

**THE INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE OF LEARNERS ON
READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN
KISUMU NORTH IN KISUMU COUNTY, KENYA**



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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to investigate the influence of background knowledge of learners on reading comprehension ability in secondary schools. The objectives of this study were to: establish if learners relate their background knowledge to what they read; find out the reading strategies learners employ in the reading process and determine the challenges learners experience in the reading process that hinder comprehension. Learners of English as a second language (L2) experience difficulties understanding what they read in terms of language and cultural settings. If students do not understand what they read, they will struggle to cope with the demand for reading in all academic disciplines. Students therefore need to activate their background knowledge for effective comprehension. This study was guided by the schema theory as advanced by psychologist Frederic, C. Bartlett and Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive learning. This study was a descriptive survey focusing on Form three secondary school learners in Kisumu North in Kisumu County in Kenya. Two hundred and fifty six students were sampled through systematic random sampling from a population of 855 Form three students from all the 16 secondary schools in the district in order to arrive at the sample population. Data was collected by means of classroom observation, which was aided with a tape recorder and a self administered student's questionnaire. The data collected was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics, which included frequency and percentages and was presented in tables, graphs and charts. Data from the observation schedule was analyzed qualitatively and described thematically in areas defined by the objectives. Data analysis revealed that learners' background knowledge of the topic and subject matter enhanced comprehension ability; however, the learners' poor command of the English language hindered their comprehension ability. It was also found that lack of using appropriate reading strategies and minimal instruction on how to activate background knowledge to learners hindered effective comprehension. From the analysis and interpretation of the findings, the study concluded that background knowledge (schemata) and reading strategies had significant influence on reading comprehension ability. The study recommends that since learners have different schemata, instruction should be given to activate background knowledge in all areas (language, content and formal), before embarking on the reading process. Appropriate reading strategies should be emphasized to enable learners activate relevant schemata and consequently act as a motivation by giving them a purpose to read. The study also recommends that learners need to build their schemata by reading extensively in order to familiarize themselves with different text types and a variety of language.