The Effect of Background Knowledge on Reading Comprehension

by

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Abstract

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This study was conducted to investigate the effect of prior background knowledge of a certain topic on reading comprehension of the ninth graders and the second secondary academic stream students in Jordanian schools.

The study is aimed to answer the following questions:

1 - Is there a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension which may be due to the relevant background knowledge (low, medium and high) of a certain topic?

2 - Is there a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension which may be due to grade level (ninth and second secondary grades)?

3 - Is there a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension which may be due to the interaction of relevant background knowledge of the topic with grade level.

The population of the study was all female students in ninth grade and second secondary grade in the public schools in the academic year (1994-1995).

A random sample was used. The sample consisted of 300 students: 150 in ninth grade and 150 in second secondary grade.

For testing the hypotheses of this study, the following instruments and procedures were used:

1 - A reading passage about a general topic (Olympic Games) was chosen. It had about (550) words.
2. A multiple choice test on the reading comprehension passage with 20-items was constructed to test subjects' comprehension of the passage (Olympic Games).

3. A Yes/No Test with 24-items was constructed to measure the students' background knowledge about the passage.

4. A cloze test was used to test the subjects' language proficiency. The test included 44 spaces which were made in a certain order (every seventh was omitted).

5. The validity of the previous instruments was confirmed through asking some experts to evaluate them. They were two university professors, two English supervisors and five experienced (EFL) teachers who served as judges. The researcher took their constructive points and comments in the final version.

6. The reliability of the three instruments was computed on a sample of 100 subjects from the study population. Split-half method was used.

To analyze the collected data, a two-way analysis (ANOVA) was used with the background knowledge and grade level as two independent variables and language proficiency as a covariate variable. The findings of the study showed:

a. There was a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension due to the relevant background knowledge.

b. There was no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension due to the grade level.

c. There was no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension due to the interaction between the background knowledge and the grade level.

Finally, the researcher advised English teachers to help their students build their prior knowledge by using the scientific method. Teachers are advised to consider the inferential skill in order to help their students to make use of the prior information they had. The researcher, also, recommended to the Ministry of Education to cooperate with the JTV to re-evaluate the educational programs and to produce fruitful educational one which suit all levels in all grades.