THE ROLE OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Article examines how prior knowledge influences reading comprehension in English. It explains that readers draw on their existing knowledge of vocabulary, topics, culture, and text structures to interpret ideas, make inferences, and connect new information with what they already know. The article also considers how limited background knowledge can make a text harder to understand, even when readers recognize many of its words. It highlights strategies teachers can use to activate and build students' prior knowledge, such as introducing key concepts, discussing related experiences, and using guiding questions before reading. The article is relevant to English-language teaching because it shows how connecting reading materials to learners' knowledge and experiences can support understanding and engagement.

Key words: Prior knowledge, English reading comprehension, background knowledge, schema theory, reading strategies.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is more than recognizing words and sentences. Readers must interpret ideas, identify relationships, make inferences, and connect information across a text. One important influence on this process is prior knowledge: the knowledge, experiences, and expectations readers bring to what they read. When readers encounter familiar ideas, they can often understand a text more readily because they have a framework for interpreting it. When its subject or context is unfamiliar, comprehension may be more difficult, even if the vocabulary is not especially challenging. For this reason, prior knowledge is a significant factor in English reading comprehension and an important consideration for teachers.

Prior knowledge refers to information a reader has acquired before beginning a particular text. It may include knowledge of the world, such as how plants grow or how communities function; knowledge of a specific subject, such as science or history; and knowledge of language, including vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and common expressions. Readers also develop knowledge of text types and structures. For example, they may recognize that a news report usually presents key facts near the beginning, while a story often

introduces characters and a setting before a conflict develops. Personal and cultural experiences also contribute to prior knowledge. A reader who has visited a farm may visualize a description of farm life more easily than someone who has never seen one. Similarly, familiarity with a cultural practice, historical event, or social institution can help readers understand references that a text does not explain in detail. Prior knowledge is therefore not a single skill. It is a broad collection of resources that readers draw on while reading.

Prior knowledge helps readers interpret information by providing a context for new ideas. Readers do not usually process every sentence as an isolated unit. Instead, they connect details, notice patterns, and form a developing understanding of what the text means. Existing knowledge helps them decide which details matter and how those details relate. It also supports inference. Writers cannot explain every connection explicitly, so readers often need to draw reasonable conclusions from clues. If a passage says that dark clouds gathered and people hurried indoors, a reader familiar with changing weather may infer that rain is likely. In more complex texts, readers use knowledge of topics, people, or events to understand implied causes, motives, and consequences. Prior knowledge can also make reading more efficient. Familiar concepts require less effort to interpret, leaving readers more attention for unfamiliar vocabulary or complicated arguments. Knowledge of common text structures helps readers anticipate what may follow and organize information in memory. These benefits do not mean that readers can understand a text without attending to its words. Rather, comprehension develops through an interaction between the text and the reader's knowledge.

Schema theory offers one way to explain this interaction. A schema is an organized framework of knowledge about a subject, situation, or type of text. For example, readers may have a schema for visiting a restaurant: they expect to enter, choose a table, order food, and pay. A story that mentions a menu and a waiter can activate this framework, helping readers understand the setting without a lengthy explanation. When readers encounter new information, they may connect it with an existing schema, adjust that schema, or form a new one. Reading can therefore both depend on prior knowledge and expand it. A text about an unfamiliar scientific concept may become easier to understand as readers connect its explanations to familiar examples. However, schemas can also be incomplete or inaccurate. Readers may impose assumptions on a text that it does not support, so comprehension requires checking interpretations against the actual wording. For learners of English, comprehension can be affected by both language knowledge and subject knowledge. A reader may understand the general topic but struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, or idiomatic expressions. Conversely, a reader may

recognize many English words but lack the background knowledge needed to understand the passage's main ideas. These difficulties can overlap and reinforce one another.

Cultural references may create additional barriers. A text may assume familiarity with a holiday, school system, sport, or historical event. Learners who have not encountered that context may miss important meanings. At the same time, learners bring valuable knowledge from their own languages, communities, and experiences. Teachers should not treat unfamiliarity with a particular cultural reference as a lack of intelligence or general knowledge. The task is to make the context accessible and help learners connect what they already know with the new material. Teachers can support comprehension by activating relevant knowledge before reading. They might introduce the topic through a short discussion, an image, a question, a brief video, or a real-world example. Questions such as "What do you already know about this subject?" invite learners to recall useful information and identify areas of uncertainty. Predictions based on the title or illustrations can also encourage readers to form expectations that they later confirm or revise. When essential background information is missing, teachers can build it before or during reading. A concise explanation, a timeline, a diagram, a vocabulary preview, or a comparison with a familiar situation may provide enough context for students to follow the text. Pre-teaching should focus on ideas and words that are important for understanding rather than explaining every unfamiliar detail. Too much explanation in advance can reduce opportunities for students to make discoveries while reading.

During reading, teachers can model how to connect a passage with relevant knowledge while checking that the connection fits the text. Graphic organizers can help students record key ideas, causes and effects, comparisons, or new information. After reading, discussion and writing tasks give learners opportunities to explain how their understanding changed and which details in the text supported their interpretations. These activities strengthen both comprehension and the ability to use evidence. Prior knowledge is most useful when it works together with careful reading. If readers rely only on what they already believe, they may overlook new evidence, misunderstand unfamiliar viewpoints, or make unsupported assumptions. Teachers can encourage students to distinguish between what the text states, what they infer, and what they already know. Asking "Which words or details support that idea?" helps students evaluate their interpretations. It is also important to choose texts that extend learners' knowledge without making them inaccessible. A variety of topics exposes students to new vocabulary, experiences, and perspectives. Connecting unfamiliar material to something recognizable can provide an entry

point, while the text itself introduces new information. Over time, broad reading helps learners develop the background knowledge that supports future comprehension.

CONCLUSION

For English learners, comprehension depends not only on vocabulary and grammar, but also on access to relevant cultural and subject knowledge. Teachers can strengthen reading by activating learners' experiences, introducing essential background information, and encouraging students to support interpretations with textual evidence. However, prior knowledge should guide reading rather than replace careful attention to the text. Through diverse reading experiences and purposeful instruction, learners can expand their knowledge, improve comprehension, and become more confident, independent readers.

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