

Prior or Background Knowledge

Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (MC3)
Regional ELL/CCSS Task Force
Rosie García-Belina, Ed.D.

Prior Knowledge

- Every student brings knowledge to school on a variety of areas acquired through past experiences in academic and real life (Beyer, 1991).
- English language learners' (ELLs') prior knowledge reflect who the students are and how they perceive the world based on their culture and surrounding environment (Kujawa and Huske, 1995).
- Sometimes, however, the experiences ELLs bring with them are different from the knowledge needed to succeed in the American education system.

Prior Knowledge

- Students learn when they can make connections from new concepts to knowledge they already have. Otherwise, there is a need to develop such background knowledge to allow students make sense of the new information.
- Prior or background knowledge does not just refer to subject-matter knowledge. It can also be knowledge in different dimensions, such as metacognitive processes, comprehending strategies, vocabularies, skills, and even self understanding.

Role of Prior Knowledge

- As students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” the use of prior knowledge plays an important role in developing comprehension, fluency, student engagement, and motivation to learn.
- Teachers can facilitate their ELLs’ literacy success by helping them to activate prior knowledge, and/or providing the necessary information to develop the required background knowledge that allows students make the connections they need.

Activating Prior Knowledge

- Activating prior knowledge can be done through beginning a lesson by discussing topics and using skills that are already familiar to students.
- By doing so, students improve their sense of preparedness, thus being more motivated to engage in the selected tasks.
- Teachers can gauge the level of students' prior knowledge and use this as the foundation to prepare their instruction.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Selecting an adequate approach to activate prior knowledge depends on the following:

- Grade level
- Level of English language proficiency
- Students' characteristics
- Text characteristics

Building Background Knowledge

- Students are given introductory material containing definitions of difficult vocabulary, translations of idiomatic expressions/phrases, and/or explanations of complex concepts before they read a particular text.
- The use of different media resources or short readings, while developing questions to be answered from such materials, will provide a foreword for the concepts to be introduced.
- Such questions will ensure the material presented to students is adequate to build the necessary knowledge to allow students to understand the new information better.

Building Background Knowledge

- Teachers can also use an indirect approach to prepare students for the new information, such as
 - using field experiences;
 - hands-on activities;
 - reading trade books ahead of time and keeping journals;
 - engaging in interactive discussion/student reflection on prior knowledge;
 - prompting students to state, write down, or otherwise record what they already know about the topic;

Building Background Knowledge

- Teachers can also use an indirect approach to prepare students for the new information, such as
 - content-rich texts on the same topic drawn from different areas (magazines, newspapers, etc.);
 - computer assisted activities where students search for preconceptions that they can compare and contrast with the new information;
 - having students answer questions before and/or while they read new material; and/or
 - training students to interpret topic-related pictures.

Identifying the Background Knowledge Needed

- Wiggins and McTighe (2005), suggest the following criteria for teachers to identify the preceding knowledge needed to comprehend the essential concepts of the new information:
 - Is it essential?
 - Must it be taught?
 - Will it be used for future understanding?
 - What will be remembered after the details are forgotten?

Assessing Background Knowledge

- Just as it is important to activate prior or background knowledge, it is also essential to determine if the learner's previous information is weak, incomplete, or based on any misconception.
- There are several means to accomplish this, such as the following:
 - **qualitative reading inventory:** series of questions directly taken from the text that will be read
 - **K-W-L Strategy Sheet:** a form with three columns, where students write what they **know** in the first column, what they **want to learn** in the second column, and what they **learned** in the third column (completed after the lesson)

Assessing Background Knowledge

There are several means to accomplish this, such as the following:

- **anticipation guides:** present statements that students need to identify as true or false
- **opinionnaires:** present statements in a Likert format where students choose from strongly agree to strongly disagree
- **cloze exercises:** paragraphs where students insert the words that have been previously omitted
- **thinking maps:** graphic organizers

Additional Resources

Self Assessment of Background Knowledge

<http://www.heinemann.com/shared/companionresources/E02655BackgroundKnowledgeRubric.pdf>

Activating prior knowledge

<http://www.thinkport.org/career/strategies/reading/activate.tp>

NCAC Background Knowledge

http://www.cast.org/system/galleries/download/ncac/ncac_BK.pdf

Building on Prior Knowledge and Meaningful Student Contexts/Cultures

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr100.htm>

Thinking maps

<http://thinkingmaps.org/>



For additional information, please contact

MC3 REGIONAL ELL/CCSS TASK FORCE
c/o the University of Oklahoma

Rosie García Belina, Ed.D., Coordinator

405.200.2242

rbelina@ou.edu



Portions of this presentation may have been developed under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education; however, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. © 2012 The University of Oklahoma