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Elementary school students ability to activate related concepts in a domain predicts domain-based inferential reading comprehension

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Abstract

The ability to make inferences has been identified as crucial for reading comprehension; yet, the mechanisms supporting such inferences remain poorly understood. We propose that the activation of related concepts in semantic memory supports the ability to make inferences, including in the context of reading comprehension. Consistent with this hypothesis, 2nd- and 3rd-grade students who more strongly co-activated related concepts in a domain (i.e., were more likely to notice the presence of related distractors when searching for a target) showed better inferential comprehension of written passages in that domain. This predictive relation was found across three different domains (natural kinds, music, and sports), and when controlling for individual differences in co-activation of concepts in a control, unrelated domain. We will discuss the implications of these results for contemporary accounts of reading comprehension and for designing effective interventions aimed at improving reading comprehension, a key ability in academic contexts.