

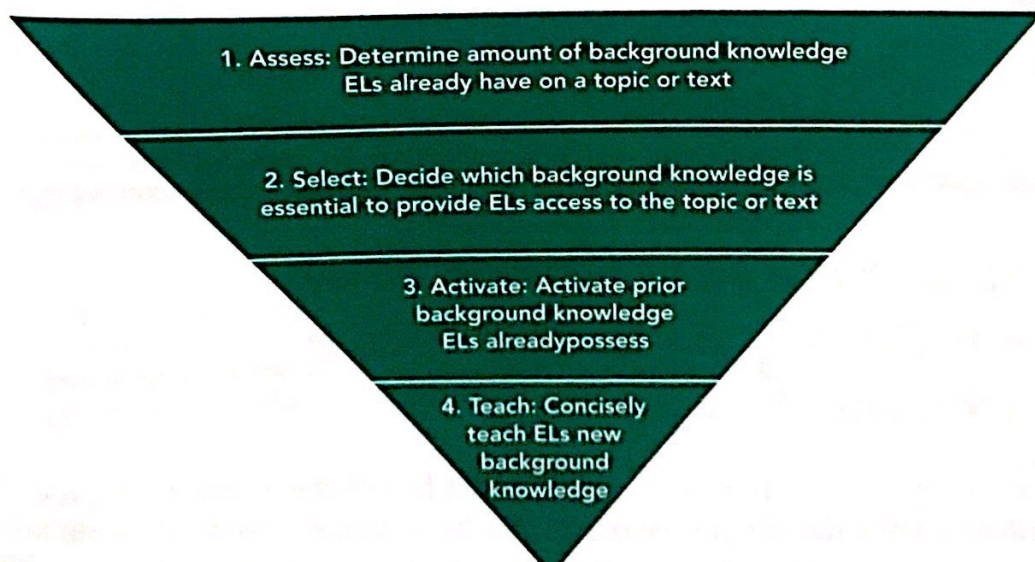
What Is a Framework I Can Use for Building ELs' Background Knowledge?

Through our review of the research, as well as work with ELs and their teachers, we have developed a framework for building ELs' background knowledge when working with complex texts or topics. The framework consists of four sequential steps, each of which we outline in more detail in this chapter. The framework takes place within a context of collaboration among teachers. It is important to remember that not all background knowledge is created equal in terms of relevance when it comes to lesson planning and instruction, and this framework will provide a tool to you to determine what is most relevant for ELs and worth your precious time. Figure 7.1 provides a visual representation of the framework.

Step 1: How Do I Find out My ELs' Prior Knowledge on a Particular Topic or Text?

In order to maximize your instructional time on new content, assessing your ELs' background knowledge to gauge your students' level of familiarity on a certain topic can provide valuable insight for lesson planning. You will need to figure out how much ELs already know about a topic or text prior to your teaching it so you can determine whether to activate prior knowledge, build new background, or do a combination of both. This kind of informal

FIGURE 7.1 Framework for Building ELs' Background Knowledge



assessment can be done through many means that do not require much time and can be seamlessly woven into instruction. In addition, you should concentrate this informal assessment on background you already feel may be essential for ELs to fully engage with the topic and/or comprehend the text you're planning on basing your instruction on. For example, teachers can engage ELs in oral discussions, anticipation guides, checklists, and self-ratings to inform them of ELs' background knowledge and adjust instruction accordingly. In addition, Fisher et al. (2012) suggest cloze assessments, word sorts, opinionnaires, and caption writing to find out what students already know on a given topic. Let's look at one type of informal assessment in a little more depth.

Opinionnaires are a series of statements students can complete that demonstrate students' background knowledge on a particular topic. Teachers can use them before instruction on a topic and then again after instruction to see what students knew prior to instruction and what they learned. Figure 7.2 provides a sample opinionnaire that teachers could use to determine the level of students' background knowledge on a health lesson on nutrition before reading a text on health or discussing the topic. Students would answer the opinionnaire individually, then discuss their answers in pairs, and finally discuss with the entire class. This exercise, which can be used with all students, would allow teachers to see how much background individual ELs have on the topic without singling them out. To ensure ELs of varying proficiency levels can respond to the opinionnaire, you will need to write statements in a way so that they will be linguistically accessible to ELs. In addition, you may need to add scaffolds, such as glossaries in English or the home language, so that ELs can fully engage with opinionnaires.

FIGURE 7.2 Health Lesson Opinionnaire Example

Before Reading		Statement	After Reading	
Yes	No	1. I am active, so the kinds of food I eat do not matter.	Yes	No
Yes	No	2. Taste is more important than nutrition.	Yes	No
Yes	No	3. The government should limit the size of junk food and soda containers.	Yes	No
Yes	No	4. It's reasonable to exercise for thirty minutes a day.	Yes	No

Step 2: How Do I Decide How Much Background Knowledge to Provide to ELs?

When trying to decide how much background knowledge to teach ELs, it's important to first figure out how critical the background knowledge is to ELs' understanding of the topic or text. This is the area that is the biggest

departure from traditional thinking on ELs' background knowledge and can be the most challenging for teachers to change their practice. Fisher et al. (2012) note that *core background knowledge* is what students need to understand the new information to be learned. They contrast core knowledge with *incidental knowledge*, which is knowledge that is merely interesting and not likely to be used or recalled in the future. We refer to the background knowledge that is needed as *essential*. When you're considering preteaching some background about a text your ELs will be working with or a topic they will be discussing, use the following table and flowchart to help you decide whether knowledge fits into the essential category. Figure 7.3 provides considerations for determining which background knowledge to teach. Some of the considerations are applicable to ELs as well as non-ELs, and we point this information out in the final column of the table.

Since it's often helpful for us to see concepts presented visually, we have developed a flowchart to help you determine which background knowledge to teach ELs. While Figure 7.4 presents the four considerations from Figure 7.3 in a flowchart, you can adapt the flowchart to meet your needs.

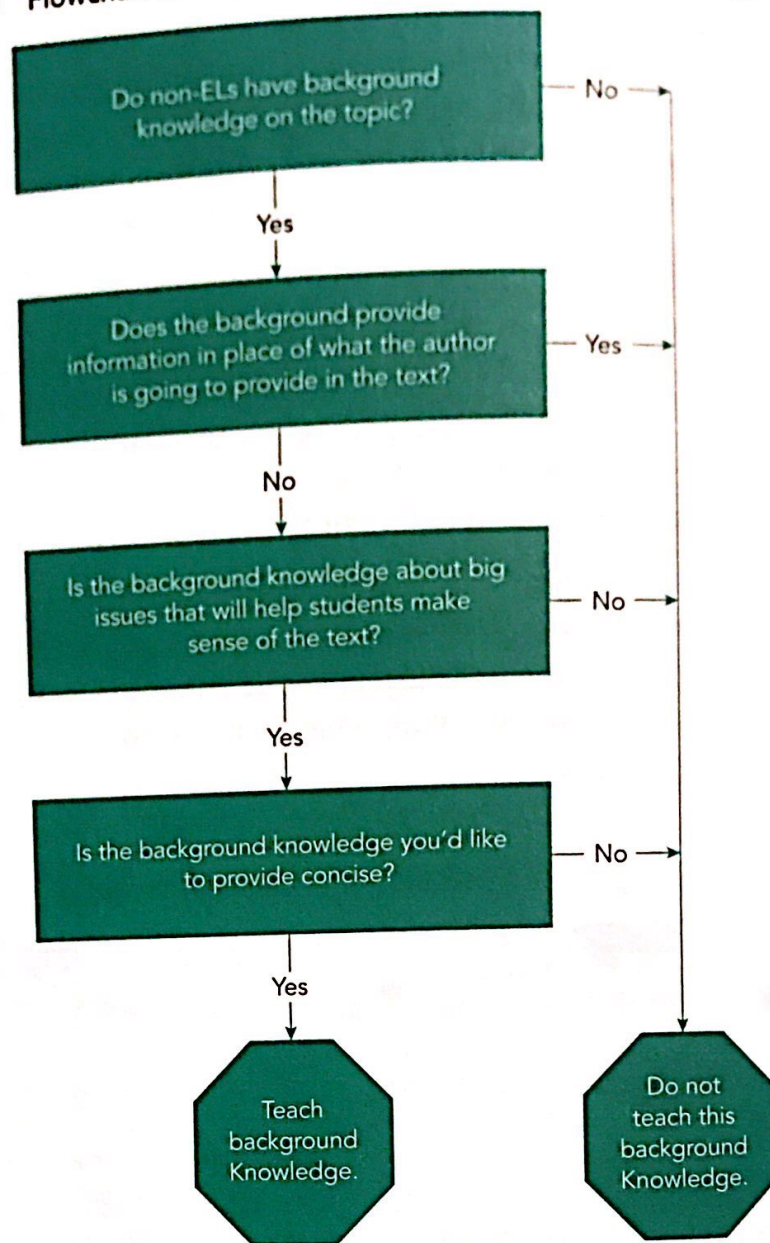
These tools build upon Diane August's Common Core work in New York State.

FIGURE 7.3 Determining Which Background Knowledge to Teach ELs

Background Consideration	Comments	Applicable to ELs or ELs and non-ELs
1. Do non-ELs have background knowledge on the topic?	Teachers must ensure that ELs approach the text with comparable levels of background knowledge that non-ELs already have. If non-ELs already approach the text with certain background knowledge, teachers should make sure ELs have the same information as a matter of equity.	ELs
2. Does the background provide information in place of what the author is going to provide in the text?	The background information provided can't give away the text. (No spoilers!) Students must gather information from the text itself instead of learning it from background knowledge the teacher provides. ELs will still need support and scaffolding to gather information from the text itself.	ELs and non-ELs
3. Is the background knowledge about big issues that will help ELs make sense of the text?	Teachers must focus instruction only on the background knowledge that is critical to ELs comprehending the text. ELs don't need to know everything possible related to the topic. For example, when studying the Gettysburg Address, ELs don't need to be pretaught a full biography of Abraham Lincoln's life but will need to know enough about the big issue of the Civil War that will help them unlock the meaning of the text.	ELs and non-ELs
4. Is the background knowledge you'd like to provide to ELs concise?	The more concise the background information is, the better (e.g., you may wish to reconsider taking an entire class period to build ELs' background knowledge). For example, you could provide some background knowledge via homework that students complete prior to class time and briefly discuss the background the next day of class.	ELs

Source: Adapted from Staehr Fenner (2013b) (Colorincolorado.org/blog).

FIGURE 7.4 Flowchart for Determining Which Background Knowledge to Teach ELs



Source: Adapted from Staehr Fenner (2013b) (Colorincolorado.org/blog).

Step 3: How Do I Activate ELs' Background Knowledge That They Already Possess?

After taking part in Step 2, you may have a few areas of background knowledge you'd like to teach. However, some ELs may actually already have some related background knowledge you can tap into instead of teach outright. Shanahan (2013) outlines two essential areas of background knowledge that teachers can effectively utilize with students. One area is providing background knowledge where none previously exists. Readers need to integrate prior knowledge—when it exists—with text information

FIGURE 7.5 Differences Between Providing Background Knowledge and Activating Existing Prior Knowledge

Type of Background Knowledge	Definition	Examples
Providing background knowledge	Giving students background knowledge that they do not already have on a particular topic or text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing students a visual of Inuit art prior to them engaging in a lesson on the topic • Showing students a video clip on Betsy Ross
Activating background knowledge	Finding out and leveraging pre-existing knowledge on a topic or text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having students discuss what they think the title of a text titled "Hurricane Katrina" means in pairs • Having students write a paragraph in their journals about what they previously learned about the Revolutionary War

in order to form a mental representation or memory. A second area is activating existing prior knowledge. Existing prior knowledge is also a form of background knowledge, and teachers can efficiently draw upon what students already know. For example, teachers can use the title of a text as a springboard to help the students make a connection between the title and their existing knowledge of a topic without giving away the text. Figure 7.5 provides further explanation and examples of the differences between providing background knowledge and activating existing prior knowledge.

Three ways to activate ELs', as well as non-ELs', prior knowledge are through carousel brainstorming, sentence starters, and categorized sticky notes.⁸ There are many other ways as well.

What ways do you activate your ELs' background knowledge?

- **Carousel brainstorming:** On chart paper around the room, have small groups of students respond to a question or statement posed at the top of the paper. These questions or statements should be written at a linguistic level that ELs can use to access their meaning and should represent components of students' upcoming texts. After a short period of time, student groups move on to another piece of chart paper, read what has been written about that topic, and add to or respond to it. You can use these charts and responses as lesson activators because they represent the prior knowledge and current understandings of the group.
- **Sentence starters:** Provide for students a sentence starter or prompt that requires them to complete a sentence or phrase on the topic or text you will be working on. Take this for example: One thing I already

8. Strategies selected and adapted from <http://www.gcasd.org/Downloads/Activating-Strategies.pdf>.

know about _____ is _____. You could post these starters around the room and have students view and discuss each other's sentence starters.

- **Categorized sticky notes:** Give students sticky notes and a question or topic related to the upcoming lesson. For example, when beginning a unit on bees, you can ask students, "What is one thing bees do?" Students respond to the question or topic on their sticky notes and then post their notes on the board, door, wall, or a chart. The space they post their notes to can be divided into positives and negatives, for example, so students will have to categorize their responses. (For example, the sticky note with "Bees give us honey" written on it would go in the "positive" section while the sticky note with "Bees sting" would go in the "negative" section). Students will return to those responses at the end of the lesson to confirm, revise, or add to their thinking and may need to move their sticky notes.

Step 4: What Are Some Strategies for Concisely Teaching ELs Background Knowledge?

After you have determined which background knowledge ELs already have on a topic or text (Step 1), decided which background knowledge is essential (Step 2), and activated ELs' prior background knowledge (Step 3), it is now time to focus on concisely teaching any new background knowledge that is necessary for ELs (Step 4). There are several strategies for teaching background knowledge (August, Staehr Fenner, & Snyder, 2014), which include the following:

1. Short, teacher-developed text, with guiding and supplementary questions
2. Web link (in English or home language)
3. Brief video clips or visuals
4. Text-based instruction
5. Home language support (e.g., text, Web link, or video)

Background knowledge instruction can be pretaught, or it can be embedded into instruction. How much background knowledge you teach depends on the amount of instruction that is needed, students' English language proficiency levels, and your lesson objectives. It's important to consider how to make the most out of limited instructional time and how to teach background knowledge concisely. Some ways to teach background

knowledge to ELs that do not interrupt class time are for ESOL teachers to teach it during a stand-alone ESOL class or to assign it for homework prior to all students working with the content in the content teacher's classroom. This approach will require collaboration between content and ESOL teachers. Another option that we've seen work well with ELs is to hold a "lunch bunch" meeting for ELs in which they bring their lunches to the ESOL and/or content teacher, socialize a bit, and also work on a background knowledge lesson. This provides a setting in which ELs can feel safe to ask questions about the background, as well as take risks with the language.