

Activating Prior Knowledge With English Language Learners

 edutopia.org/article/activating-prior-knowledge-english-language-learners

English-Language Learners

Students learn better when they first access what they already know—and this plays a big role in improving English language learners' academic literacy.

By Larry Ferlazzo, Katie Hull Sypnieski

March 29, 2018



© Shutterstock/rawpixel

Activating prior knowledge means both eliciting from students what they already know and building initial knowledge that they need in order to access upcoming content.

We have found this strategy to be essential to teaching all of our students, both those who are proficient in English and those who are acquiring English language skills. To go even further, this strategy lies at the heart of our teaching philosophy—our students already possess a wealth of knowledge and experiences they can build upon as they encounter new learning. It's up to us to facilitate this process by developing relationships with our students so that we learn what they already know and ensure that they feel comfortable sharing it.

The Research on Prior Knowledge

Brain research from Carnegie Mellon psychologists confirms that it's easier to learn something new when we can attach it to something we already know. Other research, including the study "Prior knowledge activation: Inducing engagement with informational texts," supports the idea that activating prior knowledge is a critical step in the learning process and a major factor in reading comprehension. Additional

research by Deborah Short and Jana Echevarria with English language learners (ELLs) finds that activating and building prior knowledge plays a big role in improving their academic literacy.

Common Core Connections

Educators and researchers, along with the Common Core authors, recognize that activating prior knowledge is a necessary step in accessing complex texts, whether in the form of written words, images, charts, or other text types. However, you can have too much of a good thing. As the Common Core authors say, “Student background knowledge and experiences can illuminate the reading but should not replace attention to the text itself.”

The activities which follow serve to activate and build background knowledge as a support, not as a bypass, for students in meeting the Common Core standards.

Get the best of Edutopia in your inbox each week.

Here are a variety of ways to activate students’ prior knowledge and build further background knowledge in preparation for new learning. Activities for tapping prior knowledge are typically designed for use before reading activities, but we have used the ones listed here to also help students access writing, speaking, and listening tasks.

K-W-L Charts: Of course, the tried-and-true K-W-L chart is always an effective way of gauging students’ background knowledge about a topic or concept. Students write and share what they already know about the topic in the K (What I Know) section. They then add questions in the W (What I Want to Know) section and write their learnings in the L (What I Learned) section as they uncover new information through written and digital texts.

Variations of K-W-L extend the chart to include columns for how students can find answers to their questions (online searches, personal interviews), what actions they might take after learning this new information (apply it, teach someone else, create something new), and/or what new questions they have based on what they’ve learned.

Anticipation Guides: Anticipation guides ask students to think, write, and/or talk about their opinions on key themes or big ideas contained in upcoming texts and units of study. They are often organized as a list of statements which students have to agree or disagree with. This can be done in writing or speaking.

It can be helpful to have students revisit their anticipation guides at the end of a unit in order to reflect on changes in their thinking and in preparation for writing an essay.

The anticipation guide from our book is an example of one we've used with our students during a mini-unit on sports drinks.

For a more kinesthetic version of an anticipation guide, students can respond to a series of agree or disagree statements by standing and placing themselves on a continuum (strongly agree on one side of the room, strongly disagree on the other, and other opinions at other places along the continuum).

We have also used the well-known Four Corners strategy by posting four statements in different parts of the classroom. We then ask students which statement they agree with most and tell them to go that corner. Once there, students share with each other why they agree with that statement, and then one student from each group shares out to the whole class. This thinking and talking results in language building and helps students develop curiosity about what is coming next.

Multimedia: Many times before we start a new unit or text, we'll show students a related video (with English subtitles) or slideshow, or display a photograph on the document camera. Asking students to write or talk about it with a partner is a great way to instantly gauge prior knowledge, build background, and spark interest. A simple prompt could be "What did you notice?" or "What did you find interesting?" So many resources are now at one's fingertips—music from an era being studied, newscasts about a famous event, interviews with authors—and they can be used to build background in an engaging way.

Preparatory Texts: Providing simpler, preparatory texts in anticipation of a more complex reading task can be very helpful in building background knowledge and reading confidence. We often use the same text written in different Lexile levels. There are many resources available online that make it easy to find or create these types of accessible texts. We're not suggesting that teachers simplify the complex text they're planning to use for close reading. Instead, teachers can provide simplified texts addressing topics or themes similar to the ones in the complex text as a way to build background knowledge.

Providing ELLs in advance with texts or videos in their home language can be another way to promote background knowledge. There are also many free online resources that can help with this kind of support.

Editor's note: *This post is adapted from the authors' new book, The ELL Teacher's Toolbox: Hundreds of Practical Ideas to Support Your Students, available from Wiley.*