# The Effect Of Prior Knowledge On Teaching International History: An Empirical Case Study In UK Higher Education

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*The research methodology includes the findings from an open-ended questionnaire distributed to the students at the end of the academic year 2014-2015. The paper presents a variety of strategies employed in order to assess, activate or deal with insufficient prior knowledge, with the findings validating that the use of discussion, in-classroom, and out-of-classroom activities can help the teacher assess, activate, or deal with insufficient prior knowledge.*

*The research reveals that due to their different educational backgrounds, students in UK Higher Education often have insufficient or even inaccurate prior historical knowledge and a limited perspective on examining international history. In particular, European students face significant difficulties with the period before the French Revolution, while non-European students feel that the international history curriculum is excessively Eurocentric, and they would welcome the examination of history from different standpoints. In sum, the paper offers suggestions for the enhancement of international history teaching in higher education through assessing, stimulating or challenging prior knowledge, and through the encouragement of viewing historical issues from multiple perspectives.*

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## Introduction

Prior knowledge is considered as one of the most critical elements in the learning process. According to Ausubel, 'the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly' (Ausbel, 1968, p.127). The teacher should encourage the students to reflect on their prior knowledge. This can be achieved through a method of student-oriented teaching of a small group where the students can engage into dialogue stimulated by 'a series of 'thought' questions' (Pressley, Wood, Woloshyn, Martin, King and Menke, 1992, p. 105). Further, the existence of a strong link between prior knowledge and interest means that the use of stimulating materials can also help the students recall what they already know (Tobias, 1994, p. 37; Wade, Schraw, Buxton, Hayes, 1991). On the other hand, prior knowledge can hinder the learning process, since it can be inactive,

insufficient, inappropriate or inaccurate (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman, 2010, pp. 13-14).

The notion of prior knowledge is much more important in teaching history, particularly in a diverse and multicultural learning environment as in the United Kingdom [UK] Higher Education System. Indeed, students come from various education systems that focus on different historical periods and regions. Moreover, national education systems usually are mono-cultural and ethnocentric in their history teaching (Virta, 2009, pp. 285-287), leading to the students having a limited perspective or even inaccurate prior knowledge. On the other hand, the same danger is looming over the UK Higher Education System, which needs to avoid adopting a monolithically Western-oriented approach to international history teaching. In order to address this issue, the Council of Europe published a study in 2003, suggesting that history teaching should be more 'multiperspectival and less monocultural, exclusive and universalistic' (Stradling, 2003, 59). Yet, interculturalism in history education should not be interpreted as simply 'covering multiple cultures'. Instead, it should focus on 'working through a dialogue between cultures', and ensure that 'students can carry out a critical dialogue with others, regardless of who they are' (Lee, 2006, p. 210).

**The study**

The aim of present study is to assess the effect of prior knowledge on teaching international history in a multicultural learning environment. It was conducted as part of the Enhancing Academic Practice (EAP) module at King's College Learning Institute. The paper reflects on my experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the module 'International History' during the academic year 2014–2015. The module was part of the first year Bachelor degree in International Relations, offered by the Department of War Studies, at King's College London. The main learning objective of the teaching was to help the students understand the historical origins and the evolution of the international system and of the global power structures, from the 1648 Westphalia treaty until 2001. My role as a seminar tutor was to lead two seminar groups of around 15 students each. The groups met weekly for one hour, discussing the topic delivered previously by the lecturer.

In addition to drawing upon my experience during teaching, the findings of this paper are also based on empirical data. At the end of the year, I distributed to my students a three-page questionnaire that comprised of open-ended questions. The questionnaire had three main parts, which correspond to the three main parts of this paper. In the first part, I will describe the methods I used in order to discover the prior knowledge of my students. In the second part, I will present the strategies I employed in order to stimulate prior knowledge, improve insufficient knowledge or challenge inaccurate assumptions. And, in the final part, I will conclude by offering recommendations for the enhancement of international history teaching.

**Assessing prior knowledge**

The effort to discern the prior knowledge of my students was constant throughout the year. This section is divided according to the methods that I used, and in each section I will also present my findings. First, we will examine the most common method employed, the discussion during the seminars. The second method involved two interactive activities in classroom. Those aimed in creating a safe environment in which the students could anonymously express what they already knew on the subject. The final but most formal method was the questionnaire that I administered to the students, designed to explore their previous educational experiences.

**Discussion**

During the seminar of 27th November 2014, a vibrant discussion took place. The seminar topic was the 19th Century Vienna System which was imposed after the defeat of Napoleon. One of my students, who had completed her secondary education in Qatar, complained that the course evolved too much around Europe. Her exact words were that the module 'is called History of the International System and not History of Europe'. In contrast, she suggested that we should switch our attention also to Africa, the Middle East and China. My first course of action was to offer her my copy of *The Cambridge History of Africa,* a fundamental textbook in academic literature, in order to further her knowledge. Nevertheless, she utterly declined, arguing that since it was published by Cambridge University Press, it would not offer an objective account of the historical events in Africa.

The second example took place in a seminar in which we talked about the Ottoman Empire. I made a brief remark that the Ottoman Empire was considered as relatively tolerant of people of different faiths and, actually, it allowed the peoples under its control to practice their religion, language and education. A Bulgarian student objected to this notion, and argued that the Ottomans were oppressive as she had learned in high school. In addition, she asked my personal view 'as a Greek', since I came from a country which was under Ottoman occupation as well.

The last example was quite interesting. In that case, the issue was not the absence of prior knowledge or the existence of inaccurate beliefs, but quite the opposite. In the seminar in which we discussed nuclear strategy during the Cold War, a British student, who usually was enthusiastic, seemed quite bored. I approached him and asked him if everything was okay. He replied by saying the he had already covered in length this particular period in high school, and was even familiar with complex terms such as 'deterrence', 'Mutually Assured Destruction' and 'first strike capability'.

These cases provide us with three different aspects of how prior knowledge can affect history teaching. In the first example, the student fostered the (in broad terms accurate) belief that the curriculum of Western universities focuses too much on Western ideas and history while promoting the use of Western textbooks (Berman, 1992). As a result, she refused to broaden her knowledge with a book that she considered biased against non-Western people. The second is a classic example of inaccurate prior knowledge. In fact, it can fall into the category of misconception since the stereotype of the Ottoman Empire as not allowing the practice of other religions was deeply instilled in the student during her school years (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, Norman, 2010, pp. 24-25). In the final example, the student's prior knowledge was neither insufficient nor inaccurate. In contrast, he had already achieved the desired level of knowledge during his secondary education, something that rendered his participation in the seminar unnecessary.

**Classroom Activities**

The classroom activities that I employed in order to assess the prior knowledge of the students fell into two categories, with one being low-tech and the other high-tech. The former was the distribution of post-it notes on which the students could write their ideas anonymously and then stick them on the wall, creating the sparkle for discussion. I applied this method on 25 November, in the seminar about the Napoleonic Wars. I handed over post-it notes to my students and asked them to write any keywords that they would come up with regarding Napoleon and the French Revolution. Then, I told them to stick the notes on the whiteboard while I would remain outside of the classroom in order to preserve anonymity. The students were delighted with that activity and participated wholeheartedly. It was also a very helpful activity for me as a teacher since I discovered that my students had an adequate knowledge of the period. For instance, some posts were words such as The Third Estate, the role of Enlightenment, the fall of

Bastille and the Revolutionary Wars, and they were all accurate terms of the period's historical examination.

The second method involved the use of technology, and in particular the use of 'Poll Everywhere' software, which allows students to vote or post their ideas in real-time on the screen, by using their laptops or mobile phones. I introduced this method to both my seminar groups in March 2015 when we were discussing the End of the Cold War. The module co-ordinator instructed the seminar leaders to ask the students at the beginning of the lecture about when they thought that the Cold War had ended, in order to discover their prior knowledge on the subject. Hence, I created two polls through 'Poll Everywhere' software. In addition to asking when the Cold War ended, I also included a question about the factors that led to the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The activity was a success all along the line and allowed both myself as a seminar tutor and the module coordinator, to whom I e-mailed the response clusters, to discover that the students had an accurate and sufficient knowledge of the period.

**Questionnaire**

The final method I employed was the most formal of the three and was the inclusion in the questionnaire of a section exploring the knowledge that the students had acquired before enrolling in the course. The questions dealt with the previous educational experience of the students by asking which periods and geographical regions they had covered in their high school education. Another question asked them to assess whether the syllabus of the module was linked to their previous knowledge on history, and which areas and periods were new to them. In the second set of questions, where the students were required to assess their current educational experience, they were also asked to mention the difficulties they had faced during the course of the year. Finally, the questionnaire asked the students to mention in which country they had finished high school.

The results were very interesting and unveiled the complexity of the issue of prior knowledge in a multicultural learning environment. The most important result was that non-European students faced significant difficulties in keeping up with the others. A characteristic example was student A5, who argued that 'Nothing I had learnt before was relevant to what I am learning now, all areas are new'. He/she went on stressing the he difficulties faced in 'memorizing European names' and 'European relationships before the 19th century' (presumably between royal houses). Student B7, who had completed high school education in Malaysia wrote that 'history prior to 1900s was new' for him/her as well as the 'in-depth study of certain countries'. Student B10 from Mauritius, considered the syllabus of the module as 'not at all' linked to his/her prior knowledge. In addition, he/she expressed a feeling of lagging behind the others, stating that 'I have no background knowledge of European history, 'Unlike other classmates who already learnt a bit about European history so they can get the whole idea very quickly' (sic).

In contrast, most of the European students felt confident about their prior knowledge of the subjects covered in the seminars. Student B8 from France argued that nothing was entirely new. A Swiss student also argued that the subjects of the course had been 'already covered', as did another Swiss student A8, who said that none of the periods or areas covered was new. Bulgarian student A1 stated that except from US history and the history of Asia and Africa 'everything else was covered but not extensively in my high school education'.

On the other hand, the historical period before the French Revolution that was covered in the first series of lectures, troubled both European and non-European students. Student A11 from Norway argued that 'it was very difficult to keep up in the first weeks as my knowledge of 1600–1800 history was limited'. French student B8 stated that 'everything prior to the 18th century was not

covered in high school, while another French student reported that 'anything from the 17th -19th century was new' and described the first term as 'blurry'. Finally, for student B9 from Mauritius 'Term 1 was completely new', as was history before the 20th century for student A9 from Malaysia.

The final theme revealed by the questionnaires was the ethnocentric character of the national education systems, regarding their history curriculum. That confined students to limited knowledge on other regions through a monolithic perspective on examining history. For example, a student who finished high school in the Russian Federation argued that he/she found it useful examining the other perspective on the Cold War in the module. A French student mentioned that he/she faced difficulties in studying international history since in high school the education 'focused a lot on France'. A very interesting reply came from a Malaysian student who described what they covered in high school by breaking up the themes and providing percentages. According to the reply, they studied 60% Malaysian History, 20% Islamic History, 10% Southeast Asian History and only 10% World History, and that only regarding the inter-war years.

**Teaching Strategies**

As it is apparent, the issue of student prior knowledge poses a great challenge for history teachers. In this section I will present the teaching strategies that I employed in order to activate the prior knowledge of my students, to address insufficient prior knowledge and to correct inaccurate prior knowledge. These strategies can be split into two main categories: in classroom and out of classroom. In addition to my own perception of how I addressed these issues, I will also use the views of my students. The questionnaires that they filled in also asked them to give their opinion of how their seminar tutor activated their prior knowledge or helped them with any unfamiliar aspects or misconceptions regarding historical events.

**In-classroom strategies**
The main tool inside the classroom was discussion. In that direction, the small-group format of the seminars proved extremely helpful, as small-group teaching allows the student to 'think for himself and work on his own' (Hale, 1964, iii). Further, the environment was student-oriented and the seminar tutor could stimulate discussion using 'thought' questions (Pressley, Wood, Woloshyn, Martin, King and Menke, 1992). The students acknowledged that effort, as in the case of student B8 who reported that the tutor made them 'think' about their answers. Another student described the seminars as 'very thought provoking (…) where everyone had to speak and was asked for their opinions which made me interest myself in what I had already studied before'. (sic)

Discussion was extremely helpful when dealing with inaccurate prior knowledge. A good example was the case of the student who had an inaccurate belief about the Ottoman Empire. Instead of simply referring to the established academic view about the relative tolerance of the different religious groups in the Ottoman Empire (Barkley, 2008, pp. 109-110), I attempted to challenge her misconception (Ambrose, Bridges, Di Pietro, Lovett and Norman, 2010, p. 37). I did so by asking her how the different ethnicities under the Ottoman yoke managed to preserve their faith and language, if the Ottoman Empire did not allow their exercise. In general, the student responses validated that challenging their inaccurate knowledge had a positive effect. Student A7 noted that the seminar tutor 'made me question things that had been assumptions for me before [thus] helped me not to see events just as black and white'. Finally, student B10 wrote that 'he [the seminar tutor] won't tell us directly that we are wrong in some ideas. Instead, he would pose new questions and activate our thinking and lead us back to the right direction'.

Discussion also proved extremely useful in activating prior knowledge and furthering knowledge. A common strategy that I used was to ask the students whose knowledge I knew was sufficient and

accurate to explain a topic to the rest of the class. For instance, on 4 December 2014, a student delivered an excellent presentation about the Bismarck Alliance System. In that, he referred to the Prussian class of *Junkers*. Immediately I sensed that many of the students would not be familiar with such as specific term from European history and I asked him to explain what the *Junkers* were. That way, I managed to stimulate his prior knowledge, and, at the same time, help the rest who might not have already possessed the relevant knowledge. This strategy was recognized by student B1, who noted in the questionnaire that the tutor often asked 'people to clarify some things as they had learned them in their countries of origin' and that he 'managed to activate our prior knowledge through brain-storming'. Indeed, this process familiarized the students with different perspectives on the subject, and allowed them to engage into critical discussion with each other (Lee, 2005, p. 210).

The process of brainstorming did not only take place in the form of discussion. In addition, the techniques of post-it notes and Poll Everywhere were used to help me assess my students' prior knowledge and to also activate it. The fact that they could post their answers anonymously alleviated their fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers and allowed them to think freely. For example, the response cluster to the question 'When did the Cold War end' in 'Poll Everywhere' included a variety of different answers. Since there was not a word limit to the answers, the students were able to justify their opinion by using their knowledge on the subject.

The final strategy that I employed was to distribute handouts that linked the previous knowledge of the students to the subject of the seminar. This enabled the new knowledge to 'stick' on what the students already knew (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman, 2010, p. 15). The handouts were usually designed to include a short text and some bullet points, although there was a notable exception in the ones I passed out during the final seminar. At that time, I had to explain to my students the 'End of History' concept, as introduced by Francis Fukuyama who had interpreted history in the terms of Hegel. Since Hegel's ideas were so fundamental and my students were familiar with them, I created an one-page handout by using comic strips to explain the link between Hegel and Fukuyama in a friendly and easy to understand way.

**Out-of-classroom strategies**

The main strategy of this category was to suggest additional material for the students to read when studying at home. The syllabus of the module had predicted that some students might face difficulties regarding their knowledge of the 17th and 18th century history and, in order to help them keep up with the others, it recommended fundamental textbooks such as John Merriman's *A History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present,* or H.M. Scott's, *The Birth of a Great Power System, 1740–1815*. In addition to books, the syllabus suggested a series of videos from lectures on European Civilization of the period 1648–1945 at Yale University. All these sources proved to be an extremely useful point of reference and in fact, I did often recommend them to students who had not studied European history before.

The second strategy was to organise activities outside seminar hours, such as film screening and museum visits, in order to trigger the interest of the students. Indeed, a plethora of studies have proved the link between interest and the stimulation of prior knowledge (Tobias, 1994, 37; Wade, Schraw, Buxton, Hayes, 1991). Further, Tobias argued that interest could facilitate learning by stimulating 'a more emotional, more personal and more extensive network of relevant associations than is invoked by prior knowledge' (Tobias, 1994, p. 50). Husbands showed that museum visits can stimulate learning, since they combine the physical presence of an artifact with the ideas that the students bring into the museum, thus helping them activate their prior knowledge or challenge their misconceptions (Husbands, 2004, pp. 113-114).

As a matter of fact, my experience validated the above theories. On Friday 24 October 2014, I led both the groups on a visit to the Imperial War Museum in London. The museum tour aroused the interest of the students and they were able to connect their knowledge to the artifacts in front of them. My role during the visit was to explain the exhibits and link them to the module. Yet, I also encouraged the students to recall their prior knowledge and also become the tour guides to fellow students. A striking example was a Chinese student who had expressed concern about his lack of knowledge on early modern European history. During the visit at the museum, he took the opportunity at the exhibit of a Japanese Zero fighter aircraft to analyze the Pacific War to the rest of the group in great detail. In contrast to simply recalling his prior knowledge in the classroom, I firmly believe that this activity was indeed a more emotional and personal method. In fact, it also helped him feel part of the group despite his insufficient knowledge of other historical periods.

**Recommendations**

In general, the present study validates that small groups and student-oriented teaching facilitate an accurate assessment of prior knowledge. In addition, discussion and asking thought-provoking questions proved powerful tools in order to activate accurate, or deal with any inaccurate, prior knowledge. Yet, there is still room for improvement regarding the teaching of international history in UK Higher Education. In this section, I will first present the suggestions of the students as expressed in the last part of the questionnaires and then I will present my own recommendations for the future enhancement of the practice.

The major difficulty of the students was that they had insufficient prior knowledge. Thus, it is not a surprise that the two most prevalent demands were first, to make the module less Western-oriented and second to focus less on pre 19th century. To begin with the first suggestion, student B7 clearly stated that the module should be 'less Eurocentric', with the word Eurocentric being in capitals and underlined. This was also the case with student B1 who argued that particularly the first term was very 'Eurocentric' and demanded that ' some lectures on the Middle East and Asia should be added'. Student A1 noted that 'our readings are mainly Western' and that 'it's interesting to see how states in Asia and the Middle East for example viewed the course of history'. Student B10 argued that the 'first term focuses too much on old European history' and described it as 'boring', suggesting to include some Asian history. The second recommendation of the students was to limit the examination of history before the 19th century. A student characterized it as a 'confusing topic and less intellectually stimulating' while another described it as 'not really useful'. Student A9 asked to focus more 'on modern history which is more relevant to IR students'. In the questionnaire the student B9 argued in favor of removing Term 1 completely.

The suggestions of the students as expressed in the questionnaires do make sense, but only to a certain extent. Taking into account the grave insufficiency of prior knowledge that many of them faced during the year, some adjustments can be made to the teaching of international history in order to avoid alienating students from different educational backgrounds. Indeed, the design of the history modules in British higher education could focus less on the western world and include the examination of other regions. A particular example is the period of the Cold War in which the main focus is usually on the two superpowers. The examination can also explore more of the history and attitudes of the 'Third World' countries in which numerous conflicts between the two rival blocks took place.

On the other side, it is important to stress that the examination of different regions and perspectives should not be at the expense of accurate and efficient teaching. For example, the examination of the Great Powers is of paramount importance in order to explain the international system. Indeed, one of the most difficult tasks for a teacher of international history is to decide what to leave out

from a course (Reilly, McNeill, Staviranos, Curtin, Wallerstein, 1985, p. 513). Hence, the design of an international history course should not adopt 'diversity for diversity's sake' but instead, promote 'a dialogue between cultures' (Lee, 2005, pp. 202,210).

The selection of the reading material could play an important role in the teaching of international history. The addition of works by non-Western scholars and of studies that also focus on other regions, such as the Middle East or Africa, could help alleviate any student concerns about the impartiality of history teaching. On the other hand, since the knowledge of certain historical periods and regions is of paramount importance in the learning process, the studying of some fundamental textbooks needs to become mandatory as a preparation before teaching commences.

The final recommendation is that that assessing the prior knowledge of the students at the beginning of the academic year should be a top priority. In the present essay, I presented a variety of strategies that can be used in order to discover what the students already know such as the use of questionnaires, activities and discussion. An accurate assessment of the knowledge of the students can greatly enhance the teaching experience.

**Conclusion**

This empirical study proved the profound effect of prior knowledge on history teaching in a multicultural learning environment. Due to their different educational backgrounds, students in UK Higher Education often have insufficient or even inaccurate prior historical knowledge and a limited perspective on examining international history. In particular, non-European students face significant problems with their knowledge on European history, while the history of the era before the French Revolution seems to trouble European students as well. In order to overcome these issues, the present study demonstrated how discussion, in-classroom, and out-of-classroom activities can help the teacher assess, activate, or deal with insufficient prior knowledge. These strategies, along with the encouragement of viewing historical issues from multiple perspectives, can greatly enhance the learning experience of international history in higher education.

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**Appendix**

**The effect of prior knowledge on teaching history**

**PART A**
**General Information**

1) Age……..

2) Country in which you finished High School ……...……

3) Foreign Languages and Level of Proficiency ……

**PART B**
**Prior Educational Experience**

1) Which periods and geographical areas did you cover in your High School education on history?

2) Do you think that the syllabus of the module is linked to your prior knowledge on history? What areas and periods covered in the lesson were new for you?

**PART C**
**Current Educational Experience**

1) What difficulties in regards to your knowledge on history did you face during the course of the year?

2) How did your seminar tutor help you activate your prior knowledge on history?

3) How did your seminar tutor help you with any unfamiliar aspects or misconceptions about historical events?

**PART D**
**Points for improvement**

1) What improvements would you suggest regarding the content of the course?

2) What else do you think that your seminar tutor could do to help you with any unfamiliar aspects or misconceptions about historical events?