Asgari et al., 2019; Eddy-U, 2015; Mayer, 2013) that totally confirm the positive role of using interest in language learning by leading to higher motivation, attention or interest for learners.

It seems that one reason for the increase in learners' interest is that learners experience more involvement in the learning context or activities as a result of facing the attractive teaching materials based on their preferences (Clinton et al., 2011; Reber Hetland, Chen, Norman, and Kobbeltvedt, 2009). The results can also be justified by the fact that interest-based selection of course materials provide learners with the feeling of respect and value. In this way, the learners enjoy the feeling of the improved emotional state that can have some significant influence in learning and teaching process. This means that when learners are given a chance to share their desires in instructional material selection, they find a feeling of significance (Eddy-U, 2015; Reninger, 2000) that emerges after they are considered as the person who makes decisions in the learning process.

The rise in the interest level of the learners brought about by the interesting teaching materials can be connected with the success the learners feel and experience in the performance, which is in accordance with Hidi and Reninger's (2006) idea that interest can be promoted through the learning context factors. The view simply implies that learners are motivated to endeavor for learning after they experience success in learning. The feeling may lead to a sort of simplicity in the learning tasks as such emotional states create courage and hope for learners who are in a long-lasting direction to their goals.

The last research question was, "Does integrating interest with instructional materials have any impact on the learners' anxiety? In this research question, the researchers were seeking to discover any possible impact the adopted method exerted on the learners' anxiety level. The related results indicated the effectiveness of using instructional materials matched with students' preferences in reducing their anxiety in language learning. The results echoed Dornyei's (2014) and Goodboy and Bolkan's (2011) findings, who reported that the addition of interest to the syllabus materials creates higher motivation for EFL/ESL learners. Accordingly, the reduction of stress for learners with a high level of motivation looks extremely possible. Repeated research results show the hindering role of anxiety in EFL or ESL learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). The outcomes can also be explained by the fact that learners with higher attention enjoy heightened courage and motivation or lower fear and concern, which normally will result in improved learning. It seems that a reduced state of anxiety provides learners with a relaxed mind that can easily and quickly attend to the learning task and context, which will expectedly contribute to the learning process. It also sounds that applying an attractive teaching method can reduce the learners' anxiety and serve as a usual process for presenting the instructional materials that raise learners' confidence. The heightened confidence can subsequently lead to more attempt and struggle on behalf of the learners and provide learners with more successful learning experience. The achieved success looks to keep recurring and end in a cycle of better learning outcome and more struggle to learn by the learners. Furthermore, the controlled level of anxiety seems to appear as a result of the determined mind that is provided for learners by the raised interest level.

### Conclusion

Affective and learner factors have always had an important role in EFL/ESL learning. Improving the process of syllabus design by making it more tailored to learners' preferences and desires was the main and general objective of this study. This study tried to find if integrating interest with instructional materials had any effect on learners' grammar achievement; whether integrating instructional materials with interest created any interest for the learners; and whether integrating instructional materials with interest had any effect on learners' anxiety level. Using quasi-experimental design, the researcher used several instruments to gather the data required for the study. The attained results revealed that the employment of interest in selecting class materials helped learners have better performance in learning grammatical points. Furthermore, it was also confirmed that learners' interest level significantly grew as a result of the using materials based on learners' preferences. Finally, the results approved that learners' anxiety level reduced following the use of attractive materials.

These results can be attributed to several factors. First of all, using interesting materials in the classroom procedures and activities leads to a heightened participation level, and students are more actively engaged in the discussions and tasks. This way, the learners and teacher are both actively engaged in the learning process, and there is much more interaction among the students. Thus, the language learning chances and episodes increase significantly, according to Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981). The second reason is that, according to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), when students enjoy the teaching environment and experience less stress and anxiety, they are much more likely to succeed in the learning process. Using interesting materials in the class and giving the students the option and chance to make decisions in the choice of materials gives them both enjoyment and self-confidence. They experience a higher respect and value in the class since they are considered in the decisions made, hence experience higher self-esteem. These can be associated to the recent approach in language teaching called learner-centered approach (Kumar, 2020).

### Implications

The results revealed that the selecting class content according to learners' preferences or desire assisted learners in reading and grammar. As a result, syllabus designers or other decision makers of language teaching are recommended to employ those that are in line with learners' interest. Hence, EFL teaching

programs need to consider learners' desires and expectations through attending to the fact that the course materials have to be in accordance with learners' interests if better learning outcome is expected. Based on the outcome of the investigation, content selection based on learners' preferences has the power to make the whole program attractive to learners. Consequently, language teaching planners are expected and hoped to turn instructional materials more attractive through adding interest to the syllabus and employing its remarkable benefits in syllabus designing. Selecting interesting materials as teaching content is able to pave the way of quick development in language teaching (Asgari et al., 2019). Ultimately, language teaching experts and decision makers can use the results of the current study to offer more facilitative and productive learning for language learners (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

### **Limitations**

The small sample size was the first limit as the researchers had restricted access to the participants of the study regarding time and place, for which the research findings may suffer generalizability problems. In addition, the learners were selected from one school in Iraq through convenient sampling, which added to the problem of low consistency of the results. Certainly, using participants selected through randomized sampling from different classes and even different schools could provide more productive and generalizable results. Furthermore, the study focused only on learners' performance in learning grammatical points in reading, hence, the findings could not be normally generalized about other aspects and skills of language like listening or speaking.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

The affective and learner factors are attractive and important to be closely examined by even more researchers as they have been found to be useful in language learning due to numerous studies completed in the related area. The researchers are suggested to study more affective or learner factors, which are thought to have remarkable effects in language teaching and learning. Beside interest, some factors like hopefulness, confidence, perseverance, anxiety and etc. can also be investigated to improve language teaching. The students and researchers are also recommended to conduct studies in the area of the mentioned factors with different age or sex groups in diverse language teaching contexts.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The researchers declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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