

Why is it important for ELL programs?



Background knowledge: Why is it important for ELL programs?
By Erick Herrmann

Background knowledge — we all have it. All humans, throughout their lives, have learned about the world around them. Babies explore the world under the careful watch of their caregivers, children learn by playing with others and going to school, and adults continue their journey of learning about the world through work and social situations. All humans that have lived have background knowledge.

In the context of schools, background knowledge can be defined as the knowledge students have, learned both formally in the classroom as well as informally through life experiences. In an academic sense, background knowledge also includes content knowledge, academic language and vocabulary necessary for comprehending content information.

Prior knowledge is a term also used to define background knowledge. Some people distinguish the two as a means to separate experiences students have had in their lives, and the knowledge and language needed to be successful learning a content topic. Whatever term you use, it is important to distinguish these two concepts, and consider when to tap into students' experiences and assess the knowledge they have about a particular topic.

When it comes to English learners and students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, the type and amount of background knowledge related to a particular topic can vary. Students may have a high degree of academic schooling in their native language when they arrive in your classroom, but not have the words to express what they know in English. Other students may have had interrupted formal schooling, or their background knowledge may not match the perspective presented in the classroom. This poses a particular challenge and demonstrates the importance of assessing students' knowledge and skills as related to the content you will be studying.

Background knowledge plays a strong role in reading comprehension as well as content learning; when individuals have knowledge about a particular topic, [they are better able to recall and elaborate on the topic](#). Our experiences as teachers, as well as research on the brain and learning, have shown us that when students know about a topic, learning new information is easier. Conversely, when students are not familiar with the topic, do not have prerequisite information (historical context, for example), learning can be more challenging.

The Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards require all students to comprehend increasingly complex text and topics. Often, students will need prerequisite background information to more fully understand the topic at hand. As students are expected to read and comprehend more complex text, the ability for teachers to not only tap into what students already know, but also to fill in the gaps, will become more critical.

As mentioned in [Appendix A of the CCSS](#), the reader must be taken into consideration when deciding on appropriate complexity of text, noting that "variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student." [In](#)

regards to English learners, they add: "ELLs with high levels of schooling can often bring to bear conceptual knowledge developed in their first language when reading in English. However, ELLs with limited or interrupted schooling will need to acquire background knowledge prerequisite to educational tasks at hand."

Linking to students' personal life experiences is beneficial for a number of reasons. It can help students find meaning in content learning, and linking to an experience can provide clarity and promote retention of the learning. Relating content to students' personal lives and experiences also serves the purpose of validating students' lives, culture and experiences.

Let's now consider when background knowledge should be emphasized during a lesson or unit. Intuitively, many teachers appropriately activate students prior knowledge at the beginning of a lesson or unit. This is appropriate as a way to motivate students about a topic to be studied, to assess students' knowledge of a topic, and review and reteach key vocabulary, academic language and concepts related to the lesson. However, anytime during the lesson it can benefit students to make connections to past learning, to other content area topics being studied or personal life experiences, if it enhances instruction and comprehension or helps students stay engaged.

Critics have argued teachers have overemphasized personal connections during reading and studying of content. They argue while these connections are important, teachers rely on personal experiences and connections too heavily, and in fact take too much time away from digging into text and learning through reading and instruction. It is important to balance the time it takes to make connections to students' lives, assess what they know about a topic, and instruct and practice with reading and learning content knowledge.

Most teachers are all too familiar with students who do not have the background knowledge necessary to fully comprehend a text or topic. They may not have the reading skills, or they may lack knowledge about a historical period. If the student has interrupted school, has learning difficulties or is an English learner, he or she may not have mastered a topic previously taught that will be built upon in the upcoming lesson. In these cases, it is important that we fill in the gaps with students through instructional techniques.

Stay tuned for second part of this article, which examines how ELL programs can use background knowledge to help students.

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