



When Knowledge Limits Understanding

Based on The Knowledge Gap
by Natalie Wexler

Purpose

To help teachers understand why background knowledge is essential for reading comprehension and to recognize instructional signals that indicate when students need stronger, more intentional knowledge-building experiences.

Key Understanding

Reading comprehension depends heavily on what students already know about the world. Even when decoding and language skills are developing appropriately, limited background knowledge can prevent students from making sense of a text. Knowledge does not accumulate automatically through isolated reading strategies; it must be built intentionally through coherent, content-rich instruction over time.

Teacher Reflection Questions

- Do my students struggle to understand texts because the topic or content is unfamiliar?
- How often does instruction build knowledge across connected topics rather than isolated skills?
- Are students given opportunities to learn about the world through science, history, and informational text?
- Do comprehension difficulties increase when texts assume background knowledge students may not have?
- Which students are most affected when instruction emphasizes strategies without building knowledge?

What to Look for in Students

- Read accurately but misunderstand the main ideas of a text
- Struggle to make inferences because key information is unfamiliar
- Have difficulty connecting ideas across sentences or paragraphs
- Give surface-level responses that lack depth or detail
- Show stronger comprehension in familiar topics than unfamiliar ones

These patterns are not deficits in effort or ability—they are indicators that students need intentional opportunities to build knowledge.

EA Literacy & Learning | Research-Based Literacy Made Practical

Copyright Notice: This resource is an original professional development tool created by EA Literacy & Learning. It is based on publicly available research and professional literature and is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or produced by the author or publisher of the referenced work.

EALiteracyandLearning.com

© 2025 EA Literacy & Learning. All rights reserved.

This resource is intended for individual classroom or instructional use.

Not for resale, redistribution, or posting online without written permission.