**Activating prior knowledge**

**ABSTRACT**

Activating previous knowledge refers to a practice where a teacher brings up topics that are already familiar to some degree to the students. The purpose of this is to create a foundation for learning by giving a familiar context for the upcoming new information so that it becomes more fluently integrated with what the students already know. Thus, this procedure can help to deepen the understanding of the forthcoming information and make the students mentally engaged in learning it.

There exist several strategies to activate prior knowledge. The teacher may simply ask the students specific or general questions related to the topic, inciting them to recall their available knowledge on the topic. To invoke even deeper processing of prior knowledge, the teacher can post a problem or a scenario for students to solve. Solving such scenario should require the retrieval of relevant prior knowledge on the topic. The teacher can also have the students to activate each other’s’ prior knowledge by discussing the topic together. One commonly used method is “turn and talk” where students are asked to turn toward a fellow classmate and discuss what they know about the given topic. Such discussion can also be done by brainstorming in larger groups.

Certain methods leverage graphic organizers: for instance, the teacher can ask the students to draw a mind map or to fill a learning goals chart, either individually or in groups. One commonly used application of this is the KWL chart, which consists of three parts: what do we Know; what do we Want to know; and what have we Learned. The students are required to reflect and write answers to the first two questions before the class, and answer the final question after the class. An extension of this is the KWHL chart, which adds a procedural element into the mix by making the student also reflect on the question “How will I find information” before the class. Another effective method is the 3-2-1 list: there the students are asked to list three things they already know about the topic, two things they would like to know or learn more about the topic, and one specific question related to the topic. Such assignment can be given to students beforehand, but alternatively it can also be executed in the beginning of the class so that the teacher gives the students a moment to activate their knowledge by writing the list and then goes through the answers together with the class. This way the teacher gets an understanding about the students’ current knowledge, what interests them in the topic, and what is still unclear.

When activating students’ prior knowledge, the teacher should consider the extent of their prior knowledge. The students’ knowledge typically divides into three distinct levels of knowledge, depending on the individual: much knowledge (superordinate concepts; definitions; analogies; linking), some knowledge (examples; attributes; defining characteristics), and little knowledge (associations; morphemes; sound alikes; firsthand experiences). Thus, activating prior knowledge can be seen as self-assessment by the students, as they are encouraged to consider and reflect on the level of knowledge they have on a concept. This can be done by using an assessment chart that contains specific questions about how familiar they are with the topic. This helps the students to assess their personal level of knowledge.