Part 8

Key Directions and Characteristics of Research Organization in the Contemporary World

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Some Aspects of Developing Background Knowledge in Second Language Acquisition Revisited

Abstract

The article focuses on defining how background knowledge impacts on second-language acquisition by giving a brief overview of schema theory, the interaction of the basic modes of information processing. A challenge of dealing with culturally specific texts in second language acquisition is also touched upon. Different research-supported views on co-dependence of culture and meaning in learning a language as well as the significance of integrating authentic use of literature into the learning process are also briefly examined. The article stresses that a lack of prior and cultural knowledge may become a put-off factor for a second language student thus hindering the entire process of learning as failing to understand and master the target culture prevents a student from mastering a second language. The article also briefly considers cultural interference at the affective and denotative levels to show the connection between culture and language.

Keywords: background knowledge, reading strategies, prior knowledge, cultural knowledge, reading comprehension

Introduction

Many second language learners find it difficult to understand a spoken or written text in the foreign language especially when one is in the earliest stages of language study. Culturally specific texts may require more background knowledge. Those learners who lack sufficient background knowledge or are unable to activate this knowledge may fail to understand the key concepts and grasp the message of the text. High prior knowledge of a subject area or key vocabulary of a text often means higher scores on reading comprehension.

Moreover, second language student learn more effectively when they already know something about a content area and when concepts in that area are familiar to them; they learn and remember new information best when it is linked to relevant background knowledge.

A common thread running through various perspectives on language acquisition is the view that the meaningfulness and familiarity of second language material plays a crucial role as learners begin to develop their second language skills.

Beginning in the 1960s, the role of meaningfulness and organization of background knowledge was particularly emphasized by cognitive psychologists. Educators such as Ausubel (1968) believed that learning must be meaningful to be effective and permanent for material to be meaningful, it must be clearly relatable to existing knowledge that the learner already possesses. Furthermore, this existing knowledge base must be organized in such a way that the new information is easily assimilated, or "attached", to the learner's cognitive structure. Ausubel stressed that teachers need to provide "advanced organizers" – devices that activate relevant background knowledge – to facilitate the learning and retention of new material. Years after Ausubel first introduced this concept language teachers continue to recognize the value of such organizers in instruction Hadley (1993) and Carrell (1987) stress that with regard to the EFL/ESL learning contexts, "some students' apparent reading problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge". In his turn, Sami A. Al-wossabi (2014) claims that failure to understand particular linguistic terms demotivate learners and cause them to act passively in most of their language classes. They feel disappointed particularly if the learning material exceeds by far their background knowledge and their ability to understand the overall meaning of texts. It is considered vital to teach students how to use their background knowledge as a reading strategy.

Results and discussion

As Brandao and Oakhill state (Brandao & Oakhill, 2005) prior knowledge, also termed word knowledge or background knowledge, is what a person knows about the content of the text. The term schema also relates to the term prior knowledge because a person's schema is what already is already known about the world (Gregory & Cahill, 2010). Readers are expected to convey their knowledge in order to fill holes within the text to construct an understanding of the text.

How does background knowledge impact specifically on second-language acquisition? It might first be helpful to think about the kinds of knowledge learners can bring to comprehension tasks. In the second-language comprehension process, at least three types of background knowledge are potentially activated:

1) linguistic information, or one's knowledge of the target language code;

2) knowledge of the world, including one's store of concepts and expectations based on prior experience;

3) knowledge of discourse structure, or the understanding of how various kinds or types of discourse (such as conversation, radio broadcast, literary texts, political speeches, newspaper and magazine stories, and the like) are generally organized.

When language practice is limited to the manipulation or processing of linguistic form, only the first type of background knowledge is involved. By contrast, language learning activities that provide relevant context should be helpful in activating student's knowledge of the world and of familiar discourse structure.

One might hypothesize that the need for activating knowledge beyond that of the linguistic code is greatest for learners at ow levels of proficiency, whose imperfect control of the language can be a serious hindrance to comprehension.

This hypothesis is supported by research done by Yorio (1971), who yet concludes that second language readers and listeners are at a disadvantage as they are forced into recalling cues that they either do not know at all or know imperfectly

and consequently language learners are more likely to forget those cues much faster than they would cues in their native language. Besides necessity to simultaneously predict future cues and make associations with past cues can become challenging for many second language inexperienced learners.

Students at lower levels often try to process language in a "word-for-word" fashion, drawing only on one kind of background knowledge – their imperfect knowledge of the target-language code. If such students can be encouraged to use other cues to meanings, such as their knowledge of the world and of discourse structure, the process of understanding should be facilitated. Teachers can help students in this process by providing supplementary cues to meaning, drawing on all three types of background knowledge.

The view that individuals utilize various types of background knowledge when attempting to comprehend written and oral texts was proposed by reading theorists writing in the 1970s, such as Smith (1971) and Goodman (1972). Smith maintains that efficient readers process selected elements of the text rather than use all the visual cues available on the printed page. He describes the process of comprehension as the "reduction of uncertainty". Goodman (1972) suggests that reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game", involving the interaction between thought and language. He argues that "the ability to anticipate what has not yet been heard is vital in listening". Both Smith and Goodman describe "top-down" models of reading comprehension, where the reader is thought to begin with high-order concepts (such as one's general knowledge of a topic or situation) and work down to the actual features of the text (such as words, phrases, morphology, syntax and rhetorical structure). In their view, readers sample the textual cues, make use of redundancies, and formulate their hypotheses about what the text is going to say, actively using background knowledge to make appropriate predictions about the ongoing discourse. The sampling process also serves to help readers confirm or reject their hypotheses as they process the information in the text.

When it comes to the range of pre-reading activities that are in store for the learners the teacher can resort to either pre questions to be answered after reading the text; pre questions to activate the reader's knowledge about the topic; content organizers (summaries) much favoured by Tudor (1989) or predictions based on the title, subheadings, illustrations, or skim reading of the text; and integrated reading preparation (combining the above) regarded as far more effective by Taglieber et al. (1988).

Fries (1963) was among the first to incorporate cultural background information into a description of meaning. In his analysis, there are three levels of meaning: lexical, grammatical, and social-cultural. Comprehension of the total meaning of a sentence occurs only when the linguistic meaning of the sentence is filled into 'a social framework of organized information'. He illustrates the importance of the social-cultural level with a passage from Washington Irving. The response to Rip Van Winkle's 'archaic' use of term 'Tory' after an absence of twenty years can be attributed to the fact that its cultural meaning had changed from 'good citizen' to 'enemy of the new government'. Fries (1945) argues that readers have missed the meaning of the story if they do not understand the reaction of the group to Rip's word. For mastery of a foreign language, he argues that the person should find substitute for the kind of background knowledge existing in his/her own language

(Fries, 1945). While these insights have influenced subsequent pedagogical writings directed to foreign language and EFL pedagogy, the position Fries advanced has been somewhat attenuated (Steffensen & Joag-Dev, 1996).

One position that has been adopted is that there will be cultural interference at the affected level, in the connotative values of words and the attitudes expressed in, and underlying, the passage. Thus, Wilga M. Rivers (1983) identifies differences in values and attitudes as one of the main sources of problems in a foreign language and one area in which significant progress can be made in understanding a foreign culture as any authentic use of literature will introduce cultural concomitants into the classroom, a point supported by cross-cultural research. Rivers and Temperley (1978) argued that social-cultural meaning was an affected dimension and a great deal of reading performance is attributed to knowledge of vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is also believed to be developmental and related to background knowledge, teachers need to broaden their students' word knowledge in order to better comprehend texts (Rupley & Slough, 2010).

A second approach is that there will be interference at the denotative level as well, and students must have a rather complete understanding of the background information if there is to be complete comprehension of a text. Thus the meaning of the notice put up on a London barber shop "Sorry, no Boris cuts here" will be difficult to catch on for those learners of English as a second language who lack knowledge of what the current British Foreign Secretary used to be, as well as of Boris Johnson's trademark 'shaggy' cut and the kind of figure he cuts with British public. To fully decode the notice and enjoy the humour behind it learners should definitely do some research into the subject or seek their teacher's assistance in helping them to do that. The teacher is to provide the background information, including description of his/ her own experience in the target culture concerning the given case. Thus, Paulston and Bruder (1976) have a point when, following Goodman's thesis that the proficient reader must draw on his/her experiential conceptual background in order to supply a semantic component to the message, they conclude that learning to read is easier 'when the cultural background is familiar and students can draw on cultural information in the decoding process'. Robinett (1979) takes a similar position on reading as he focuses on the students' understanding of the cultural content implicitly or explicitly expressed, and their ability to cope with the grammatical structures in the passage. The stated position is close to that advocated by Fries but generally is not as rigorously stated.

A third approach recognizes that complete mystery of a language is dependent upon knowledge of the culture but recommends the use of literature to achieve this goal. Marquard (1967, 1969) views literature as a vehicle for creating cross-cultural empathy and appears to assume that at a certain point in their development students will possess the reading skills necessary for processing a passage, regardless of its content. He also stresses that many practitioners use foreign literature or simplified reading material based on the target culture in their classroom to enable the reader to experience how people of a particular culture live (Steffensen & Joag-Dev, 1996, p. 50).

We entirely agree with a statement that culture, as an ingrained set of behavior and modes of perception, becomes highly important in the learning of a second language, a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language and the

acquisition of a second language is also the acquisition of a second culture (Johnson, 1995, p. 123).

The study of another language enables students to understand a different culture on its own terms. The exquisite connections between the culture that is lived and the language that is spoken can only be realized by those who possess knowledge of both. So as the language is the primary vehicle for expressing cultural perspectives and participating in social practices, the study of a language provides opportunities for students to develop insights in a culture that are available in no other way. A thought that the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996, pp. 40-47) still holds true. Thus teachers should use culturally relevant and authentic texts that give an insight into the target culture and help second language learners not only acquire the second language but also the second culture.

Conclusion

There is a well-established correlation between background knowledge and comprehension. "In the top-down view of second language reading, not only is the reader an active participant in the reading process, making predictions and processing information, but everything in the reader's prior experience or background knowledge plays a potential role in the process" (Carrell, 1987, p. 149).

The use of background knowledge activation strategies in the second language teaching is widely supported. These strategies focus on building up and activating background knowledge; helping the learners to connect new information about the world with what they already know. Further, activities enhancing background knowledge can help the learners to see how to make use of and apply information in different situations. Various activities enhancing background knowledge should go on in second language reading classes. Research studies stress the importance of prereading activities, such as discussing of a story, providing background information, explaining lexical items etc., in order to help learners develop and activate background knowledge that is relevant to their reading materials.

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