THE ROLE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

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Learning, which involves active mental processes, must be meaningful to be effective and permanent. For material to be meaningful, it must be clearly relatable to existing knowledge the learner already possesses. Furthermore, this existing knowledge base must be organized in such a way that the new information is easily assimilated to the learner’s cognitive structure. Educators provide devices that activate relevant background knowledge. These advance organizers facilitate the learning and retention of new material.

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 code; (2) knowledge of the world, including one’s store of concepts and expectations based on prior experience; and (3) knowledge of discourse, or how various types of authentic discourse (such as conversations, radio broadcast, literary texts, newspaper accounts, fables, political speeches, and the like) are generally organized. When language practice is limited to the manipulation of linguistic information, only the first type of background knowledge is involved. By contrast, language learning and acquisition activities that provide relevant context essentially activate Type 2 and Type 3 knowledge bases as well, thereby increasing the meaningfulness of the learning experience and enriching the quality of that leaning considerably.

The role played by background knowledge comprehension is explained and formalized in a theoretical model known as Schema Theory. One of the basic tenets of this theory is that any given text does not carry meaning in and of itself. Rather, it provides direction for listeners or readers so that they can construct meaning from
their own cognitive structure (previously acquitted or background knowledge). The previously acquired knowledge structures accessed in the comprehension process are called schemata (the plural of schema). Other closely related terms that are similar, but not quite synonymous, are scripts, plans, goals, frames, expectations, and event chains.

Schema can be defined as an abstract representation of a generic concept for an object, event, or situation. When a schema represents a whole situation (such as going to movie, repairing a car, going on a picnic, buying groceries, doing laundry, etc.) a chain of stereotypic events or features are called up in an individual’s mind in association with that situation.

In the process of language comprehension, our knowledge is not static. Rather, it is continuously in a process of reorganization. Each of us has a somewhat different internal representation for a given message, containing elements that cannot be derived directly or solely from the words themselves. That is, the comprehension and memory of any input cannot be adequately predicted or accounted for based on mere dictionary knowledge of the words that are read or heard. The store of knowledge about the world that an individual possesses as well as his or her own analysis of the context are both heavily involved in the process of fitting meaning to existing schemata. Any one individual interpretation of a given text will therefore be influenced by his or her own background and interests. For second language learners, distortions in comprehension may arise, therefore, not only from misinterpretation of linguistic elements of the message, but also from misinterpretation of the schema, activated due to cultural bias.

If the comprehender has no schemata as a guide in this process of interpretation, then he or she will have difficulty making hypotheses about the ongoing message and may fail to comprehend it. In the comprehender does use appropriate schemata, activating background knowledge to understand and interpret the input, then comprehension will occur.
When considering the tasks involved in comprehension, schema theorists posit two separate but interrelated modes of information processing: bottom-up processing and top-down processing. In bottom-up processing, the incoming data enter the comprehender’s “system” from the bottom-most (most specific), best-fitting schemata. (Schemata are hierarchically organized - from the most specific on the bottom to the most abstract on the top.) In top-down processing, the comprehender makes general predictions about the input based on higher-level, more abstract schemata.

There are two basic kinds of schemata used in interpreting messages: content schemata (relating to the individual’s background knowledge of the world and expectations about objects, events, and situations) and formal schemata (relating to the individual’s knowledge of the rhetorical or discourse structures of different types of texts). Both types of schemata are important in the comprehension process.

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