

Teacher Perceptions and Strategies for Activating Prior Knowledge in the Moroccan EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

Departing from the assumptions that reading in a second language presents many difficulties and challenges that what EFL learners bring to text is more important than what they get from it, and that prior knowledge activation plays a significant role in learners' comprehension of texts in a foreign language, this study sets off to first examine Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation. Second, investigate the frequency with which Moroccan EFL teachers activate students' prior knowledge. Third, unveil some benefits brought about by prior knowledge activation and some constraints that may hinder the process of activating students' schemata, and fourth to examine the influence of the participants' internal and external factors on the frequency with which they activate their students' schemata. To this end, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was utilized. Quantitative data was obtained from a convenience sample of N=136 Moroccan EFL teachers, whereas qualitative data was obtained from a purposive sample of N=10 participants using semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation though they encounter many difficulties while activating learners' schemata. The findings also revealed that there is a statistically significant positive, though moderate, association between the participants' internal and external variables and the frequency with which they activate learners' schemata. However, when examining individual relationships between predictor and outcome variables, the results indicated that not all predictor variables were found to influence Moroccan EFL teachers' tendency to activate learners' schemata.

Keywords: *Prior Knowledge Activation, EFL Reading Comprehension, Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods, Moroccan EFL Teachers*

INTRODUCTION

The role that prior knowledge plays in reading comprehension has been widely discussed in the literature (Rumelthart, 1980; Carrel & Eisterhold, 1988; Carrel, 1988b; Abraham, 2002; Carrel & Floyd, 1987; AL-Issa, 2006; AL-Jahwari & AL-Humaidi, 2015; Siddiek & Alfaki, 2013; Recht & Laslie, 1988; Priebe et al., 2012). prior knowledge facilitates learners' understanding and increases their engagement with the text by allowing the them to relate the text to their real lives. This study, therefore, adopts an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to 1) explore and investigate Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation, 2) investigate the frequency with which Moroccan EFL teachers activate students' prior knowledge, 3) unveils some benefits brought about by prior knowledge activation and some constraints that may hinder the process of activating students' schemata and 4) examine the influence of the participants' internal and external factors on the frequency with which they activate their students' schemata.

This chapter is structured as follows: the first section is an introduction of the chapter. Section two discusses Moroccan EFL reasons and rationale behind using reading comprehension strategies. The third section presents the overall attitudes of the participants towards activating students' schemata. Section four unveils the importance

and benefits brought about by activating students' prior knowledge. Section five is mainly about the instructional strategies employed by Moroccan EFL teachers to activate students' schemata. The sixth section presents some constraints/barriers that may potentially hinder Moroccan EFL teachers from activating students' schemata. Section seven examines some internal (age, gender) and external factors (educational level) that may positively or negatively influence Moroccan EFL teachers' frequency of activating students' prior knowledge. Section eight relates research findings to research questions and the last section is a general conclusion of the chapter.

Participants' Rationale for using Reading Comprehension strategies

Moroccan EFL teachers use different reading comprehension strategies for different reasons. This section explores the Moroccan EFL teachers' rationale and reasons as why they use these strategies (Abdallaoui, 2001; El Aouri, 2021).

The thematic analysis of the open-ended question regarding Moroccan EFL teachers' rationale behind using different reading comprehension strategies has resulted in the themes listed below:

Table 1

Moroccan EFL teachers' rationale for using different reading comprehension strategies

Theme	Frequency
Facilitate Understanding	5
Make students lifelong readers	4
Make students autonomous readers	4

The findings in the table above show that Moroccan EFL teachers use different reading comprehension strategies to facilitate understanding and increase the students' engagement with the text. Additionally, another reason as why Moroccan EFL teachers employ different reading strategies is to make learners lifelong and autonomous readers. Importantly, learners' training and autonomy has been widely discussed in ELT field in Morocco. Training students on how to use different strategies will allow them to transfer these strategies to their real lives outside the classroom and ideally continue reading for their lifetime. This finding largely supports the findings of previous research (Rose, 2006; Maingi, 2007; Friesen & Haigh, 2018; Labiod, 2007; Krashen, 2004)

Participants' Overall Attitudes towards Activating Students' Prior Knowledge

Moroccan EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards Students' Prior Knowledge Activation

To investigate Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation, it seems interesting to start with the following two hypotheses:

H₀: Moroccan EFL teachers hold negative attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation.

H₁: Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation.

The findings indicate that Moroccan EFL teachers have positive attitudes and perceptions towards activating students' prior knowledge in reading comprehension. These positive perceptions are largely reflected in the following word cloud.



Figure 1

Word cloud generated by Moroccan EFL teachers' descriptions of the Prior Knowledge Activation

The findings in the word cloud above indicate that Moroccan EFL teachers have developed very positive attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation in reading comprehension. These positive attitudes are reflected in the use of only positive adjectives to talk and describe the importance of prior knowledge activation. Relatedly, research participants assert that activating students' prior knowledge and schemata is important, necessary, engaging, crucial, essential, meaningful, fruitful and engaging. Put slightly different, Moroccan EFL teachers believe that activating students' schemata is an important and essential phase in every and each reading comprehension lesson, as it facilitates students' understanding and significantly increases their engagement with the lesson. The use of only positive adjectives to talk about and describe students' prior knowledge activation indicates that Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards activating students' schemata are highly positive. This finding is in line with previous research (Abraham, 2002; AL-Issa, 2006; AL-Jahwari & AL-Humaidi, 2015).

The fact that Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards activating students' prior knowledge and the facilitating role it plays in reading comprehension lessons is further confirmed by the following figure :

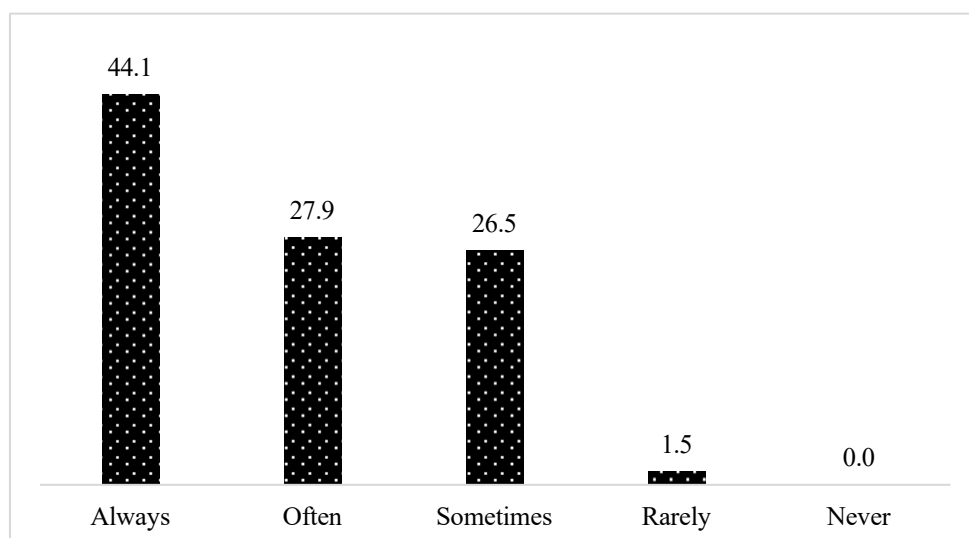


Figure 2

The Frequency of Activating Students' Prior Knowledge by Moroccan EFL Teachers

The findings in the figure above further confirm the assumption that Moroccan EFL hold positive attitudes

towards activating students' prior knowledge and schemata, which, therefore, confirms H_1 that asserts that Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards students' prior knowledge activation. Relatedly, a large proportion of Moroccan EFL teachers (44.1%) indicates that they always activate their students' prior knowledge and schemata. Additionally, more than 27% of Moroccan EFL teachers assert that they often activate their students' schemata and prior knowledge. While only a small to nonexistent proportion of the participants (1.5% and 0%) indicates that they rarely or never activate students' prior knowledge. Interestingly, the findings in the figure above indicate that the majority of Moroccan EFL teachers frequently activate their students' prior knowledge. One plausible explanatory basis for this could be the fact activating students' prior knowledge 1) facilitates the teaching of reading and 2) makes the session meaningful and 3) increases the students' engagement with the text.

Moroccan EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards Activating Students' Prior Knowledge : Qualitative Data

Open ended questions both in the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews have provided a wealth of information regarding Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards the role of activating students' prior knowledge in reading comprehension. The thematic analysis of the participants' responses has resulted in the emergence of the themes listed below:

Table 2

Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards the importance of activating students' Prior Knowledge

Theme	Frequency
Important	6
Brings Familiarity	5
Connecting	4
Facilitating	3
Engaging	3

The thematic analysis of the participants' responses lends further support to the findings obtained in the previous session regarding Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes towards the role of prior knowledge while teaching reading comprehension. Put slightly different, the findings indicate that the participants believe indeed in the importance of activating students' schemata.

The First emerging theme from the participants' responses is that prior knowledge activation is profoundly important. Moroccan EFL teachers attach huge importance to prior knowledge and believe that this technique allows for deeper understanding of the text.

The second theme that has come up from the thematic analysis of the participants' regarding prior knowledge is Familiarity. To put it differently, Moroccan EFL teachers assert that activating students' prior knowledge and knowledge of the world brings familiarity and makes the text accessible and familiar, which maximizes learners' gains from the text.

Another important theme that has emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses is that prior knowledge activation is connecting. In other words, Moroccan EFL teachers place huge importance on prior knowledge activation as they believe that it enables learners to make connections between what they read and learn in class and their real lives. The ability to connect class content to the outside world makes the lesson meaningful and engaging for the learners.

The fourth and fifth themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the participants' responses is that prior knowledge activation is facilitating and engaging. To put it slightly different, Moroccan EFL teachers assert that activating students' prior knowledge is profoundly important as it brings familiarity to the text in such a way that it facilitates students' engagement and interaction with the text, and ideally, increases what students gain from the reading text.

The first question of this study concerns Moroccan EFL teachers' perceptions towards the role of activating students' prior knowledge in reading comprehension. The findings obtained quantitatively through the questionnaire and qualitatively through interviews have clearly demonstrated that Moroccan EFL teachers have positive attitudes and are aware of the importance of activating students' prior knowledge. The positive attitudes held by the participants is largely demonstrated by the high frequency with which they activate their students' prior knowledge and also by the purely positive adjectives they used to describe the importance of students' prior knowledge. Additionally, this assumption is further confirmed by the quotes from the participants in which they all clearly have indicated that activating students' knowledge is important, crucial and/ or even necessary. The following section will delve into some of the benefits that Moroccan EFL teachers believe activating students' prior knowledge brings about.

The Importance of Activating Students' Background Knowledge

The Benefits of Activating Students' Prior Knowledge

Moroccan EFL teachers attach huge importance to activating students' prior knowledge.

One possible explanation for this could be the fact that they believe that activating students' schemata results in enormous benefits and advantages as shown in the following figures

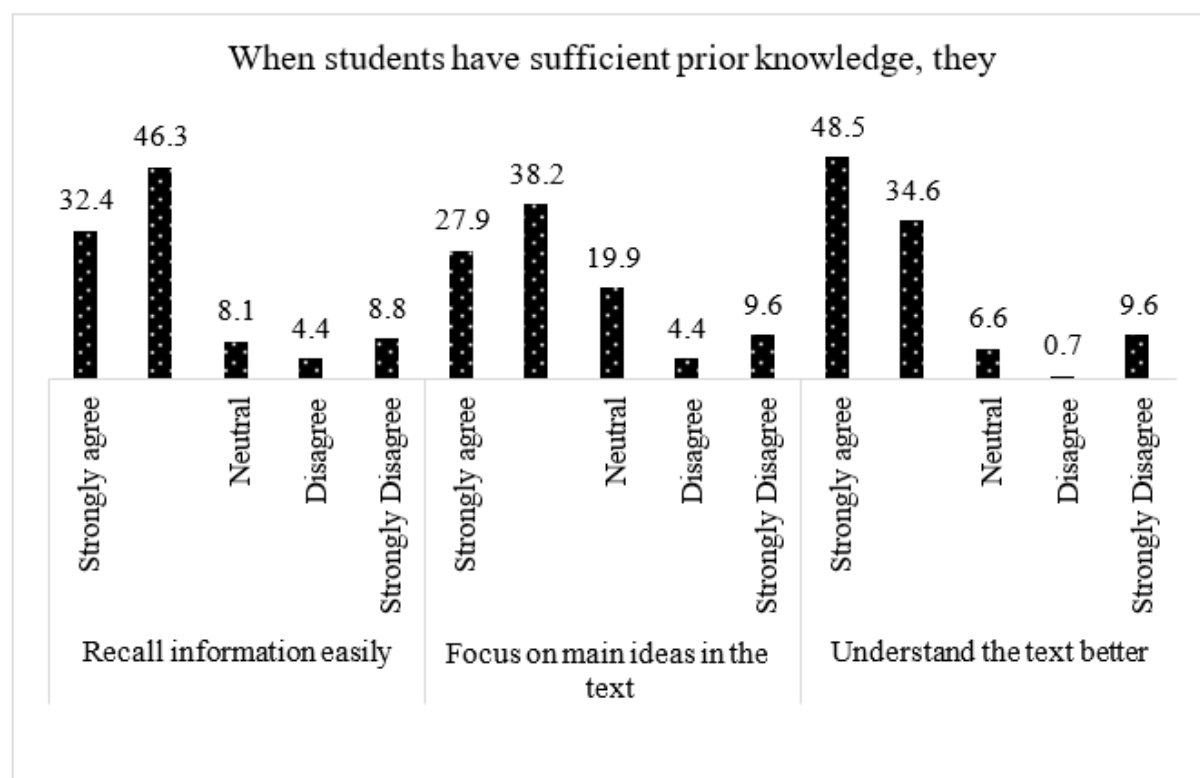


Figure 3

Other benefits brought about by activating students' Schemata

The figure above further unveils the enormous gains associated with activating learners' schemata. One obvious benefit brought about by equipping students with enough prior knowledge is overcoming their limited linguistic knowledge. Put slightly different, having enough prior knowledge allows learners to compensate for their insufficient linguistic knowledge. Relatedly, a total of 41% of Moroccan EFL teachers assert that having enough background knowledge enables the students to overcome their limited linguistic ability. Similarly, the majority of the participants agree and/strongly agree (46,3% and 31,6% respectively) that learners can easily predict the content of the text when they have sufficient prior knowledge. Another important reason why activating learners' prior knowledge is important lies in the fact that having sufficient prior knowledge enables learners to relate the content of the text to their real lives, which makes it a meaningful task for them. Conveniently, a large proportion of Moroccan EFL teachers (42.6%) agrees and/or strongly agrees (38,2%) that having sufficient background

knowledge allows students to relate and transfer what they have learned in the text to their everyday lives. Finally, the participants indicate that having

adequate prior knowledge allows participants to read the text with apparent ease. Relatedly, over 30% of the participants indicate that having sufficient background knowledge significantly increases the students' ability to read the text quickly and easily.

Fostering students' understanding through Activating Prior Knowledge

To foster students' comprehension and increase their engagement with the text, Moroccan EFL teachers are invited to activate students' prior knowledge and identify when prior knowledge is missing/absent and equip the students with sufficient and accurate prior knowledge that will enable them to fully engage with the text. The figures below delve into Moroccan EFL teachers' attitudes regarding the importance of prior knowledge activation and the crucial role EFL teachers are invited to play to activate students' prior knowledge and, ideally, foster the learners' understanding:

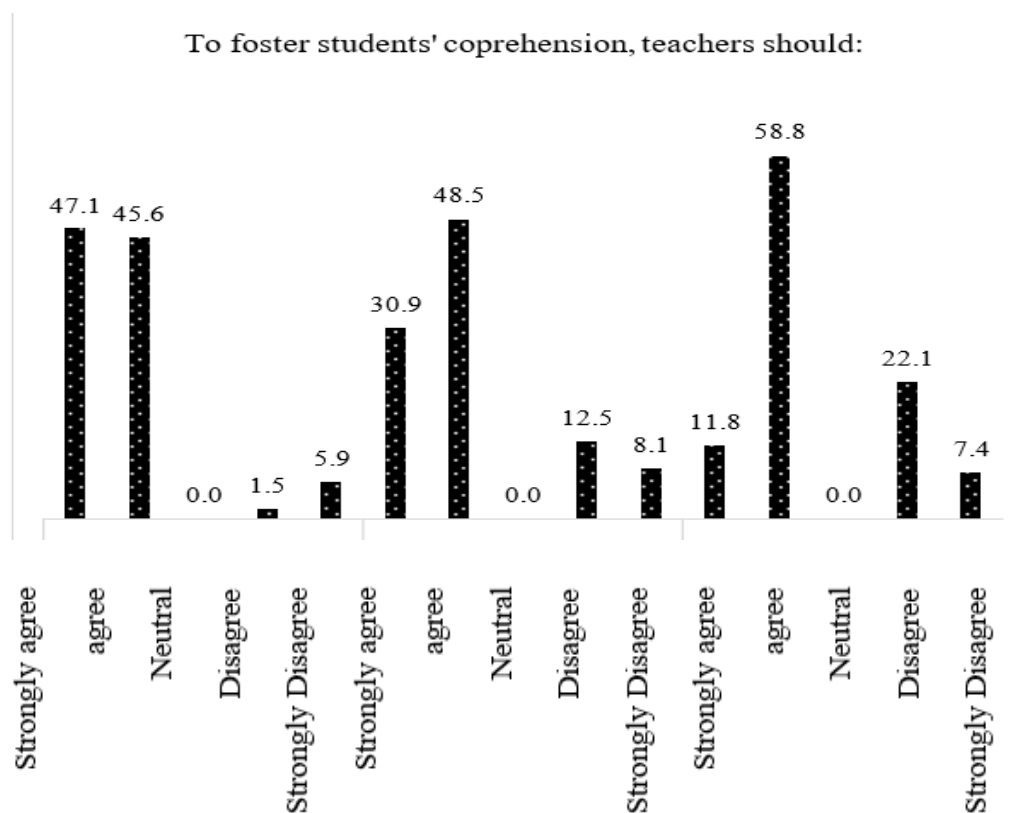


Figure 4

Fostering students' understanding through activating students' prior knowledge

The findings in the figure above indicate that Moroccan EFL teachers are well aware of the importance of activating students' prior knowledge. Relatedly, a large proportion of the participants agrees and/or strongly agrees (45,6% and 47,1% respectively) that teachers should activate students' prior knowledge to foster their comprehension. Similarly, over 40% and 30% of the participants agree and/or strongly agree that students' understanding is fostered when EFL teachers provide their students with sufficient and accurate prior knowledge. Equally important, over 58% of the total participants agree that EFL teachers should identify gaps in students' prior knowledge and then equip them with sufficient knowledge of the world. They believe that being aware of the absence of prior knowledge and offering students with the missing knowledge significantly increases their comprehension of the text.

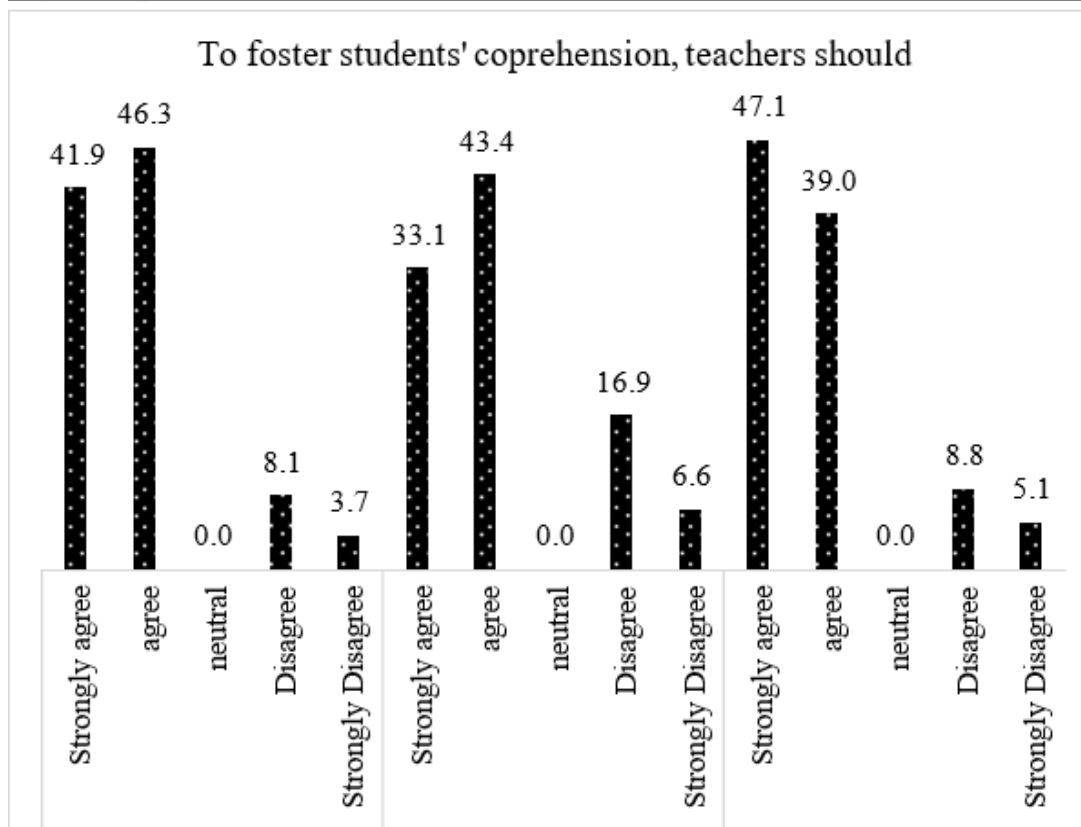


Figure 5

Increasing students' comprehension through prior knowledge activation

The findings in the figure above further stress the importance of activating students' prior knowledge and the crucial role EFL teachers should play to activate and provide students with sufficient and accurate prior knowledge. Conveniently, a total of 46,3% agree and 41,9 strongly agree that to foster students' understanding, EFL teachers should elicit background information related to the topic of the text. Similarly, over 43,4% of the participants assert that encouraging the students to summarize what they have read fosters their understanding and maximizes what they gain from the text. Finally, the majority of Moroccan EFL teachers strongly agrees (over 47%) that EFL teachers should constantly and consistently ask questions before, while and after the reading. In other words, they believe that raising questions in such a way that identifies where knowledge is needed and providing the missing knowledge increases their engagement with the text and, ideally, fosters their understanding.

CONCLUSION

This chapter investigated an important aspect of reading comprehension, namely, students' prior knowledge. Put differently, the chapter explored and investigated Moroccan EFL teachers' perceptions towards activating students' prior knowledge and schemata, the benefits prior knowledge activation brings about and the constraints that may potentially hinder the process of activating students' schemata. Equally important, this chapter examined the association, if any, between participants' internal factors such as gender, age and external factors such as participants' educational background and activating students' schemata.

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Moroccan EFL teachers' frequency of activating students' prior knowledge. Section eight related research findings to questions and the last section was a general conclusion of the chapter.

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