

## **The effect of humorous passages on developing learners' reading comprehension**

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### **Abstract**

Sense of humor as a key factor for increasing the effect of instruction has been overlooked by research in the field of education. This study was an attempt to investigate the effects of the use of humor on EFL learners' reading comprehension. For this purpose, a group of Iranian EFL learners were taught reading comprehension through the use of humorous passages while another group of learners were taught through neutralized passages. Eighty four students studying in different private language institutes in Takestan participated in this study. All subjects were male with ages between 16 and 19. The results of the study showed that the use of humorous texts significantly enhanced the reading comprehension performance of the EFL learners'. The results also showed that the learners' motivation was enhanced through the use of humorous reading materials.

**Key words:** humor, reading comprehension, EFL reading, motivation, achievement motivation

### **Introduction**

Reading comprehension is essential especially to many EFL (English as a foreign language) learners who rarely have a chance to speak English in their lives. In recent years, the focus of foreign language reading comprehension has turned from the text to the interaction between the texts and readers (Ajideh, 2003). In this situation, the use of interesting and humorous texts has found a very important status.

This study primarily addresses the issue of humor and its impact upon the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The main question posed in this study is whether humor has any effect on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension.

### **Review of literature**

Humor helps to establish an emotional connection with students and helps change their attitudes. Humor helps open them up, relax them and breakdown anxiety.

In recent decades, some studies and surveys have been carried out on the pedagogical effects of humor whose results show a considerable positive shift of view toward the application of humor in language classroom. Humor could be used to relieve stress, gain attention, and create a healthy learning environment. Humor could increase interest and motivation in learner which give their full attention to the reading passage. And then increase memory storage of the reading passage.

Humor and fun are intrinsically motivating and arouse and maintain interest in the lesson (Martin, 2006). Tamblyn (2003), introducing humor as a mnemonic device, explains that humor entertains learners and this entertainment develops intrinsic motivation which is essentially what is called personal relevancy. In clarifying the role of humor in presenting

information visually, he believes that everyone remembers pictures far better than words or thoughts.

Humor and more specifically jokes qualify as visuals; for a joke to be funny, one has to get a mental picture of it. Supporting the same idea, Schmidt and Williams (2001), in their study, provided strong evidence for the mnemonic benefit of humor. They believe that the positive effect of humor on recall may be that humorous material leads to sustained attention and subsequent elaborative processes. They further emphasize that this sustained attention is not simply verbal rehearsal, nor does it require an intention to learn material.

There are some studies which have reported the positive role of using humor in reading classes (Klasky 1979). Klasky (1979) identifies the reluctance of readers as a challenge in reading classes and knows humor as the solution to this challenge. Holding a similar idea, Shaughness and Stanely (1991) recognize laughter and humor and the power to play as a way to get students to read and make them take pleasure of their reading. Based on these pieces of evidence, it is apparent that humor influences the reading classes and reading task by motivating students, providing pleasure and interest for them. Since motivation and attitude towards reading are important factors in reading, some researchers (Naceur & Schiefel, 2005) have recommended the insertion of humorous materials into reading classes to motivate and make students interested (Medgyes, 2002). The results of a survey showed that among the books on and the reading materials selected by students, the categories of humor and horror were among the most attractive, interesting and preferred (Higginbotham, 1999).

Parker Palmer (2007) asserts that although techniques in the classroom may be what we think teachers need, ultimately, the most practical change to be achieved is the gaining of "insight into what is happening inside us as we do it" (p. 6). Palmer suggests that we observe the heart and beliefs of the teacher and not the techniques that teachers use. Although teaching techniques are essential to advance instruction in any classroom, they are simply "what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (Palmer, p. 6).

The task of creating classroom environments conducive to learning has rested heavily on the self-efficacy of teachers (Bandura, 1997). Certainly, teachers' beliefs of their abilities are crucial to education as they affect every aspect of their performance: the effort they invest in teaching, their goals, and their aspirations.

Teachers believe their extra effort and willingness to apply effective techniques can reach even the most difficult students (Bandura, 1997). Experienced teachers (a) devote the majority of class time to academic activities, (b) seem to be passionately committed to the teaching profession (Coladarci, 1992), and (c) praise students' academic accomplishments (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). In contrast, novice teachers (a) seem to be mired in classroom problems, (b) distrust their ability to manage their classrooms, (c) take a custodial view of their job, and (d) are pessimistic about their ability to raise students' achievement. These teachers are not inclined to seek out practices that raise their effectiveness in promoting student achievement.

On the other hand, Bobek (2000) defines a sense of humor as a theme of resilience. Humor has been shown to be most successful at keeping stress at bay when used as a social lubricant or coping function (Thorson & Powell, 1993b). The use of humor in the current day practice of teaching may help teachers to thrive not just survive, allowing them to enjoy a raised sense of self-efficacy (Steele, 1998). The self-efficacy issue that intersects with this study is the premise that teachers' beliefs in their abilities may be related to their sense of humor as a component in effective teaching practices.

Collective research suggests humor enhances learning in countless ways. It is a positive influence in moderating their physical and psychological well-being (Lefcourt et al., 1995) which serves as a coping mechanism for bombarding classroom stressors (Abel, 1998; Gordon & Coscarelli, 1996) that helps to create a relaxed, engaged, playful and safe classroom climate that unleashes a zest for learning (Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004).

There is a considerable amount of research that has acknowledged the association of pedagogically appropriate humor with (a) positive teacher evaluations, (b) greater student enjoyment of the subject, and (c) greater student retention (Martin, 2007). As Berk (2002) states, humor has been shown to be appropriate for students at all levels and remains to be a powerful, positive, effective instructional tool for advancing learning.

Empirical studies have concluded that students learn more from teachers who have a strong humor orientation than those with a weaker orientation (Martin, 2007). Learning is most effective when there is a natural connection to the context, and is delivered in a manner compatible with the teacher's personality (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988).

Ziv (1988) found out the effect of humor on the learning achievement of students'. The naturalistic experiment involved college students in the same course who were randomly assigned to one of two instructors. One had been trained in the effective use of humor connecting to key concepts of the lecture and one who had not. The instructor using humor used three or four instances of humor per lecture. Humor instances served as mnemonic devices to increase student retention and included jokes, cartoons, illustrations, or anecdotes (Martin, 2007). Final analyses of the students' grades showed the grades of students assigned to the instructor who used humor were nearly 10% higher than the grades of students assigned to the instructor who had not used humor.

Instructionally appropriate humor enables students to recall content more readily than instruction delivered without humor (Korobkin, 1989). Opplinger (2003) believes that the mental incongruities inherent in humor-saturated communication facilitate the cognitive functions of information storage and retention in long-term memory. Furthermore, information embedded in long-term memory by humorous cues can be retrieved more easily later. The wide range of humor-oriented instruction appears to be as diverse as the teachers who are using humor. Most teachers use humor purely for the pedagogical purpose of making content memorable (Martin, 2007); others use humor to manage student behavior (Berk, 2002; Korobkin, 1988).

A study involving student survey of humor in higher education classrooms included an item that asked students to consider the potential outcomes of using humor (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). The study reported that 50% of the students surveyed considered humor to be a means to sustain classroom attentiveness. Additionally, students mentioned other outcomes of humor to be lowered tension, boosted morale, and increased understanding of concepts that were presented in lectures.

This study explores the construct of sense of humor. This research was sparked by the observation that teachers with high humor orientation appeared to be resilient to students who are stressed. Glasser (1997) believed that good comedians are always good teachers.

Furthermore, unfortunately, most teachers' evaluation authorities define the quality of teachers by their knowledge of the subject and ignore the importance of teachers' abilities to motivate and inspire students to learn (Yatvin, 2008). On the other hand, those individuals who possess a sense of humor maintain the capability to produce and perceive what is amusing.

### **Statement of the problem**

Learners of English as a foreign language may rarely find chances to communicate with native speakers orally, but they can read different texts in different subjects with varying degrees of detail and difficulty (Rajabi, 2009). As one of the main language skills is reading, it is important to pave the way for improved instruction. It is obvious that learning is hampered if learners are not interested in the topics they are asked to read. Thus, the use of humor as a means to increase and attract learners' interest and motivation is necessary for improving instructions on reading comprehension.

One of the most important problems that students and teachers face in foreign language classes is poor reading comprehension. Crucially, learners' success in such classes depends on the degree of learners' interest in what they are asked to read to help them comprehend what they read. Getting meaning from the text requires a heightened level of interest which can be provided by the use of humorous texts. Lack of attention to learners' interest can have negative effects on reading comprehension.

Although research on the effect of humor in different areas has been profound, little is known about the impact of humorous texts on Iranian EFL reading comprehension which is the focus of this study. Based on the foregoing discussion, the present study focuses on the investigation of the impact of humor on Iranian EFL students' comprehension.

### **Research questions**

Having narrowed down the topic under investigation in the present study, the researcher came up with the following research questions:

- 1) Does using humorous passages have any effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension?
- 2) Does using humorous passages have any effect on EFL learners' motivation?

### **Significance of the study**

The significance of carrying out this study is threefold: first of all, previous research has pointed to some effect of humor on reading comprehension. Second, Iranian EFL learners lack, in general, the necessary level of interest in texts they are required to cover in their classes. Third, teachers in EFL classes find it necessary to pay attention to the stimulation of learners' interest in what they do in language classes. Through the use of humorous texts, there would be a variety of opportunities to read interesting texts in English classes. As there is a relationship between the readers' interest and the level of interaction, energy, and enthusiasm they put in reading English texts, it is helpful to improve the attractiveness of such passages by incorporating humor into these reading passages.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Eighty four pre-intermediate students studying in different private language institutes in Takestan participated in this study. All subjects were male with ages between 16 and 19. They received extra credit in their English language course in exchange for their participation.

## **Materials**

The reading materials consisted of six different passages selected from miscellaneous sources. The passages were controlled for their difficulty level in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structure. The passages were selected because they contained humorous language and stories. The texts were short since it was predicted that lengthy texts would be both difficult and confusing for the students at this special level.

### **The Key English Test (KET)**

The Key English Test (KET) was used to ensure the homogeneity of the participants and to reduce the effect of their proficiency level on the results of the study. The Key English Test is a test to determine the proficiency level of students, and is suitable for lower intermediate learners. The edition of the test used in the present study had four sections containing 62 questions: Reading 15 items, Speaking 11 items, Writing 16 items, and grammar 20 items. Since the purpose of the study was writing, the listening part was omitted. Therefore, the students were supposed to answer 62 questions of grammar reading, writing, and speaking in 90 minutes.

### **Multiple choice reading comprehension test**

Based on the six passages, a reading comprehension test was developed. The test consisted of 15 items, two or three items for each text, since as Farhady et al. (1994) state “ordinarily a passage of about 100 words yields three decent items” (p. 248). Maximum care was applied so that the difficulty level of the texts coincided with the level of the students’ proficiency in English.

The preliminarily developed test was piloted with 23 high school grade 2 students. The time allowed for answering the items was about 30 minutes, since as Heaton (1975) suggests, “at least one or two minutes must be allowed for each item in the average reading test” (p. 119).

The results were poor in terms of item facility, item discrimination, and choice distribution. As it is evident, in tests of grammar and vocabulary, new items can always be constructed in place of the discarded items, but this does not hold with reading comprehension items. The text itself has to be rewritten, certain sections added, and others deleted in order to obtain the required number of items (Heaton, 1975). Therefore, three of the passages were replaced by some new texts, some items were changed, and some others were revised. Again, the new test was piloted with 20 other high school grade 2 students. The results, this time, were satisfying both in terms of item difficulty and item discrimination and also in terms of choice distribution.

### **Achievement motivation questionnaire**

A questionnaire of achievement motivation was used to investigate the participants’ point of view about their achievement motivation. Achievement Motives Scale (AMS) has been designed for middle school and university students. The achievement motivation questionnaire was administered to the participants two times before and after the treatment to detect how providing cultural background for the participants influenced their achievement motivation. AMS consisted of 20 items originally and was translated and adapted to the Iranian educational context (Nikoopour, Alam & Tajbakhsh, 2012).

The items of AMS were in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely incorrect) to 5 (absolutely correct) and were divided into two equal halves, which provided information for one of the two AMS subscales: motivation to achieve success (MS), and motivation to avoid failure (MF). Since its construction, AMS has been used widely in different studies. In order to

account for the reasonable psychometric characteristics of the instruments, they were translated, piloted and revised. Hence, the reliability was observed for the Persian version of AMS. The participants in the study were asked to choose one of the five alternatives for each question in the questionnaire: “I totally agree”, “I agree”, “I don’t have any idea”, “I disagree”, and finally “I totally disagree”.

**Procedure**

The study was conducted in six sessions, each session lasting about 50 minutes. To ensure participants’ homogeneity, a proficiency test (Key English Test) was administered at the beginning of the study. The subjects were then randomly assigned to two groups; 42 in the control and 42 in the experimental group. The students in the experimental were given a humorous text each session, while those in the control group were given a neutralized text in each of the 6 session. They were given about 30 minutes to read the passages carefully. Both treatment and control groups were given identical pre-reading instructions. The passages were of the same level of difficulty in terms of grammar and vocabulary.

The piloted questionnaire was given to the participants to elicit data on their achievement motivation at the end of sessions. The data collected through each of the research tools was analyzed to test the research hypotheses.

**Results**

**The Effect of humor on reading comprehension**

The main purpose of the present study was to examine whether or not the use of humorous texts in reading comprehension classes would have any impact on the reading comprehension of the EFL learners. The scores of the students participating in the study on 15 comprehension questions were computed. A preliminary glance at the mean scores of the humorous text group (Mean = 9.523, SD = 2.577) and non-humorous text group (Mean = 7.571, SD = 2.380) shows that the humorous text group did better on these questions. Table 1 represents the results.

**Table 1.**

*Descriptive statistics for the reading comprehension scores of the two groups*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Comprehension Scores	Experimental group	42	9.523	2.577
	Control group	42	7.571	2.380

Addressing the first research question of the study, the following null hypothesis was tested: The use of humorous texts does not have any significant impact on EFL learners’ comprehension. To examine the significance of the difference between the two groups’ mean scores, an independent samples t-test was employed. The subjects’ scores on 15 reading comprehension questions were the dependent variable. The results of the t-test analysis showed that the experimental group did significantly better on the reading comprehension test than the control group ( $t_{82} = 3.606, p < .05$ ). Table 2 presents this result:

**Table 2.**

*Independent t-test results for the impact of the use of humorous texts*

	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Reading Comprehension Scores	3.606	82	0.001	1.952

**The Effect of the use of humor on learners’ motivation**

Addressing the second research question of the study, the following null hypothesis was tested: Using humorous passages has no significant effect on improving EFL learners’ motivation. As motivation may be known as the most important factor in individuals’ success or failure (Broussard & Garrison, 2004), the effect of using humor on achievement motivation of the EFL learners was investigated.

**Table 3.**

*Descriptive Statistics for Motivation Pretest of Control and Experimental Groups*

Group	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Control	42	28	55	83	66.77	66.50	67	7.88
Experimental	42	37	49	86	67.97	68.00	68	10.06

**Table 4**

*One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for two Groups on Motivation Pretest*

		N	Mean	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.
Pretest	Control	30	66.77	.666	.767
	Experimental	30	67.97	.493	.968
Posttest	Control	30	68.00	.799	.545
	Experimental	30	79.57	1.530	.019

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test revealed *p*-value of .76 and .96 for motivation pretest in control and experimental groups, respectively. The significance level for both groups are more than the selected significance, .05 ( $p > \alpha$ ); therefore, it can be stated that two sets of scores have a normal distribution. As a result, the parametric Independent Samples t-Test was used to compare the mean motivation score of two groups on pretest.

However, the normality test results found  $p$ -value of .54 and .01 for motivation posttest in control and experimental groups respectively. The  $p$ -value for control is larger than .05 and so it has normal distribution, but for experimental it is less than .05, and therefore it is not normally distributed. Since one group does not meet the normality assumption, the Mann Whitney U Test, which is nonparametric, was utilized to compare the performance of the two groups on motivation questionnaire.

The results of Independent Samples t-Test on motivation pretest are set forth in Table 5. Levene's Test in Table 5 showed that the hypothesis of equality of variances is supported because  $p$  value which was .13 is greater than .05 ( $P > \alpha$ ).

**Table 5.**  
Independent Samples Test to Compare the Motivation Pretest in Control and Experimental Groups

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
2.351	.131	-.514	80	.609	-1.200

$T$ -test results showed that there was no significant difference in achievement motivation between control and experimental groups on pretest ( $t = -.51, p = .60$ ), in which the  $t$ -observed was less than the  $t$ -critical, 2.00, and the Sig. was more than .05 ( $p > \alpha$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that the two groups are almost equally motivated.

The results of Mann Whitney U Test, to compare the posttest performance of the two groups on motivation questionnaire are set forth in Table 6.

**Table 6.**  
Descriptive Statistics for Motivation Posttest in Control and Experimental Groups

Group	N	Median	Std. Deviation	Mean Rank
Control	42	65.50	8.66	24.40
Motivation on posttest Experimental	42	90.50	15.76	36.60
Total	84	68.50	13.89	

**Table 7.**  
Mann Whitney U Test Results

	Motivation on posttest
Mann-Whitney U	267.000
Wilcoxon W	732.000
Z	-2.708
Sig. (2-tailed)	.007

Mann Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in the motivation of control group ( $Md = 65.50, n = 30$ ) and experimental group ( $Md = 90.50, n = 30$ ),  $U = 267, z = -2.70, p = .007$  in which the  $p$ -value was less than the significance level,  $.05 (p < \alpha)$ . As a result, the second null hypothesis of this study which suggested that “humor makes no significant difference in EFL learners’ achievement motivation” was rejected. Accordingly, with 95% confidence, it can be asserted that humor makes a significant difference in EFL learners’ achievement motivation.

$$\text{Effect size} = z / \text{square root of } N$$

$$N = \text{total number of cases} = 60$$

$$\text{Effect size } (r) = .35$$

This value of effect size (.350 is a medium index for effect size according to Cohen (1988). The effect size shows that how effective is the treatment.

**An emerging question: the effect of humor across different proficiency levels**

A third major question of the present study was related to the investigation of the impact of the students’ proficiency level on the usefulness of humor in comprehending reading passages. Therefore, addressing the third question, the following null hypothesis was tested: using humor has no effect on EFL learners’ reading comprehension across different proficiency levels.

Based on their level determined by the standards of the language centers and the proficiency test, the participants were divided into two groups: the upper-proficiency level and the lower-proficiency level. 41 students were placed in the upper group and 42 in the lower one. The mean scores and standard deviation values for the two levels of proficiency are presented in Table 8:

**Table 8.**

Descriptive statistics for the subjects’ proficiency test scores at the two levels

	level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Proficiency Test Scores	upper	41	34.853	2.770
	lower	42	25.738	3.364

To make sure that the two groups are significantly different, a t-test was conducted. The results, as indicated in Table 9, showed the two groups are different ( $t_{80} = 13.45, p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 9.**

Independent t-test results for the proficiency scores at the two levels

	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Proficiency Test Scores	13.456	80	0.000	9.115

Table 10 presents descriptive statistics for the two groups' scores on reading comprehension at two different proficiency levels (upper and lower levels):

**Table 10.**

Descriptive statistics for reading comprehension scores of the two groups at two different proficiency levels

Group	Level	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Experimental	Upper	11.125	1.676	24
	Lower	7.529	1.907	17
	Total	9.634	2.507	41
Control	Upper	8.823	2.404	17
	Lower	6.720	1.990	25
	Total	7.571	2.380	42
Total	Upper	10.170	2.290	41
	Lower	7.047	1.974	42
	Total	8.590	2.641	83

**Discussion**

This chapter presented the results of the study. It was concluded that humor has an important effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension. The results also showed that there was no significant difference in achievement motivation between control and experimental groups on the pretest, but Mann Whitney U Test results showed that humor made a significant difference in EFL learners' achievement motivation.

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of humorous reading passages on reading comprehension and achievement motivation of EFL learners. Addressing the first research question of the study, the following null hypothesis was tested: humor makes no impact on EFL learners' reading comprehension. The results of the present study showed that humorous texts enhance the EFL learners' reading comprehension. The results of the study are in accordance with a number of studies which found that humorous passages pave the way for comprehension of reading texts.

According to Wigfield, et al. (2004), motivation has an important role in different areas of learning. As reading texts are as the main part of learning a foreign language, the learners should have a strong interest in and motivation towards the topics. When the learners read humorous texts, they can be encouraged to continue reading a text. The findings of this study support the results reported by Thang Kiet (2011) who argued that learners' willingness and motivation to engage in reading need to be fostered. With motivation and willingness, learners can develop

the necessary enthusiasm to read. This study shows that there is a positive correlation between reading humorous passages and arousing the learners' motivation.

In addition, the current results lend support to the suggestion made by Pressley (2000) who argues that in order to teach students effectively to use the processes that good readers use, higher-order comprehension processes are one of the major factors to be aware of. It seems that learners find it difficult to comprehend the text when they do not have any interest in it.

Based on our results, we suggest that motivation may be the most important factor in individuals' success or failure. Generally, motivation may be seen as a drive which may push other factors in people to move or stop moving toward their goals. As Nikoopour, et al. (2012) pointed out, achievement motivation is a result of presence or lack of affective reactions that is associated with achievement-related behavior. This is in line with the suggestions made by Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, and Perencevich (2004) who maintain that learners' motivation towards not only reading but also other areas is strongly influenced by their experiences within the classroom. Hence, if a learner has a strong interest in and motivation towards the topic and a teacher is able to integrate reading and the topic, that learner may have the same motivation towards reading.

Furthermore, our results are in agreement with those reported by Wang and Guthrie (2011) who examined the extent that motivational processes facilitate the comprehension of passages. These results are in line with many studies in various EFL settings in order to investigate whether there were any differences in influential motivational factors at work in second language and foreign language acquisition contexts. As Deci and Ryan (2000) state, language learning motivation is one of the important factors that affect the rate and success of foreign language learning. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are two basic types of motivation.

The results of our study support the findings of Noels, Clement, and Pelletier (2000) who studied the relationship between motivational orientation and language learning performance finding a significant correlation between intrinsic motivation and final course grades was found. Also there was a negative correlation between lack of motivation and final course grades.

Humor has been shown to be most successful at keeping stress at bay when used as a social lubricant or coping function (Thorson & Powell, 1993b). The use of humor in the current day practice of teaching may help teachers to thrive not just survive, allowing them to enjoy a raised sense of self-efficacy (Steele, 1998). The self-efficacy issue that intersects with this study is the premise that teachers' beliefs in their abilities may be related to their sense of humor as a component in effective teaching practices.

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### **Pedagogical Implications**

In the present study, it is not claimed, by any means, that the design of the study was the ideal one. This attempt, rather, was a beginning attempt to distance a bit from traditional techniques of teaching reading that have dominated EFL classes for now more than a couple of decades.

It is believed that after so many years of using traditional methods of teaching reading, it takes time for the students to get used to new methods of teaching reading. The present study reconfirms the idea that teaching methodology for EFL reading must include a macro-textual approach. The findings of the study call for techniques which take learners' interest into account and prepare EFL students for getting meaning from written text.

The results of this study suggest that since every student's mental framework is different from that of every other student, and because the way each student responds to the material is highly personal, teachers and instructors should pay attention to the interests of different students, encouraging learners to try to relate the new information to their unique mental models through constructing personal concepts.

Comprehension is an active, integrative process in which the reader binds prior knowledge to new information to create a structure for storing information related to specific concepts and

events. Therefore, in order to improve comprehension, the interests of learners should be stimulated.

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