ผลของความรู้เดิมที่มีต่อทักษะการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจของผู้เรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

The Effect of Background Knowledge on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Skills

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้กล่าวถึงความรู้เดิมว่ามีอิทธิพลต่อทักษะการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) อย่างไร ทักษะการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจเป็นทักษะที่ซับซ้อนซึ่งต้องอาศัยความสามารถทางภาษา รวมถึงความเข้าใจในบริบททางวัฒนธรรมและหัวข้อเฉพาะทาง อย่างไรก็ตาม ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) หลายคนมักเผชิญกับความท้าทายในการตีความเนื้อหา เนื่องจากขาดความรู้เดิมที่เพียงพอ ส่งผลให้ไม่สามารถเข้าใจความหมายลึกซึ้งและการเชื่อมโยงระหว่างข้อมูลในเนื้อหาได้อย่างเต็มที่ บทความนี้จึงได้ตรวจสอบบทบาทของความรู้เดิมในด้านต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ วัฒนธรรม หัวข้อเฉพาะทาง และโครงสร้างทางภาษา ที่มีส่วนช่วยสนับสนุนให้การอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจมีประสิทธิภาพเพิ่มมากขึ้น โดยเน้นถึงความคุ้นเคยกับองค์ประกอบเหล่านี้ซึ่งสามารถช่วยเสริมสร้างความสนใจและความเข้าใจของผู้เรียนในเนื้อหาต่าง ๆ ได้อย่างมาก นอกจากนี้ยังได้แนะนำกลยุทธ์ที่เป็นประโยชน์สำหรับผู้สอนในการสร้างและกระตุ้นความรู้เดิมของผู้เรียนในห้องเรียน ผ่านการนำเสนอแนวคิดทางทฤษฎีและผลการวิจัยเชิงประจักษ์ บทความนี้จึงมุ่งหวังที่จะให้แนวทางในการพัฒนาทักษะการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) และเสนอแนวคิดที่มีคุณค่าสำหรับการสอนภาษาในเชิงปฏิบัติ

คำสำคัญ ความรู้เดิม ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) การอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจ

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Abstract

This article explores how background knowledge influences the reading comprehension skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Reading comprehension is a complex skill that requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of cultural and topic-specific contexts. Many EFL learners face challenges in interpreting texts due to gaps in their prior knowledge, which can affect their ability to grasp deeper meanings and connections within the material. This article examines the role of background knowledge in supporting more effective comprehension, focusing on cultural, topic-specific, and linguistic aspects. It highlights how familiarity with these elements can significantly improve learners' engagement and understanding of various texts. Additionally, the article suggests practical strategies for educators to build and activate students' background knowledge in classroom settings. By presenting theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the article aims to provide insights into enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension and offers valuable implications for language teaching practices.

Keywords Background Knowledge, EFL Learners, Reading Comprehension Skills

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most challenging yet essential skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Unlike other language skills such as speaking or listening, reading demands an intricate blend of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical understanding, and the ability to interpret written text within a context (Anderson, 1999). However, many EFL learners face hurdles in grasping the full meaning of a text not simply due to language barriers but because they often lack the background knowledge necessary to connect with the material. Recent educational studies show that learners' comprehension levels are significantly influenced by their familiarity with the subject matter, culture, and context in which the text is situated (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Nation, 2009; Zhang & Wu, 2020). This effect, often overlooked in traditional language instruction, reveals that background knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping a learner's reading experience (Liu & Zhang, 2013; Pardo, 2004).

Consider a situation in a classroom where students are reading a story set in the Victorian era. While learners with prior knowledge about Victorian customs, language, and societal norms may easily infer the text's deeper meanings, those without this background

knowledge struggle to go beyond a superficial understanding of the vocabulary (Carrell, 1988; Zarefsky & Chan, 2022). In this case, their ability to make inferences, connect events, and grasp nuanced meanings is directly linked to their familiarity with the subject matter (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005; Pritchard, 2021). This article seeks to explore the profound influence of background knowledge on EFL learners' reading comprehension and to suggest practical strategies for educators to build this knowledge effectively.

The purpose of this article is to explore the complex relationship between background knowledge and reading comprehension among EFL learners. By highlighting key theories, presenting empirical findings, and offering practical classroom applications, this piece aims to provide educators with insights into enhancing their students' reading experiences. In light of the increasing cultural diversity within language classrooms, understanding how background knowledge can facilitate or hinder comprehension is essential for developing effective teaching strategies. This article addresses the need to not only teach language but also nurture a learner's ability to connect new information to their existing knowledge framework.

2. Understanding Background Knowledge in Reading

2.1 Definition and Types of Background Knowledge

Background knowledge, often referred to as prior knowledge or schemata, includes a learner's pre-existing information, experiences, beliefs, and cultural understandings. Schema theory, as outlined by Anderson and Pearson (1984), posits that readers utilize mental frameworks or "schemas" to organize and interpret new information. This concept highlights the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension, as it affects how learners make sense of new texts. Fundamental types of background knowledge in reading comprehension are as follows:

1) Cultural knowledge refers to an individual's familiarity with the customs, traditions, social norms, and historical contexts of a specific culture. This type of background knowledge is crucial for interpreting texts that contain cultural references, which can range from idiomatic expressions to historical allusions. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, encountering unfamiliar cultural references can significantly impede comprehension. Chen (2022) highlights those expressions such as "breaking the ice," which are deeply rooted in Western social interactions, may be confusing to learners unfamiliar with such metaphors. This lack of cultural knowledge can lead to misinterpretations or superficial understanding of texts,

as learners may struggle to grasp the intended meaning and context of culturally embedded content.

Research in applied linguistics supports the notion that cultural knowledge is vital for effective reading comprehension. Carrell (1988) demonstrated that readers with relevant cultural knowledge are better equipped to make inferences and understand deeper meanings within texts. Similarly, Kramsch (1993) emphasized that cultural knowledge influences learners' ability to engage with texts more profoundly by affecting their interpretation of cultural references and contextual cues. To mitigate the challenges posed by unfamiliar cultural references, educators should incorporate strategies that build cultural knowledge. Pre-reading activities that provide background information on the cultural context of a text can enhance learners' understanding and engagement, enabling them to navigate texts with greater ease and achieve a more nuanced comprehension.

2) Topic-specific knowledge refers to an individual's familiarity with particular subject matter, such as science, history, or literature. This type of background knowledge is essential for interpreting and understanding texts that deal with specialized topics. For instance, a student with a background in environmental science is likely to have a better grasp of an article on climate change compared to someone without prior knowledge of the subject. This existing knowledge aids learners in connecting new information with what they already know, thereby facilitating a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the material (Snow, 2010). Anderson and Pearson (1984) highlight that comprehension is an interactive process where readers construct meaning by relating new information to their existing cognitive frameworks, a process crucial for grasping complex or specialized content.

Experts in cognitive science and education underscore the importance of topic-specific knowledge in enhancing reading comprehension. Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argue that familiarity with specific domains enables learners to develop effective reading strategies tailored to those subjects, thus improving their ability to understand and engage with texts. For EFL learners, having relevant background knowledge allows them to better interpret technical vocabulary and concepts, making the reading process more manageable. Conversely, a lack of such knowledge can lead to difficulties in comprehending the text's content and context, resulting in superficial understanding or misinterpretation. To address these challenges, educators should implement strategies that build topic-specific knowledge, such as pre-reading activities that introduce key concepts or provide essential background

information, thereby enhancing learners' comprehension and engagement with specialized material (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Snow, 2010).

3）Linguistic knowledge involves familiarity with language structures, vocabulary, and expressions used in various text genres. For EFL learners, understanding these linguistic features—such as formal language and passive voice commonly found in academic texts—is essential for effective reading comprehension. According to Grabe (2009), this type of knowledge helps learners set appropriate expectations and develop strategies to tackle complex language structures. For example, learners who understand that academic texts often employ formal language and passive constructions are better equipped to interpret these elements, facilitating a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the material. This knowledge supports learners in navigating diverse texts and engaging with content more deeply.

Experts emphasize the critical role of linguistic knowledge in enhancing reading comprehension. Koda (2020) highlights that a robust grasp of lexical and grammatical patterns aids learners in decoding texts and integrating new information effectively. Nation (2021) further supports this by noting that strong linguistic proficiency is foundational for overcoming challenges presented by unfamiliar language features. Zareva (2021) reinforces this perspective, demonstrating that linguistic knowledge enables learners to make sense of complex language structures and apply appropriate reading strategies. By equipping EFL learners with these linguistic skills, educators can significantly improve their ability to comprehend and interact with a wide range of texts (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2020; Nation, 2021; Zareva, 2021).

2.2 How Background Knowledge Affects Reading Comprehension

The influence of background knowledge on reading comprehension is most evident through cognitive processing theories, which emphasize the active role of prior knowledge in interpreting texts. When EFL learners engage with a reading passage, their understanding extends beyond merely decoding words; they construct meaning by integrating the text with their existing knowledge. This cognitive process allows learners to make predictions, draw inferences, and fill in gaps where explicit information might be missing (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). For instance, a student encountering a text about a volcanic eruption may find terms like "magma," "tectonic plates," or "seismic activity" challenging without a foundation in geology. However, learners with a background in this field can use their prior knowledge to

visualize the volcanic events, infer implications, and comprehend scientific explanations more effectively. In contrast, those lacking this background may struggle with both the specific vocabulary and overall comprehension of the text (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005).

Research in applied linguistics reinforces this perspective, with schema theory playing a central role in understanding how background knowledge influences reading comprehension. Anderson and Pearson (1984) describe reading comprehension as an interactive process where the reader's pre-existing knowledge, or schemas, is used to make sense of new information. McNamara (2007) further supports this view by highlighting that the effectiveness of comprehension is reliant on how well the reader's schemas align with and support the content presented in the text. The depth and relevance of a learner's background knowledge thus significantly affect their ability to process and understand new material. As schema theory suggests, the more robust and pertinent a learner's background knowledge, the more proficient they are at constructing meaning and grasping complex concepts (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kintsch & Rawson, 2005; McNamara, 2007).

2.3 How Readers Use Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Cognitive processing in reading comprehension involves the ways in which readers utilize background knowledge to predict, infer, and integrate new information into their existing mental frameworks. This process is crucial for understanding and making sense of texts, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who may struggle with unfamiliar content and language structures.

Prediction and Inference: Background knowledge enables readers to make predictions about what will come next in a text and to infer meanings from incomplete information. For instance, readers familiar with the concept of global warming will likely use their understanding of climate science to anticipate the content of a text discussing environmental changes. A study by Grabe and Stoller (2020) emphasizes that predictions based on prior knowledge help readers generate hypotheses about the text, which they then confirm or adjust as they read. For EFL learners, those who are familiar with basic environmental concepts will better grasp a text about climate change, as they can anticipate terms and ideas related to their prior knowledge. Conversely, EFL learners without this background may find themselves confused or unable to engage deeply with the text, leading to incomplete comprehension (Zareva, 2021).

Integration of New Information: Readers with strong background knowledge are adept at integrating new information with what they already know. This skill allows them to build coherent mental models of the text. For example, a student familiar with the historical context of the American Revolution will integrate information from a historical account more effectively than a student without such knowledge. According to McNamara (2007), this integration is facilitated by the activation of relevant schemas, which help readers organize and relate new information to existing cognitive structures. EFL learners who have prior knowledge of the cultural and historical context of a text can more easily understand and remember details, while those lacking this knowledge may struggle to connect new information with their existing schema, resulting in fragmented comprehension.

Examples of Successful and Unsuccessful Comprehension: Successful comprehension often involves leveraging background knowledge to fill in gaps and draw meaningful connections. For instance, an EFL learner who understands basic social customs in a text about Western holidays will better grasp the significance of cultural references, such as "Christmas caroling" or "Thanksgiving dinner" (Nation, 2021). On the other hand, an EFL learner without this cultural knowledge might misinterpret these references or miss their significance entirely, leading to a superficial understanding of the text (Koda, 2020). This contrast highlights the critical role of background knowledge in shaping reading comprehension outcomes

3. The Role of Background Knowledge in EFL Learners' Reading

3.1 Challenges Faced by EFL Learners

One of the most significant challenges EFL learners face is encountering texts rich in cultural references and context-specific vocabulary. Texts written for native speakers often assume a shared knowledge base, including idiomatic language, historical events, and common practices. For instance, when reading an article about Thanksgiving in the United States, learners with no exposure to American culture may not grasp the cultural significance of the holiday, the historical context behind it, or the traditions associated with it. This lack of background knowledge can lead to misinterpretations and an incomplete understanding of the text.

Moreover, EFL learners may struggle with inferencing, a skill that heavily relies on background knowledge. Inferencing involves reading between the lines and drawing conclusions based on the given information and prior knowledge. For example, if a passage describes someone "walking through a pumpkin patch on a crisp autumn morning," a reader

familiar with Western seasonal traditions might infer the scene's connection to fall activities like Halloween or Thanksgiving. Without this cultural context, the passage might merely be a collection of unfamiliar words, leaving the learner puzzled.

3.2 Influence of Background Knowledge on Comprehension

Research has consistently shown that background knowledge significantly impacts how EFL learners approach and interpret texts. A pivotal study by Carrell (1987) demonstrated that learners who were familiar with the cultural or thematic elements of a text had notably better comprehension than those who were unfamiliar, regardless of their language proficiency level. This research highlights that when learners possess relevant background knowledge, they can more effectively integrate new information, recognize key themes, and understand implicit meanings within the text. Carrell's findings underscore the importance of background knowledge in enhancing reading comprehension by allowing learners to relate new information to their existing mental frameworks, thereby facilitating a deeper and more accurate understanding of the material (Carrell, 1987).

Conversely, the absence of background knowledge can hinder comprehension and lead learners to rely excessively on word-for-word translation or decoding individual words. This approach, often referred to as "bottom-up processing," can prevent learners from grasping the text's overall message. Without the benefit of relevant context, learners may struggle to connect disparate pieces of information and understand the broader implications of the text. This phenomenon highlights the limitations of a purely bottom-up approach, which focuses solely on decoding text without leveraging prior knowledge to interpret and predict content (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005).

To achieve effective reading comprehension, it is crucial to integrate both bottom-up and top-down processing approaches. Top-down processing involves using background knowledge to anticipate and interpret content, which complements the detailed decoding required in bottom-up processing. Kintsch and Rawson (2005) argue that while bottom-up processing is essential for understanding specific details within the text, top-down processing enables readers to utilize their background knowledge to construct a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the material. Balancing these approaches allows EFL learners to better navigate texts and achieve a more complete comprehension of the written content (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005; Carrell, 1987).

3.3 Cognitive Differences in Reading Comprehension: High vs. Low Background Knowledge

Research has revealed significant cognitive differences in reading comprehension between students with high and low background knowledge. One key study by Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) demonstrated that readers with extensive background knowledge on a subject engage in more efficient cognitive processing compared to those with limited knowledge. Their findings indicate that well-informed readers are able to employ elaborate cognitive frameworks to integrate new information, make inferences, and understand complex texts more deeply than their less knowledgeable peers.

More recent studies continue to support this view. For instance, a study by Zhang and Hsu (2022) explored how background knowledge impacts comprehension across different content areas. Their research found that students with higher levels of topic-specific knowledge were significantly better at recalling details and understanding main ideas from texts compared to students with less background knowledge. This advantage is attributed to their ability to activate relevant schemas and employ more effective reading strategies, such as prediction and inference, which facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the material (Zhang & Hsu, 2022).

Further, research by McNamara, Kintsch, and S. E. (2018) underscores the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension by comparing the cognitive strategies used by readers with varying levels of prior knowledge. Their study highlights that readers with high background knowledge are more likely to use context to fill in gaps and generate a cohesive understanding of the text. Conversely, readers with low background knowledge often struggle with decoding and integrating information, leading to fragmented comprehension and reduced retention of the material (McNamara, Kintsch, & S. E., 2018).

3.4 Common Misconceptions in Language Proficiency and Comprehension

One prevalent misconception in the field of reading comprehension is the belief that high vocabulary knowledge directly translates to effective comprehension. While a robust vocabulary is undoubtedly beneficial, it is not a panacea for reading difficulties. Recent research highlights that even learners with an extensive vocabulary can struggle with comprehension if they lack sufficient background context. For instance, Marzano and Pickering (2017) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge alone does not ensure comprehension, as it is

only one component of a more complex process involving background knowledge and cognitive integration.

Another misconception is the assumption that language proficiency in isolation guarantees successful reading comprehension. This view overlooks the significant role of background knowledge in interpreting and integrating textual information. According to Zareva (2021), linguistic knowledge, such as familiarity with language structures and genre-specific expressions, must be complemented by contextual understanding to achieve effective comprehension. Zareva's research underscores that without adequate background context, even proficient readers can struggle to grasp nuanced meanings and thematic elements of texts.

Empirical studies further substantiate this perspective. For example, a study by Koda (2020) found that EFL learners who possessed high vocabulary knowledge but lacked relevant background information were prone to superficial reading. They could decode words and recognize syntactic structures but faced challenges in making inferences and understanding implicit content. Similarly, Nation (2021) argues that while vocabulary is crucial, it must be integrated with background knowledge to support deeper comprehension. Nation's findings suggest that effective reading comprehension depends not only on lexical knowledge but also on the ability to relate new information to existing cognitive frameworks.

4. Building Background Knowledge to Enhance EFL Reading Comprehension

4.1 Pre-Reading Activities

Effective pre-reading activities are crucial for enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension by building and activating their background knowledge. These activities help create a mental framework that supports understanding and integrating new information. Below is a step-by-step guide on implementing three key pre-reading strategies: KWL charts, mind mapping, and brainstorming sessions, along with their classroom applications and best practices.

1) KWL Charts

The KWL chart is a structured tool that facilitates learners' engagement with the text by organizing their prior knowledge, setting reading goals, and reflecting on what they have learned. The chart is divided into three columns: What I Know, What I Want to Know, and What I Learned.

Steps

●**Before Reading:** Introduce the KWL chart and explain its components. Ask students to fill in the What I Know column based on their existing knowledge about the topic.

●**During Reading:** As students read, they add new information to the What I Want to Know column and update the What I Learned column.

●**After Reading:** Review the completed chart to consolidate learning and address any gaps in understanding.

Classroom Scenario: If the text is about climate change, students might use the KWL chart to record what they already know about environmental issues, what they want to learn about climate change, and what new insights they gain from the text. This method helps activate prior knowledge and set learning objectives (Ogle, 1986).

2) Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is a visual strategy that helps learners organize their thoughts and make connections between concepts before engaging with the text. This technique involves creating a diagram that visually represents the relationships between key ideas and concepts related to the reading material.

Steps

●**Before Reading:** Introduce the concept of mind mapping and have students create a central node representing the main topic of the text. They then branch out to include related subtopics and ideas.

●**During Reading:** Encourage students to expand their mind maps with new information and connections as they progress through the text.

●**After Reading:** Review the mind maps to assess the depth of understanding and integrate new knowledge.

Classroom Scenario: For a reading passage on historical events, students create a mind map starting with the main event in the center and branching out to include dates, key figures, and related historical contexts. This activity helps in organizing thoughts and visualizing the structure of the content (Buzan, 2006).

3) Brainstorming Sessions

Brainstorming sessions are collaborative activities where learners generate and discuss ideas related to the reading topic. This approach encourages active engagement and the sharing of background knowledge among peers.

Steps

- **Before Reading:** Facilitate a brainstorming session where students share their knowledge and opinions about the topic. Record their ideas on a board or chart paper.

- **During Reading:** Refer back to the brainstormed ideas to connect new information with previously discussed concepts.

- **After Reading:** Discuss how the new information aligns with or challenges the initial ideas, reinforcing understanding.

Classroom Scenario: If the text is about technological advancements, students brainstorm their thoughts on recent innovations and their impact on society. This session helps activate prior knowledge and sets a context for deeper engagement with the text (Osborn, 1953).

Impact of Pre-Reading Activities

Pre-reading activities are essential for creating a mental framework that enhances reading comprehension. By engaging in KWL charts, mind mapping, and brainstorming sessions, learners activate their prior knowledge and set expectations for the text. This preparation allows them to approach the reading material with a clearer understanding of context and purpose, facilitating more effective comprehension and integration of new information

4.2 Integrating Culturally Relevant Content

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, integrating culturally relevant content is vital for enhancing reading comprehension. Culturally relevant materials help learners connect their prior knowledge with new information, fostering a more meaningful and engaging learning experience. By selecting texts that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds and gradually introducing more complex, unfamiliar content, educators can support learners in building the necessary background knowledge to comprehend diverse texts effectively.

Strategies for Selecting Culturally Relevant Materials

Selecting culturally relevant materials involves understanding the cultural backgrounds of EFL learners and aligning the reading content with their experiences and interests. According to a study by Nguyen and Schmitt (2021), culturally relevant content not only motivates

learners but also facilitates comprehension by connecting new information with their existing schemas. To ensure the relevance of materials, educators should consider the following strategies:

- **Assess Learners' Cultural Backgrounds:** Begin by gathering information on students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and experiences. This can be done through surveys, interviews, or classroom discussions. Understanding learners' cultural contexts allows teachers to select materials that reflect their experiences and values.

- **Choose Familiar Content:** Start with texts that feature familiar cultural references, scenarios, or themes. For instance, using folktales, traditional stories, or everyday situations that students can relate to provides a foundation for building comprehension skills. Research by Carrell (1987) underscores that texts with familiar cultural content enhance comprehension by allowing learners to draw on their existing knowledge.

- **Gradually Introduce More Complex Texts:** Once students are comfortable with familiar content, introduce more complex or unfamiliar texts that expand their cultural horizons. This gradual approach helps learners build the skills necessary to tackle diverse content while reducing cognitive overload. For example, after reading a familiar folktale, students might progress to a modern story set in a different cultural context.

- **Utilize Culturally Neutral Content:** Culturally neutral texts serve as a bridge between familiar and unfamiliar content. These texts avoid specific cultural references but still engage learners with universal themes, such as friendship, adventure, or challenges. As noted by Lee and Schallert (2016), using such materials helps students develop reading strategies that are applicable across various contexts.

To illustrate the use of culturally neutral content, consider the following examples:

- **Universal Themes:** Texts that explore universal themes such as personal growth, problem-solving, or family dynamics are effective in bridging cultural gaps. For instance, a story about overcoming obstacles can resonate with learners from different backgrounds while providing a common ground for discussion.

- **Generic Texts:** Materials like fables or parables that focus on moral lessons rather than cultural specifics can be used to introduce learners to reading strategies and comprehension skills. For example, Aesop's fables are widely accessible and offer valuable lessons without relying heavily on cultural references.

• **Adapted Texts:** Adapt existing texts to remove or modify culturally specific references, making them more universally accessible. For example, a story set in a particular cultural context can be adapted to feature a more generic setting while retaining its core message.

By integrating culturally relevant and neutral content, educators can enhance EFL learners' reading comprehension, making the learning process more engaging and effective. This approach not only helps students build the necessary background knowledge but also fosters a greater appreciation for diverse cultures and perspectives.

4.3 Expanding Students' Background Knowledge

Expanding students' background knowledge is a critical component in enhancing reading comprehension, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Broadening background knowledge involves engaging in various activities that expose students to a wide range of information and experiences. Effective strategies include extensive reading, media consumption, and cross-cultural interactions. These methods not only enrich learners' understanding of different subjects but also contribute to their ability to comprehend and interpret texts more effectively.

Diverse Methods for Acquiring Background Knowledge

• **Extensive Reading:** Extensive reading, which involves reading large amounts of text for pleasure and general understanding, has been shown to significantly enhance background knowledge and reading skills. According to Day and Bamford (1998), extensive reading helps learners encounter a broad array of vocabulary and concepts in context, which builds their background knowledge and improves comprehension skills. This approach exposes students to diverse topics, thereby facilitating the integration of new information with their existing schemas. Furthermore, extensive reading fosters a love for reading and encourages lifelong learning, both of which are essential for continued academic success (Krashen, 2004).

• **Media Consumption:** Media consumption, including watching films, listening to podcasts, and engaging with digital content, offers EFL learners additional avenues for acquiring background knowledge. Studies by Kinsella (2005) demonstrate that exposure to media in the target language helps learners gain insights into cultural contexts and language use. For instance, watching news reports or documentaries can familiarize students with contemporary issues and terminology, which is particularly useful for understanding complex

texts. Media also provides authentic language usage and cultural nuances that are often not captured in traditional textbooks (Cheng, 2014).

●**Cross-Cultural Interactions:** Engaging in cross-cultural interactions, such as participating in exchange programs or collaborating with international peers, can significantly broaden students' background knowledge. According to Lee and Schallert (2016), these interactions expose learners to different cultural perspectives and practices, which can enhance their ability to understand and appreciate diverse content. Cross-cultural experiences allow students to connect more deeply with texts that incorporate varied cultural elements, thereby improving their overall reading comprehension.

Research Findings on Background Knowledge Enhancement

Research supports the positive effects of expanding background knowledge on reading comprehension. For example, a study by Nation (2013) found that learners who engaged in extensive reading showed improved reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge compared to those who did not. This improvement was attributed to the exposure to a wide range of topics and contexts, which helped students build and activate relevant background knowledge during reading. Similarly, Grabe (2009) emphasizes that media consumption and cross-cultural experiences contribute to a richer understanding of texts by providing learners with diverse perspectives and additional context.

Overall, integrating diverse methods for acquiring background knowledge into EFL instruction can significantly enhance students' reading comprehension skills. By broadening their exposure to various types of content and experiences, educators can help learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of texts and improve their overall reading performance.

4.4 Using Visual Aids and Contextual Clues to Enhance EFL Reading Comprehension

Incorporating visual aids and contextual clues in the classroom can significantly enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reading comprehension. These tools not only support learners in understanding complex texts but also facilitate the integration of new information with existing knowledge. Effective use of visual aids and contextual clues involves a systematic approach to selecting and implementing these resources to optimize learning outcomes.

Using Visual Aids

Visual aids, such as graphic organizers, infographics, and multimedia resources, play a crucial role in helping EFL learners comprehend texts more effectively. Graphic organizers, for example, provide structured frameworks that assist students in visualizing relationships between concepts, events, or characters within a text. According to Lyman (1981), tools like concept maps and Venn diagrams help learners organize their thoughts and make connections between new and prior knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension. For instance, a concept map detailing the main ideas and supporting details of a reading passage can help students grasp the structure and content of the text more clearly (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

Infographics, which combine text with visual elements such as charts and diagrams, present information in a more accessible format. They can be particularly useful for explaining complex data or processes. Research by Tufte (2006) highlights that well-designed infographics can aid comprehension by making abstract concepts more concrete and easier to understand. In the context of EFL instruction, infographics that illustrate key themes or vocabulary can support learners in grasping difficult concepts and retaining information more effectively.

Multimedia resources, including videos and interactive presentations, offer dynamic ways to engage learners and provide context for the material. For example, a video clip related to a reading passage can provide additional background information and visual context, making the text more comprehensible. According to Mayer (2009), multimedia presentations that integrate visual and auditory information help learners build mental models of the content, which enhances understanding and retention.

Training Students to Use Contextual Clues

Teaching students to utilize contextual clues independently is essential for developing their reading skills. Contextual clues refer to hints or information within the text that help readers infer meanings and understand content without relying solely on external resources. Training students to identify and use these clues involves explicit instruction and practice.

One effective method is to model the process of using contextual clues through think-aloud strategies. Teachers can demonstrate how to infer meanings of unfamiliar words or concepts by analyzing surrounding text and visual aids. For instance, if students encounter a new term in a passage, the teacher can guide them to examine related words, sentence structure, and visual cues to deduce the meaning (Nassaji, 2003). This approach helps students become more proficient in using contextual clues to enhance their comprehension.

In addition, educators can provide practice exercises that focus on identifying and interpreting contextual clues. Activities such as cloze exercises, where students fill in missing words based on context, or text analysis tasks that require them to match definitions with words using visual aids, can reinforce these skills. Research by Snow (2010) suggests that consistent practice with contextual clues improves learners' ability to independently navigate and understand complex texts.

Overall, integrating visual aids and contextual clues into EFL instruction and training students to use these tools effectively can significantly enhance reading comprehension. By providing structured support and opportunities for practice, educators can help learners build the skills necessary to comprehend and engage with texts more deeply.

5. Practical Examples and Applications in Building Background Knowledge for EFL Reading Comprehension

5.1 Case Studies and Real-Life Examples

To understand the impact of background knowledge on EFL reading comprehension, examining case studies of learners with varying levels of prior knowledge can be highly illustrative. For example, a study by Kintsch and Rawson (2005) explored how students with different levels of background knowledge approached texts on complex topics such as climate change. The study found that students with a strong foundation in environmental science were able to more effectively comprehend and analyze texts related to climate phenomena. In contrast, learners with limited knowledge struggled with both understanding specific terminology and grasping the overarching concepts, which impeded their comprehension.

Another case study by Carrell (1987) demonstrated that EFL learners exposed to pre-reading activities that activated their background knowledge performed better on comprehension tests than those who did not engage in such activities. This research highlighted the effectiveness of pre-reading strategies, such as KWL charts and thematic discussions, in improving comprehension. For instance, students who participated in KWL (Know, Want to know, Learned) charts before reading a text on cultural festivals were better able to connect new information with their existing knowledge, leading to improved understanding and retention of the material.

5.2 Classroom Activities

Incorporating specific classroom activities can significantly enhance EFL learners' background knowledge and, consequently, their reading comprehension. Thematic reading

projects are one such activity that encourages students to explore and engage with a topic in depth. For example, a thematic project on global environmental issues could involve reading articles, watching related videos, and participating in discussions about climate change. This comprehensive approach helps students build a solid foundation of knowledge that enhances their ability to understand and interpret related texts (Snow, 2010).

Group discussions and role-playing exercises are also effective in building background knowledge. For instance, in a role-playing exercise about historical events, students might take on different roles related to a specific event and discuss their perspectives. This method not only helps students understand historical contexts but also fosters empathy and deeper engagement with the text. Sample lesson plans for such activities include goals like enhancing understanding of historical contexts, practicing language skills in context, and developing critical thinking abilities. Activities might include assigning roles, conducting research, and presenting findings to the class.

5.3 Technology Integration

Digital tools offer innovative ways to support background knowledge acquisition and reading comprehension for EFL learners. Language-learning apps such as Duolingo or Babbel provide interactive exercises and contextual practice that help learners build vocabulary and understanding. These apps often include gamified elements that make learning engaging and effective.

Virtual reality (VR) experiences can immerse students in different cultural contexts, providing them with firsthand insights into various environments and practices. For instance, a VR simulation of a traditional market in a foreign country can give students a deeper understanding of cultural references they encounter in texts. Research by Bower et al. (2017) highlights the potential of VR to enhance engagement and comprehension by providing immersive, experiential learning opportunities.

Online forums and platforms for cultural exchange, such as Tandem or Conversation Exchange, allow learners to interact with native speakers and practice language skills in authentic contexts. These platforms facilitate discussions about cultural norms and everyday experiences, which can enrich learners' background knowledge and improve their comprehension of culturally relevant texts.

Integrating these digital tools into the curriculum can support continuous learning outside the classroom. Educators can encourage students to use language-learning apps for

regular practice, participate in VR activities to explore new cultural contexts, and engage in online discussions to broaden their understanding of diverse perspectives. By leveraging technology, teachers can provide students with additional resources and experiences that complement classroom instruction and enhance their reading comprehension skills.

6. Challenges in Activating Background Knowledge

Activating background knowledge is crucial for reading comprehension, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, educators face significant challenges, such as limited access to diverse content and language or cultural barriers, which can hinder students' ability to connect new information with what they already know. Addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing EFL learners' comprehension and supporting their educational development.

6.1 Limited Access to Diverse Content

In many under-resourced educational settings, students often face significant barriers to accessing diverse content necessary for activating background knowledge. These barriers can include limited access to up-to-date reading materials, inadequate library resources, and a lack of exposure to varied cultural and academic texts. According to a study by Zhang and Yamasaki (2020), such limitations can hinder students' ability to build a rich base of background knowledge, which is crucial for effective reading comprehension. Teachers in these environments must adopt creative strategies to overcome these constraints. This might involve leveraging open-access digital resources, incorporating community resources, and utilizing online platforms to provide a broader range of content. For instance, teachers might use freely available e-books, educational websites, or collaborate with local organizations to access supplementary materials that align with their curriculum (Zhang & Yamasaki, 2020).

6.2 Language and Cultural Barriers

Language and cultural barriers also pose significant challenges in activating background knowledge for EFL learners. Differences in cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and contextual understanding can impede students' ability to fully grasp the content of texts. For example, a study by Lee and Schallert (2021) found that EFL learners often struggle with texts that contain cultural nuances unfamiliar to them, leading to difficulties in comprehension and engagement. To address these issues, teachers can use strategies to bridge these gaps. One effective approach is to provide explicit explanations of cultural contexts and incorporate supplementary materials that offer background information on cultural references.

Additionally, using visual aids, such as images and videos, can help contextualize unfamiliar concepts and make them more accessible. Engaging students in discussions about cultural differences and encouraging them to share their own experiences can also foster a more inclusive learning environment (Lee & Schallert, 2021).

6.3 Suggestions for Overcoming Challenges

To address these challenges, several practical solutions can be implemented. Utilizing universal themes in reading materials, such as common human experiences or global issues, can help make content more relatable and engaging for students from diverse backgrounds. Teacher-generated materials, such as customized reading passages and contextual notes, can also be tailored to address specific background knowledge gaps. Collaborative learning activities, such as group projects and peer discussions, allow students to share their knowledge and perspectives, thereby enriching the learning experience for all participants. Incorporating these strategies helps create a more inclusive learning environment that supports the development of background knowledge and enhances reading comprehension. By combining these approaches, educators can mitigate the impact of resource limitations and cultural barriers, ultimately fostering a more equitable and effective learning experience for EFL students (Snow, 2010; Zhang & Yamasaki, 2020).

7. Discussion on Pedagogical Implications

The insights drawn from the article underscore the crucial role of background knowledge in shaping EFL learners' reading comprehension and offer significant implications for curriculum design and teacher training. By addressing how background knowledge influences comprehension, educators can develop more effective strategies to enhance EFL instruction. This discussion provides a deeper examination of how these insights can be applied to pedagogical practices and offers further guidelines for integrating background knowledge into EFL education.

7.1 Enhancing EFL Curriculum Design

Effective EFL curriculum design must account for the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension by embedding activities that actively build and utilize this knowledge. A curriculum that integrates background knowledge can help bridge the gap between what learners already know and what they need to understand new texts. For instance, incorporating scaffolded reading materials that start with simpler, familiar content and progressively introduce more complex topics can help students build their knowledge base

gradually. This approach not only facilitates understanding but also promotes engagement by connecting new information with students' existing knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Additionally, integrating interdisciplinary approaches can enrich the curriculum. By combining language instruction with content from other subjects, such as history or science, educators can provide learners with broader contextual knowledge that enhances their reading comprehension. For example, a reading unit on environmental issues could be paired with activities from geography or biology to deepen students' understanding of the content (Snow, 2010). This interdisciplinary approach helps students make connections across different domains of knowledge, thereby improving their ability to comprehend and engage with a variety of texts.

7.2 Implications for Teacher Training Programs

Teacher training programs should focus on equipping educators with the skills to effectively incorporate background knowledge into their teaching. Professional development should include:

●**Training on Effective Pre-Reading Strategies:** Educators need training on how to design and implement pre-reading activities that activate students' prior knowledge. Workshops and seminars can provide teachers with practical tools and techniques for using strategies such as KWL charts, think-pair-share exercises, and concept maps to engage students before they start reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

●**Developing Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness:** Teachers must be prepared to address the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms. Training programs should include modules on cultural competency, helping educators understand how cultural backgrounds influence reading comprehension and providing strategies for incorporating culturally relevant content into lessons (Koda, 2020). This can involve creating a culturally inclusive curriculum and using diverse materials that reflect students' backgrounds.

●**Utilizing Technology and Digital Resources:** With the growing role of digital tools in education, teacher training should include guidance on integrating technology into reading instruction. This includes using digital platforms and resources that support background knowledge acquisition, such as online articles, interactive simulations, and educational apps (Nation, 2021). Training should focus on how to effectively incorporate these tools into the curriculum to enhance students' understanding and engagement.

●**Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms:** Teachers need strategies for assessing the effectiveness of background knowledge-building activities and providing feedback. Training programs should include components on developing assessment tools that measure students' prior knowledge and their progress in integrating new information. This includes formative assessments that track students' understanding and provide insights into areas where additional support may be needed (Zareva, 2021).

Incorporating background knowledge into EFL curriculum design and teacher training programs can significantly enhance reading comprehension and overall learning outcomes. By developing curricula that integrate background knowledge activities and providing educators with the necessary skills and resources, schools can create a more effective and supportive learning environment. This holistic approach not only improves comprehension but also fosters a deeper connection with the material, ultimately leading to greater academic success for EFL students.

8. Conclusion

The impact of background knowledge on reading comprehension for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is profound. This article has highlighted the importance of integrating cultural, topic-specific, and linguistic knowledge to support learners in making meaningful connections with new information. Effective strategies such as pre-reading activities, the use of culturally relevant content, and diverse knowledge-building techniques have been discussed as essential for enhancing comprehension. Challenges, including limited access to resources and cultural differences, underscore the need for innovative and inclusive teaching practices.

Incorporating background knowledge into EFL instruction is crucial for improving reading comprehension outcomes. Adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates pre-reading activities, culturally relevant materials, and diverse knowledge-building strategies can significantly enhance learners' engagement and understanding of texts. Educators are encouraged to employ holistic teaching methods that address both language skills and cultural literacy, creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

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