

# Beginning with Biography Cards: Unlocking Student Potential in Diverse Classrooms

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## Introduction

Racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity characterizes most classrooms today. Some teachers are ill-prepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners because they hold deficit perspectives regarding learners' home languages and their families ([He et al., 2025](#)). Other teachers quickly recognize these identity-rich aspects of learners, yet they do not always know how to create spaces for teaching and learning that are responsive to students' backgrounds and lived experiences. Recent trends toward scripted curriculum often result in only a portion of the class achieving the intended lesson goals, with CLD learners typically underperforming and teachers left wondering what the missing link might be. In short, a monocultural and monolingual view of learners and a narrowed approach to instruction leads to restricted opportunities to learn.

All learners are unique. They bring different family backgrounds, varying levels of access to economic resources, different ways of communicating and interacting, varying home languages, and differing levels of English proficiency across language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Understanding, honoring, and maximizing the diversity in our classrooms is fundamental to supporting *all* our students to succeed. Rather than seeking to minimize difference, effective teachers use learner differences to build up positive, mutually supportive classroom communities and that employ the combined wealth of students' assets and strengths to advance learning. In this article, we illustrate how teachers can arrive at a more holistic understanding of CLD learners and provide tools for discovering their knowledge, skills, and experiential assets to power and personalize instruction.

## Instructional Responses to Learners' Identities

For more than 30 years, educational researchers have provided teachers with equity-centered guidance on how best to maximize the cultures, languages, and literacies of CLD learners. Foundational work by Ladson-Billings (e.g., [Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995](#)), for example, illustrated how culturally relevant pedagogy could be used to foster student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Teachers were encouraged to leverage students' skills toward academic achievement. In a similar vein, Gay (e.g., [2000, 2010](#)) provided educators with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasized “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” ([Gay, 2002](#), p. 106). [Lucas et al. \(2008\)](#) expanded the focus on instructional responsiveness by introducing the term linguistically responsive teaching, emphasizing the need for teachers to meet the needs of multilingual learners. Paris and Alim (e.g., [Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014](#)) then challenged educators to go beyond simply leveraging learners' cultures, languages, and literacy practices to achieve within dominant framings of academic success, such as acquiring English language proficiency. Instead, they urged teachers to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies that seek to “perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” ([Paris, 2012](#), p. 93).

Although sound theory and research exist to guide practice, teachers have long struggled to make the leap from theory to application in classroom implementation ([Khalifa et al., 2016; Young, 2010; Yoon, 2023](#)). Many teachers are unsure of how to be responsive to each learner's unique background, especially given the multitude of races, ethnicities, and languages often represented in classrooms ([Puzio et al., 2017](#)). Herrera ([2010, 2016, 2022](#)) developed Biography-Driven Instruction to address these types of challenges and to provide practical strategies for implementing culturally and linguistically responsive/sustaining teaching effectively.

### **Biography-Driven Instruction**

Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) ([Herrera, 2022](#)) is an instructional framework that supports teachers to identify, leverage, and sustain the knowledge, skills, languages, and literacies that learners bring from their homes, communities, and schooling experiences. During lesson delivery, it involves 1) discovering student assets related to the lesson topic, concepts, or key vocabulary, 2) supporting learners to make connections between these assets and the curriculum, and 3) affirming the gains and growth of individual learners and the collective classroom community. BDI offers more than 20 practical strategies to guide educators to implement the tenets of culturally and linguistically responsive/sustaining teaching. It has been used successfully in both ESL and EFL classrooms (e.g., [Murry et al., 2015; Murry et al., 2017a; Penner-Williams et al., 2019; Vire & Fajardo, 2022](#)). At the core, it involves getting to know students at a deeper, more holistic level.

### **Histories in Your Classroom**

Accelerating students' learning from a culturally and linguistically responsive/sustaining perspective begins with exploring and valuing students' histories. The wealth of assets that students bring enriches our classrooms, creating opportunities for more situated and personalized instruction, meaningful interaction, and instructional talk. The biopsychosocial model, which was first introduced within the medical field, supports educators to consider the multitude of

experiences and factors that influence how learners respond and engage in the classroom ([Herrera, 2022](#)). The learner's biopsychosocial history includes biological, psychological, and sociological aspects. As we build a welcoming, affirming, and supportive learning community, these aspects require us to reflect upon questions such as:

- What are the biological realities of the student (e.g., age, skin color, developmental milestones, physical health)? In what ways has the learner's positionality influenced access to resources, educational opportunities, and others' expectations to date?
- What factors are contributing to the learner's socioemotional state of mind? Is the student psychologically present, or is he or she distracted by tension, stress, or anxiety related to the school, community, or home? How have past experiences nurtured or inhibited students' positive beliefs about themselves and their capabilities as learners?
- What social supports does the learner have in the home, community, or school to foster and sustain their culture and native language? What is the impact of messages sent by the school, community, state, and nation regarding CLD students and families? How might students' interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging influence their classroom interactions?

Seeing, hearing, and valuing the language, knowledge, and skills each learner brings opens up equitable spaces of mutual respect and authentic *cariño* – loving care that encourages, supports, and challenges ([Valenzuela, 1999](#)). In the classroom, it fosters a sense of belonging, promotes an identify-safe environment, and supports development of self-efficacy, which is pivotal for motivation, engagement, and learning ([Ferguson-Sams et al., 2025](#)). As teachers, we must have high expectations for all learners, bearing in mind that every student has assets and aspirations, regardless of the difficulties and challenges that might also shape their histories.

### **Teaching from the Heart**

Culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining teaching requires us to know our students' backgrounds and histories and maximize the different layers of each student's identity. The multidimensional research conducted by Thomas and Collier ([1995, 2002](#)) suggested four dimensions essential to a holistic view of second language learners: sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic. Herrera and colleagues (e.g., [Herrera & Murry, 2005](#); [Herrera et al., 2006](#)) built upon this foundational work to develop the CLD student biography (see Figure 1), which expanded the discussion to include the processes and challenges learners encounter related to each dimension. As illustrated in the figure, the biopsychosocial history of the learner provides the foundation upon which the biography rests. Biography-driven teachers explore each dimension of the learner's biography to identify assets and strengths that can be used to amplify instruction and foster linguistic and academic growth.

The sociocultural dimension of the CLD student biography is at the heart of learner-centered education. Before arriving in our classrooms, students have learned to love and learn within their families and communities. Their ways of knowing and being have been influenced by their interpersonal relationships and interactions. Connecting to students' lives outside the classroom ignites pathways in the brain that are tied to culturally influenced knowledge, memories, skills, beliefs, emotions, and values. Creating learning spaces that honor and leverage students'

sociocultural identities allows them to benefit from their unique lived experiences and those of their peers. When we explore and find ways to incorporate students' sociocultural assets developed in the home (funds of knowledge) and their experiences in the community (prior knowledge), we increase the relevance of the curriculum. This, in turn, fosters learners' motivation to share what they know, make personal connections to the curriculum, and engage in classroom activities.

Our words and language(s) reflected in the linguistic dimension permit us to communicate our culture, experiences, knowledge, and ideas. Learners have already developed communicative structures and the linguistic competencies needed to express thoughts, comprehend language, respond to questions, and react to non-verbal cues based on their cultural and linguistic socialization. These ways of communicating and interacting are situated in the discourse of their families and communities (primary discourse). In biography-driven spaces, students maximize their full expressive repertoire using visuals, the native language, English, and any additional languages they know. Learners then can leverage their existing language and literacy skills toward English language acquisition. Actively listening to and observing students as they interact with peers, produce language, and engage with the content informs us of which types of linguistic scaffolding (e.g., visuals, diverse grouping configurations, native language for clarification or elaboration) will best support their comprehension and language growth. Rather than simply knowing a static score on a proficiency test, this type of contextualized language assessment provides us with meaningful data to inform, enrich, and differentiate our instruction.

The cognitive dimension of the CLD student biography reminds us that students are not only culturally and linguistically diverse, but also diverse in how they know, think, and apply. Every person utilizes unique paths to make sense of new information, develop solutions to problems, and innovate. Our prior experiences and cultural socialization influence how we engage with the curriculum and the schemas we use to interpret and make meaning. Knowing and honoring students' varied ways of thinking allows us to explore alternative perspectives and often stretches us to see the content in new ways. Responsive environments provide students with cognitively demanding activities, along with strategies and tools to scaffold the learning process. When we guide learners to audit their own mental processes and make decisions about strategy use (i.e., develop metacognition), we support them to take control of their learning. Opportunities for peer interaction allow all learners to benefit from multiple ways of applying sociocultural, linguistic, and cognitive resources to achieve learning goals.

Academic success is the ultimate target of our instruction. Often teachers' expectations and beliefs about potential are limited by students' "entry points" based on standardized test scores. By contrast, when using a biography-driven approach, we seek to discover the assets the learner brings and then use them to advance learning and language acquisition. We create supportive conditions that allow learners to build from the known (their background knowledge) to the unknown (the new content and language). We increase students' access, hope, and engagement in our classrooms when we honor their unique starting points and use what they know and produce to make connections, model language and literacy skills, discuss diverse perspectives, and affirm learning. The journey to academic success is less about conveying content and more about supporting students to develop "perceptions of competence and control (*I can*), values and goals (*I want to*), and social connectedness (*I belong*)" ([Herrera, 2022](#), p. 65). When our

instructional practices convey the expectation that *all learners* are knowledgeable and capable, students strive to maximize their potential and together attain higher levels of academic achievement.

### **Biography Cards: A Culturally Responsive Entry Point to Instruction**

Exploring and documenting students' biographies allows us to begin connecting with the learners in our classroom. It communicates that we are interested in knowing who they are as individuals, not just as students. The insights that we gain enable us to respond to their individual needs and validate their assets. With increased understanding of the members of our learning community, we are better equipped to create conditions and contexts that maximize their individual and collective potential throughout the learning process.

CLD student biography cards support us to begin planning, teaching, and assessing from a learner-centered perspective. Biography cards are adaptable tools used by teachers to gather information about each dimension of the learner's biography. Teachers consider what they would like to know and adjust the format and prompts to fit their own classroom needs and contexts. Insights from students, families, and teachers can be added to biography cards throughout the year to capture an increasingly nuanced profile of the learner's sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions. Biography cards provide a holistic view of learners and serve as an easy-to-reference resource when making decisions about grouping configurations, linguistic scaffolds, classroom activities, and learning outcomes. Figure 2 illustrates a sample of creative and interactive biography cards that have been used by teachers in ESL and EFL contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the learners in their classroom communities (Figure 2).

### **Collecting & Leveraging Students' Biographic Information**

As teachers begin to build relationships with students during their first days together, they allow learners to document on their biography cards whatever they feel comfortable sharing. We must remember that trust is developed over time. As learners come to believe that we truly care about them and their learning, they will feel increasingly comfortable to share about their lives.

Providing daily opportunities for students to reflect on, document, and talk about their background knowledge allows us to catch glimpses of their experiences with loved ones and others in the community and larger world. Teachers can also utilize activities such as I Am poems, interviews, and cultural presentations to gain additional details about how students perceive themselves, including their assets and identities. Natural exchanges during instructional conversations and daily interactions nurture our knowledge about the uniqueness of CLD students' biographies.

Question starters to facilitate more focused discussion about students' lives and learning include:

- Can you describe a moment that reminds you of the uniqueness of your family? What are some of your responsibilities or roles at home or in the community?
- How do you and your family use language to interact with each other?

- Can you describe an enjoyable lesson you have experienced? What activities or resources did the teacher use?
- What most helps you to be successful in your learning?

The biographic insights that teachers gain and document on student biography cards then support instructional decisions related to:

- Topics and examples likely to be more relevant to learners
- Students to partner and group together
- Scaffolds to support comprehension, language acquisition, and literacy development
- Student gains to encourage and affirm
- Tasks that will allow learners to demonstrate most effectively what they know and *can* do
- Family knowledge, skills, experiences, and resources that can be maximized to support learning

A focus on students' biographies supports development of writers prepared for college, career, and community (Early, 2019). It also allows teachers to bridge in-school and out-of-school activities to create inclusive mathematics instruction (Store, 2023). Moreover, linking to students' biographies through photography in social studies education has been found to support personalization of rights, responsibilities, and citizenship spaces (Kim et al., 2019). When teachers view student biographies as pivotal to learning, they find creative ways to contextualize instruction in the lives and experiences of learners (Murry et al., 2017b; Wyatt, 2015).

### Conclusion

Knowing and honoring the diverse histories and wealth of assets that students bring to our classrooms expands the possibilities for building relationships and catalyzing learning. Through the four dimensions of their biographies, we find sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic entry points to unlock learners' full potential. The insights we gain allow us to responsively accommodate instruction for our students' individual needs, assets, and realities.

Biography cards are just the beginning. Each day brings new opportunities for learners to share their knowledge and experiences and express the uniqueness of their identities. Future research into student perceptions of the benefits (or unanticipated drawbacks) of sharing about their biographies through biography cards would illuminate implications of using this type of data gathering tool in classroom practice. Such research might also surface additional ways that teachers can gain insights into students' strengths, experiences, and identities. With a deeper understanding of our classroom community, we are better prepared to guide all learners toward increased academic achievement and language development in ways that honor their race, ethnicity, home language, and personal history.

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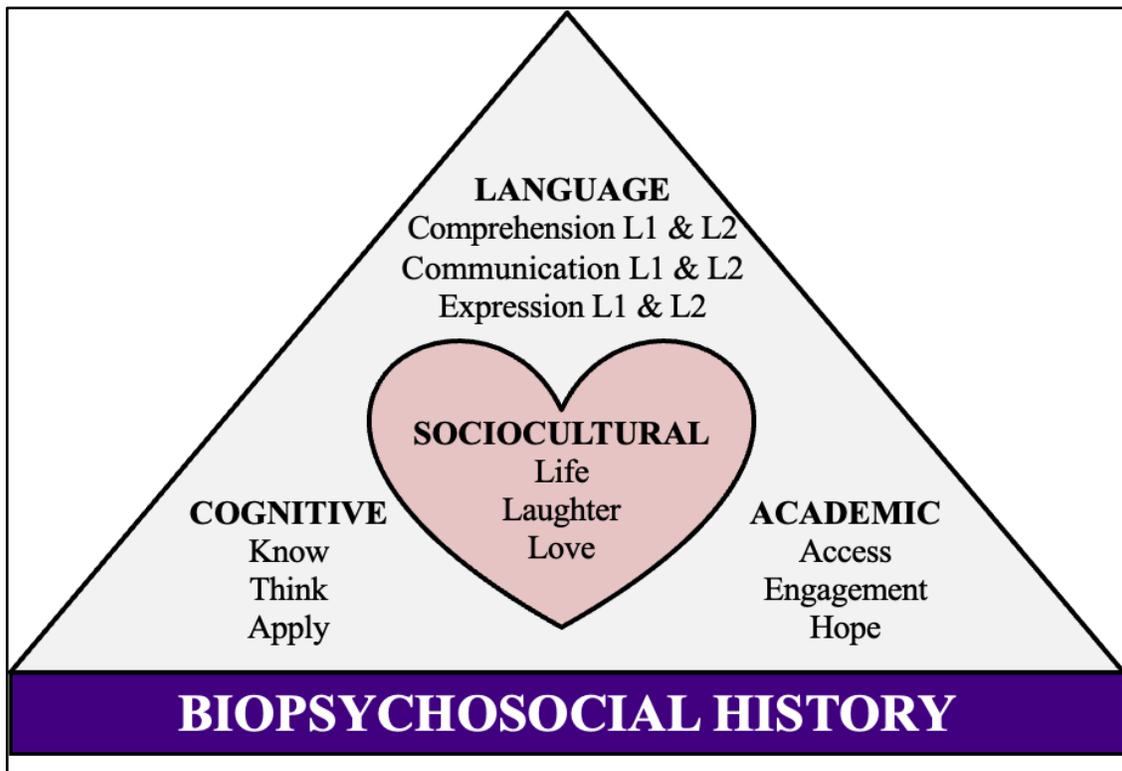
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**Figure 1**

*CLD Student Biography*



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**Figure 2**  
*Sampling of Biography Cards*

	<p>This commonly utilized version of the biography card (Herrera, 2016) was applied in a U.S. elementary school context with CLD learners. It documents students' demographic information and level of language proficiency in L1 and L2. It also elicits information about the four dimensions of learners' biographies, including family/community assets (e.g., immediate and extended family members in the U.S.), preferred cognitive routes for learning (e.g., repeating, verbalizing, doing, songs, and rhythms), academic background (e.g., no formal education), and state of mind related to academic processes (e.g., positive attitude, great participation, commonly engaged).</p>
	<p>This chart version of a biography card was used in a U.S. middle school ESL context. It displays students' demographic information and elicits details related to the four dimensions of their biographies. Students included sociocultural information associated with their interests, identity, and family structures. They also shared their academic backgrounds (e.g., strengths and challenges), learning preferences (e.g., reading, visuals, writing, doing), collaboration preferences (e.g., individual, pairs), and L1 and L2 proficiency levels.</p>
	<p>This mini-book style of biography card was used in an EFL high school classroom in Ecuador. Students were able to provide personal demographic information and details about their home community. They included pictures of family members and wrote about personal interests (e.g., favorite sports/sport player, favorite singer). Learners also included the languages they spoke, their preferences regarding academic subjects, and other skills they were learning.</p>

