

Knowledge Matters: Building Content- Rich Literacy Instruction for K-5 Students



Sticky Note Parking Lot



Note Catcher

Why Knowledge Matters

- What stands out to you?
- How does this expand upon what you already know about student knowledge and reading comprehension?
- Did anything surprise you or challenge your current thinking?

Principle 1: Big Ideas

Principle 2: Word Knowledge

Principle 3: The Use of Multiple Genres

Principle 4: Distributed Review

Principle 5: Intentional Opportunities for Language Engagement

- Student Talk
- The Reading-Writing Connection

Excerpt from “Comprehension in Disguise: The Role of Knowledge in Children’s Learning” by: Susan B. Neuman

The Case Against Comprehension as a Generic Skill

Comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from text. So, let’s start with a simple example adapted from the *Becoming a Nation of Readers’* consensus report (Anderson et al., 1985):

When Melissa arrived at the restaurant, the woman at the door greeted her, checked her coat and looked for her name. A few minutes later, Melissa was escorted to her table, and shown the daily specials. The attendant was helpful but brusque, almost to the point of being rude. Later, she paid the woman at the door and left.

For those reading this text, it probably brings to mind past associations with restaurants. The woman at the door is the *maître d’*, the attendant, the waiter or waitress. However, no text is completely self-explanatory. Throughout the reading, you probably made connections and inferences based on the text and the knowledge you already possess. But take a minute more to look at the last two sentences, and here it gets a bit more complicated. Why did Melissa probably pay the *maître d’* and not the waiter? One could infer that Melissa was angry with the poor service and chose not to leave a tip.

The paragraph highlights several important points about comprehension. In interpreting text, readers draw on their store of knowledge about the topic. You were able to use your prior knowledge to fill in the gaps in the message and integrate the different pieces of information in the message. As someone probably familiar with restaurants, you were able to infer that Melissa had a reservation, was directed to the table, selected her meal from the daily specials on the menu and was likely frustrated with the service she received. Yet none of this information is expressly mentioned in the text.

These are all inferences that bring together the information presented in the text and the knowledge the reader already has about restaurants. Good readers, according to these consensus reports, are thought to integrate information in the text with what they already know, whereas less mature readers may struggle with its meaning. However, here’s the irony. Although good readers may read the above paragraph with greater fluency than less mature readers, the inferences they make are not likely based on their overall ability to monitor their comprehension or make inferences. Rather, whether good or poor readers, those inferences had to do with their knowledge of what goes on in a restaurant. With more knowledge, a reader could likely make sense of the text and fill in those gaps.

No educator would likely quibble with the conclusion that background knowledge played a role in comprehending the paragraph. The problem, however, has been in defining that role. For example, if knowledge is merely a supporting player, then it might only represent the existing schemas readers bring to the text, essentially a static characteristic that one applies while reading. But if we reverse roles, placing knowledge on center stage, we now see knowledge as an alterable characteristic, one that needs to be developed and nurtured.

In fact, whether it’s comprehension, vocabulary development, content learning, critical thinking or problem-solving, one might attribute learning to a single variable: When one has some knowledge, it’s easier to develop more knowledge. Simply put, knowledge is power in cognitive development.

Note: Some content from this section of the article has been omitted. The full article can be accessed in “*Perspectives on Language and Literacy*,” Fall 2019.