

Prior Knowledge: Activating the 'Known'

Description: Through a series of guided questions, the instructor helps students activate their prior knowledge of a specific topic to help them comprehend the content of a story or article on the same topic. Linking new facts to prior knowledge increases a student's *inferential* comprehension (ability to place novel information in a meaningful context by comparing it to already-learned information).



Reserve at least a full instructional session to introduce this comprehension strategy. (For effective-teaching tips, consult the guidelines presented in “*Introducing Academic Strategies to Students: A Direct-Instruction Approach*”).

Materials:

- Overhead transparencies of practice reading passages and sample Text Prediction questions, transparency markers
- Student copies of practice reading passages (optional) or reading/text books, blank paper and pencil or pen

Preparation:

- Prepare overheads of sample passages.
- Locate 3 main ideas per passage and—for each idea—develop a prior knowledge question and a prediction question (see below).

Intervention Script:

1. Introduce this strategy to the class:
 1. Explain the Benefit of Using Prior Knowledge to Understand a Reading Passage: Tell students that recalling their prior experiences (“their own life”) can help them to understand the content of their reading. New facts make sense only when we connect them to what we already know.
 2. Demonstrate the Text Prediction Strategy. Select a sample passage and use a “think-aloud” approach to show students how to use the text-prediction strategy. (Note: To illustrate how the strategy is used, this intervention script uses the attached example, *Attending Public School in Japan*.)

Step 1: Think About What and Why: Describe what strategy you are about to apply and the reason for doing so. You might say, for example, “*I am about to read a short article on public schools in Japan. Before I read the article, though, I should think about my life experiences and what they might tell me*”

about the topic that I am about to read about. By thinking about my own life, I will better understand the article.”

Step 2: Preview Main Ideas from the Reading and Pose Prior Knowledge and Prediction Questions. One at a time, pose three main ideas that appear in the article or story. For each key idea, present one question requiring that readers tap their own *prior knowledge* of the topic and another that prompts them to predict how *the article or story* might deal with the topic.

Here is a typical question cycle, composed of a main idea statement, prior knowledge question, prediction question, and student opportunity to write a response.

“The article that we are going to read describes how different the writing system used in Japanese schools is from our own writing system ” [A main idea from the passage].

“What are your own attitudes and experiences about writing?” [prior knowledge question] Answer this question aloud, and then encourage students to respond.

“What do you think that the article will say about the Japanese writing system?” [prediction question] Answer this question aloud, and then seek student responses.

“Now, write down your own ideas about what you think the article will say about the Japanese writing system.” [student written response] As students write their own responses, model for them by writing out your answer to the question on the overhead transparency.

Step 3: Students Read the Story or Article Independently. Once you have presented three main ideas and students have responded to all questions, have them read the selection independently.

2. When students have learned the Text Prediction strategy, use it regularly to introduce new reading assignments.

Tips:

Use Text Prediction to Prepare Students for Homework Reading. You can apply the Text Prediction strategy to boost student comprehension of homework reading assignments. When assigning the homework passages, take students through the steps in the strategy. Then require that students take their own written predictions home to compare to their actual reading.

Transition from Group to Individual Application of the Strategy. As your students become proficient in applying the strategy, you can gradually train them to use the strategy independently. As the instructor, you might hand out the three main ideas for a story and then direct students to take each idea and write out (1) a short account of their own experiences with the topic, and (2) a prediction of what the article or story will say about the main idea. You can collect these written assignments to monitor student understanding and follow-through in using the technique.

References:

Hansen, J. & Pearson, P.D. (1983). An instructional study: Improving the inferential comprehension of good and poor fourth-grade readers. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 75*, 821-829.

Attending Public School in Japan

Japan is a country of 125 million inhabitants, with a rich and ancient cultural tradition. The geography is varied, with many mountains and valleys.

The Japanese language is quite different from English. In fact, linguists (researchers who study to form and structure of languages) disagree on how Japanese evolved as a language and how closely it is related to other world languages. Because Japan is an archipelago (a series of islands), sections of the country were once quite isolated from one another. Even now, throughout Japan there are a number of different *dialects* (variant spoken versions of the language) that can make it difficult at times for a speaker of one dialect to understand a speaker of another dialect.

The food in Japanese public schools is generally very healthy but quite different than students are used to eating in America. Dishes may contain combinations of raw or cooked seafood, vegetables, noodles, rice, or seaweed. While meat is commonly served, the portions are smaller than are typical in American meals. Fast food has become popular in Japan, but diners must also be able to handle chopsticks.

In Japan, all children attend primary (elementary) school and middle school. Although high school is not mandatory in Japan, virtually all high-school-age students attend them. Unlike most American school systems, high schools in Japan are selective. Students must take competitive exams to be admitted to these schools, which are largely designed to prepare students for college. Many students choose to attend vocational schools, rather than academic high schools.

In public school, students must learn four separate writing systems: Kanji, hiragana, katakana, and romaji. The most challenging of these systems, kanji, is based on Chinese ideograms (words written as a pictorial series of brush- or pen-strokes) and takes years to learn to read and write properly.

Most high school students in Japan will tell you that they have no assigned homework. However, Japanese students regularly spend *several hours* per night reviewing their lessons and reading ahead on the material that will be covered in school the following day. Japanese students, like their American counterparts, love television shows, movies, computer games, and other forms of popular entertainment.