Equitable and Effective Identification and Assessment of Language Learners' Background Knowledge

By Jenifer Crawford and Esther Gross

We define equitable instruction that promotes academic language proficiency for all learners of diverse backgrounds as the interaction between language features and higher-level thinking skills that are embedded in real-world social, cultural, and political contexts. When it comes to the topic of teachers building on students' background knowledge, most of us will readily agree that knowledge matters in learning.

Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of the types of background knowledge that matter and teachers' diagnostic assessments of their students' prior knowledge. In this article, we discuss socio-cultural factors, academic content, linguistic background knowledge, and how to identify and assess each type of knowledge from traditional (teacher-centered), socio-constructivist (learner-centered), and critical (power-centered) perspectives. We conclude with a critical socio-constructivist learner survey tool that can be adapted across ages, proficiency levels, and academic settings.

KNOWLEDGE MATTERS IN LEARNING.

Traditional Language Educators

When it comes to prior knowledge, traditional language teachers value racially and economically dominant (white, upper-middle class in the U.S.) home practices and social values, and Standard target language (Delpit & Dowdy 2008). They believe that prior linguistic knowledge (L1) is irrelevant and interferes with target language learning (L2) (Christiansen & Chater, 2008).

From this approach, teachers review what students know about the language structures of the target language (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) based on standardized assessments, vocabulary and grammar quizzes, essays, and summative unit tests as well as past records (e.g., report cards or transcripts) (Ovando & Combs, 2011). This information is often readily available to language teachers and does not require additional inquiry. Gaps in access to previous and future language learning opportunities are often perpetuated when teachers wrongly assume that learners possess canonical, factual, and technical prior knowledge, or misidentify the necessary prior knowledge that is needed for new learning.

Socio-Constructivist Language Educators

Socio-constructivist teachers tend to draw on communicative approaches, content-based instruction, and task-based language teaching while centering the learner and their knowledge in the language learning process. In contrast to traditional approaches, socio-constructivist language educators place the students—their knowledge, and the ways in which they construct knowledge—at the center of learning (i.e. learner-centered pedagogy) (Ellis, 2008). To that end, teachers believe that prior linguistic knowledge (L1) and target linguistic knowledge (L2 or more) share a common foundation across languages. Research has shown that cross-linguistic transfer can significantly increase student achievements and proficiency in L2 (Cummins, 2013).

Socio-constructivist educators who think critically about the sociocultural context of working-class students highlight and expand the concept of students' prior knowledge—personal interests, experiences, hobbies—to include families' social and cultural histories, household practices, values, and linguistic repertoires which are systematically undervalued in many classrooms. These socio-constructivist language educators who have a critical lean call this array of background knowledge and skills Funds of Knowledge because it is a set of resources that students and teachers can leverage to improve learning outcomes (Moll et al., 1989).

Socio-constructivist teachers develop diagnostic tools to learn not only about their students' technical knowledge of the target language (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) but also to inquire about each language learner's existing Communicative Multilingual Competence (i.e., the ability to communicate for various purposes, in various contexts, and in various languages) and cultural knowledge, their evolving academic knowledge in interdisciplinary subject matter areas, their social-emotional development, learning habits and preferences, life experiences, successes, and challenges as well as their Funds of Knowledge in order to develop their academic language proficiency in two or more languages.

Critical Language Educators

Critical teachers tend to draw on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, translanguaging approaches, and critical literacy practices while centering power and the learner's experience of linguistic and social hierarchs in the language learning process.

In addition to Funds of Knowledge and Communicative Multilingual Competence, critical teachers take into account students' Cultural Capital and Double Consciousness. Cultural Capital refers to linguistic knowledge and skills, content knowledge, and sociocultural competency. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that people of all socioeconomic positions have linguistic knowledge. Moreover, that knowledge is how individuals internalize and transmit key aspects of the social structure. In this way, people's knowledge—specifically linguistic knowledge—reflects their class status and reinforces their greater or lesser access to capital (material and social resources). Double Consciousness means understanding one's self and one's way of knowing and speaking through one's own eyes and through the eyes of others. While Funds of Knowledge and Cultural Capital are both associated with sociocultural and linguistic background knowledge, Cultural Capital is a more complete concept for three reasons.

First, critical language teachers recognize that all learners have sociocultural and linguistic background knowledge, not just minoritized and working-class students. Second, critical language teachers notice the gap between their own dominant sociocultural and linguistic knowledge (or that of the school) and the knowledge of their minoritized and low SES students. Finally, the wider the gap between the students' background knowledge and that of the teacher and/or the school, the more that inequitable opportunities to learn are perpetuated. This is due to the relative sociocultural and linguistic differences between the two bodies of background knowledge, teacher bias, and inequitable institutional resources (e.g., eliminating world language departments, the lack of technology and/or quality textbooks) and policies (e.g., arrest leading to deportation vs suspension for adolescent misbehavior).

Students with a wider gap between their background knowledge and that of the teacher and/or school knowledge are forced to think about the institutional structures and personal bias that relegates and devalues their home knowledge. In schools, racially and linguistically minoritized students whose background knowledge is marginalized often have a sense of always looking at one's self—their way of knowing and speaking—through the eyes of others and often seek to satisfy two unreconciled sociocultural bodies of knowledge and ways of being and learning. Du Bois (1903) calls this *double consciousness* a valuable skill wrought through the necessity of constant negotiation. While double consciousness is a useful lens to understand students' conflicting sources of sociocultural knowledge, Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) use the term *critical multilingual awareness* to highlight students' often competing prior linguistic knowledge. Both concepts illustrate the fact that racially and linguistically minoritized students need to see the world from the perspective of two or more languages at all times, and this experience facilitates students' critical thinking about the sociopolitical context of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge hierarchies perpetuate racial, economic, and linguistic inequities.

Critical language teachers assess the ways in which learners draw on their existing linguistic and socio-political awareness and resources through past multilingual e-portfolios with sociopolitical analysis, problem-solving tasks, and social action measures. This critical assessment provides teachers with information to support their learners to access academic content and develop their language proficiency in both languages in order to develop texts (oral, written, multimodal, etc.) that critique inequities (ranging from individual bias to discriminatory policies or institutional practices) and enact social change. In sum, critical lan-

guage teachers support students as they make sense of new knowledge through their own cultural frames (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Freire, 1993; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Moje, 2007) as well as students' salient everyday experiences (Paris, 2012; Rosa & Flores, 2015).

A Synthesis of Approaches

Language educators who draw from traditional, socio-constructivist, and critical approaches value various types of background knowledge and implement comprehensive diagnostic assessments of students' background knowledge as ways to leverage new

learning and action. They solicit input from students' existing knowledge on personal, social, cultural, linguistic, and political issues to encourage meaningful conversation and dialogue to help develop multilingual communicative competence.

Critical socio-constructivist language teachers may use the following innovative Equitable and Effective Learner Profile Survey that we developed first as language teachers in our own classroom and then with in-service and pre-service language teachers to have a more robust assessment of students' sociocultural, academic/content, and linguistic background knowledge. The instrument is comprised of three parts: sociocultural knowledge, academic content knowledge, and linguistic knowledge from socio-constructivist and critical perspectives.

Equitable and Effective Learner Profile Survey

This survey protocol is a practical tool for ensuring access to equitable and effective language learning for all learners. There are many ways to use this protocol in different contexts with students of different ages and proficiency levels. Here are some suggestions and things to consider:

- **Part or all of the survey:** Use part or all of the survey with your students in one sitting or spread it out over the first weeks of instruction as sponge activities as students come in the room. For example, Opening Community Circle, where you present one question a day.
- **At home or in class:** Students can complete the protocol at home over summer break or during the first couple of weeks of school.
- **For all students or for some:** Rather than distributing the survey to all students, you could select 3 focus students who represent a range of proficiencies or knowledge groups. Then you could either distribute the survey to just these students of interest or ask these students the questions in the protocol in an individual or group conversation during lunch or outside of class time.
- **Language:** Consider scaffolding or modifying the questions to be responsive and comprehensible to your students given their age and language proficiency. The language of the questions can be adapted to simple English. Scaffolding could be

TABLE 1

Approaches to Types and Assessments of Language Learner Background Knowledge

	Type of Background Knowledge Sociocultural = SC, Academic Content = AC, Linguistic = L		Diagnostic Assessment
Traditional	SC	Dominant white, middle class home practices and social values	Standard summative assessments, report cards, past vocabulary, grammar quizzes, essays, and summative unit tests.
	AC	Factual and canonical	
	L	Technical language structures in standard target language only.	
Socio-Constructivist	SC	Socio-emotional skills, social interests, learning habits, and Funds of Knowledge (a-political)	Past Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA), student portfolios with 21st century skills from Project-Based Learning activities.
	AC	A combination of factual and canonical knowledge with content responsive to non-dominant scholars (i.e., ethnic studies)	
	L	Communicative Multilingual Competence	
Critical	SC	Cultural Capital (considers power) Double Consciousness	Past multilingual e-portfolios with sociopolitical analysis, problem-solving, and social action measures.
	AC	Socio-political awareness and action	
	L	Critical Multilingual Awareness	
Equitable & Effective	SC	Socio-emotional skills, social interests, learning habits, Funds of Knowledge, Cultural Capital, and Double Consciousness	Standardized assessments and report cards, past vocabulary and grammar quizzes, essays, and summative unit tests.
	AC	Factual and canonical. Socio-political awareness and social action	Past multilingual e-portfolios with sociopolitical analysis, problem-solving, and social action measures.
	L	Language structures in Standard English and home language(s), Communicative Multilingual Competence, Critical Multilingual Awareness	

provided by giving sentence frames and vocabulary. For example, for the question: "I have opportunities to share my family's stories, customs and experiences," you could allow students time to individually reflect on their response using a sentence frame like: "I share about my family with _____ (people) in _____ (spaces)." Another way is to translate to students' L1s and offer a choice of multiple language versions of the protocol. You could also encourage students to respond to open-ended ques-

tions using the language in which they are most comfortable writing.

- **Low-tech or high-tech:** You can distribute paper copies of the survey or create a digital form (e.g., Google Form) that students can access on a tablet or smartphone using a QR code that hyperlinks key terms. You can also use a free online translation program (e.g., Google Translate) or a dictionary to understand students' written open-ended responses in languages that you do not know and/or have a conversa-

tion with the students using simultaneous translation application (e.g., through the conversation feature in Google Translate).

- **Teacher or student:** The protocol may be completed by the teacher with or without the student during a one-on-one conference or by the student as a self-assessment tool. Teachers can then fill out the same survey to gauge whether their perception of the student's background knowledge matches the student's own perception of his or her background knowledge.

Equitable & Effective Learner Profile Survey

Socio-Cultural Knowledge

I do the following with my family and/or community:	Regularly	Sometimes	Never
I have opportunities to share my family's stories, customs, and experiences			
I read holy book(s) and memorize passages			
I read the newspaper and debate current events together			
I read novels and bedtime stories			
Adults ask me for my opinion and ask questions about what we read together			
Someone in my family grew up in a different country than me.			
People in my family test me or ask me questions they already know the answer to (What is 2+2? What sound does a dog make? How do plants convert sun into energy? Who was our last president?)			
People in my family ask me questions about how I feel or about my opinion			
I go to the library and or museums with my family			
I travel to other cities, states, or countries with my family			
I help my family with their business or work to contribute to my family			
I help my community by volunteering or helping my neighbors			
I attend marches and protests, or I work to change injustices or unfairness in my community (write letters to government officials).			
I think about how my skin color, religion, gender, or culture is similar or different from those of other people			
I think about how adults whose skin color, religion, or culture is different than mine view me			
I act differently when I'm interacting with adults whose skin color, religion, or culture is different than mine			
I like to join my classmates and work in groups *			
I like to work in groups with students who know different languages			

* All questions with an asterick are from Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching.*

	Regularly	Sometime	Never
I don't mind being corrected by other classmates who know better than me*			
I am afraid I will learn their mistakes if I work with other students in class*			
I believe I learn well when I actively participate in classroom conversation*			
I keep quiet in the classroom because that is the way I am expected to behave*			
My teacher gives me opportunities to share what I know and do outside of school in the classroom			
My teacher helps me connect what I know and do outside of school to what we are learning in the classroom			
I use what I already know to learn something new*			
When working with people in my family or community:	**Regularly**	**Sometime**	**Never**
I learn about the land, growing plants, or caring for farm animals			
I learn about how machines work, how to fix vehicles, and how to build things (such as a house or a fence)			
I learn how to sell, buy, and keep track of money and the rules involved with business			
I know how to use plants to make medicine, to do advanced first aid, or how to help people who are sick			
I know how to cook, care for children, keep a budget, or repair appliances in the house			
I know a lot about stories and values from my holy book			

Academic Content Knowledge

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I hesitate to question my teachers because they have superior knowledge*				
I hesitate to disagree with teachers because they have authority in class*				
It is the responsibility of the teachers to transmit knowledge in class*				
I am reluctant to express my views or raise questions in class because of my respect for teachers*				
I learn things that we learn in school at home first				
If I don't understand something at school, I have people in my family who can help me				
If I don't understand something at school, my family will get me a tutor or online support to help me				
I learn best when I hear the information				
I learn best when I see the information with writing, pictures, or subtitles				
I learn best when I create something				
I learn best when I move around and am not seated at my desk				

- The things that I'm most interested in are: _____
- My greatest strength as a learner is: _____
- My greatest challenge as a learner is: _____

- What are some challenges/inequities in your community? _____
- What knowledge and skills do you have that could help you and your peers address these challenges/inequities? _____
- What knowledge and skills do you need to gain in this class to address these challenges/inequities? _____

Linguistic Knowledge

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my family we don't speak English at home				
In my family we speak only English at home				
In my family we speak _____ languages at home (add a number in the blank)				
In my family we joke around or play with the languages we speak in a way that makes me think about the similarities and differences of the languages				
If I speak another language some people may treat me differently				
People in my family have been treated badly when speaking our home language				
If I see someone badly treated because of the language they speak, I say or do something				
I use both languages when reading, writing, or speaking in class				
In class, I sometimes read text in one language and take notes in another language				
In class, I sometimes write my outline or first thoughts in one language and then write my final draft in another language				
I compare the grammar rules of the languages I know				
At home, I mix more than one language during conversations				
At home, we listen to music, read books or magazines, and watch TV in more than one language				
I think in more than one language				
I think all the languages I speak at home are important for my future				
I use my first language knowledge to learn the second language				

Academic Languages Skills

Note: Home language can be one or more of the languages you speak at home or in your community if this is different than the target language or English.

1= I totally disagree

5= I totally agree

	Home Language	Target Language	English
I know the meaning of and how to use all the vocabulary learned in class			
I use grammar correctly when speaking in class			
I comprehend information I hear from my teacher and from the media (e.g., instructions, songs, radio broadcasts, etc.)			
I clearly read text out loud in class with no errors and pauses			
I understand every text I read for class			
I can analyze facts and form my own opinions when I read/hear new information			
I express ideas clearly and fluently when speaking in class			
I express and organize my ideas clearly in writing			
I use correct spelling and punctuation in my writing for class assignments			
I use proper grammar in my writing for class assignments			

The improvements that educators who choose to use these tools can expect to experience better language learning outcomes and a more inclusive classroom climate. We first tried identifying our student's background knowledge as novice language teachers. We asked our students and when appropriate their families, questions to get to know them, their learning goals, and their learning needs. Asking these types of questions challenged the assumptions we had about what, why, and how our students engaged in learning a new language. With this knowledge we could establish a better rapport with our students that led to a more inclusive classroom climate.

We were also able to make our lessons more responsive to our learners. These more responsive lessons supported our students' engagement and investment in class activities and yielded better language learning outcomes. We have developed these initial questions into a more comprehensive tool during the last decade of our work with pre-service and in-service world language teachers who reported experiencing similar positive impacts on student learning and classroom climate.

For example, we use this tool as part of a pre-service teacher education course. Teacher candidates conduct a language learner case study using part or all of the tool through a survey or series of discussions with the entire class. They then select one student to volunteer (minors should have parental consent) to ask follow-up questions about survey responses, such as:

- Can you tell me about a time when …?
- Suppose it were my first day … what would it be like?
- Some people would say X … what would you say to them?
- Would you describe what you think the idea Z would be like?
- Are you finding that Y experience is what you expected?

The teacher candidates also interview the focus student's family or friends when appropriate and then write a plan for how to better support this student's language learning, revising the lesson plan that they intend to use in their placement class to incorporate the whole class and their case study student's background knowledge through scaffolding, differentiation, expanded learning materials and activities, and strategic grouping.

These expanded learning outcomes result from this work because students' background knowledge is leveraged to make language learning more engaging, efficient, and empowering. After using the Equitable & Effective Learner Profile Survey teachers better understand their students' background knowledge. Teachers of language learners should center their lessons around students' lives and language skills using real-life personal, social, cultural, and political knowledge and experiences to encourage a critique of inequitable social structures and to support target and home language development that leads to social action. Ultimately, we hope that using this tool will be the first step for teachers to begin to possess the knowledge, skills, and sensitivity to facilitate students' critique of hierarchies of knowledge and to mediate between the students' culture capital and the traditional dominant school culture and ways of knowing, being, and learning.

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