

Funds of Knowledge: Language Acquisition Techniques for English Language Learners

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The Funds of Knowledge are a collaboration of findings first mentioned in the journal article called the “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect homes and Class Rooms” by Louis C. Moll, Kathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez. The term “Funds of Knowledge”, or FoK, refers to the “accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992 p. 133). The funds of knowledge are also described as the “responsibility of each teacher to attempt to learn something special about each child they teach” (Lopez, 2010, p. 2). These “funds” are cultural tools that can be discovered in the intimate and familiar settings of cultures, communities, and families where knowledge is acquired through generations and serves as an essential mechanism for the survival of a particular culture.

In order to apply the Funds of Knowledge into the classroom, one must be able to draw from and extract essential cultural information about activities learned from families. FoK helps students become more responsive to classroom lessons and subject matter thus making the material more relatable. For instance, cooking could be considered a learned cultural activity passed down from generation to generation. When utilized in the classroom, the instructor could use familiar cooking techniques shared by ELL students in order to teach the names of different foods in both English and the learner’s home language, assuming students are linguistically homogeneous. When utilizing FoK, one must also be able to bridge the gaps between language, culture, and activities to help students grow inside and outside of the classroom. When applying the funds of knowledge into the classroom the instructor must make essential connections with students and their culture that will help them engage and retain educational material.

Interview:

On September 27, 2021, I interviewed Lulu Pi, an ELL student Doctoral Candidate for the Poole College of Management at North Carolina State University. The interview was

conducted via the online platform Zoom at 5:30 pm and lasted approximately 30 minutes in length with a total of 20 questions asked.

Student Background:

Lulu Pi is a Doctoral Candidate studying economics at North Carolina State University. He is originally from Daye, China and in addition to being a student, Lulu also works as a Teacher's Assistant, for an undergraduate economics class. He has lived in the United States for 3 years now and reports that he visits his family at least once a year. Lulu has a mother, father, and two siblings that currently reside in China. Lulu's hobbies include playing video games, studying mathematics, and traveling. Because of Lulu's full schedule, he does not socialize much and enjoys spending his days at home on his own. After earning his Ph.D., Lulu plans to return to China in hopes of securing a full-time position with a large company as an economic researcher. Lulu also expressed his aspirations of potentially becoming an economics Professor.

Sample Interview Questions:

The interview questions were designed with the goals of FoK in mind and in alignment with discovering, examining, and extracting critical information regarding the subject's learning experiences with his family and home community. Some questions inquiring about Lulu's learning experiences as they relate to FoK include:

“What are some things that your parents know how to do, or like to do when they aren't working? What are their hobbies?”, “What are things that your grandparents, uncles and aunts, and other adult members of your family know how to do? How did they learn these skills? Have you learned these as well?”, and “What are things that you are good at - what do you know all about?”

Description of Student's Funds of Knowledge:

Despite Lulu's self-proclaimed status as “anti-social” and his desire to remain isolated, his body language told a different story revealing his true interest in the interview. As I began the interview, Lulu initially sat hunch in his seat, shoulder slightly sunken forward, and replied with a mild and soft voice making him appear to be withdrawn. As I continued to describe the interview process and purpose, and more specifically, informed Lulu that I would be asking him to tell me about his family and friends, his demeanor changed: he sat up in his seat and leaned in toward the screen, his voice seemed emboldened as it grew in volume and in clarity, and his eyes seemed to hold a new spark. He appeared eager and excited to share his world with me and had no trouble answering questions all about his family, culture, and interests.

When asked, *“What are some things that your parents know how to do, or like to do, when they aren’t working? What are their hobbies?”* Lulu was a bit hesitant at first. He took some time to think back and reflect on his childhood before replying that planting (gardening) was an activity that he and his family used to participate in frequently when he was younger. Lulu continued to explain that there was “not much to do in Daye” but that gardening was a “family activity” enjoyed by all in his family including his parents, his siblings, and himself. Expanding on his response, I inquired if he had found certain parts of gardening particularly interesting or memorable to which he responded “I don’t know” as it was “so long ago.” In moving on to my next question, “what is your favorite activity to do in your free time?”, Lulu described the various video games, particularly online multiplayer games like “Honor Kings” or first-person shooters like “Gears of War” he enjoyed playing. Lulu elaborated that these games were a good way to relieve stress.

Lulu’s most intriguing response was perhaps his answer to the question “Do you travel to your home country occasionally? If so, when? How often? What do you do there? Who do you see there?” What made his response so intriguing was not only in what he said but in how he said it. Lulu appeared to be excited by this question which he explained to be due to how much he enjoys spending a lot of time with his family which he makes sure he does at least once a year. On these yearly trips, he would take his family to “the sea” and spend time visiting new areas of China to try new foods. When asked what foods, in particular, he enjoyed most, Lulu replied, with a chuckle, “real Chinese food”, clearly indicating that what we here in North Carolina call “Chinese” must not be.

After this question, Lulu seemed to open up a bit and display more of his personality. When I asked about his thoughts on learning English in the United States, and more specifically what was and was not easy about learning the language, Lulu replied with a grin, “learning English is especially easy”. In his elaboration as to why he felt this way, he simply replied, “English is a default language”. He further claimed that English is widely used in China by travelers and students that study abroad.

The interview concluded with a discussion about his favorite teacher. Earlier on, we had discussed subjects in school that Lulu was most interested. These topics included Mathematics and Geography, though Lulu also made it very clear that he did not like theoretical mathematics. He also emphasized that he despised talking about politics. I again asked Lulu about why he liked specific subjects in school, most notably, geography. And I clarified that I wanted to know if there was anything “special” about why he was drawn to particular subjects? Lulu detailed that it wasn’t really the subject that he enjoyed most, but the teacher of the subject that led to his passion for that topic.

Lulu had enjoyed his geography class simply because he “respected the instructor” and liked that he “told a lot of jokes” in-between subject matter.

Tapping into the Funds of Knowledge:

During the interview, I chose to pay close attention to Lulu’s reactions regarding his personal life, family traditions, and which teachers/instructors he was particularly drawn to. In order to develop a successful lesson for Lulu based upon notes from the interview, I would definitely include a section on geography as geography can be made appropriate for multiple grade levels. To capitalize on Lulu’s FoK, the lesson could ask about the types of sights and sounds one might encounter on the coastlines of China. This would allow Lulu to share his knowledge gained from his extensive travels and family visits to the coast. As a class, we could then compare the sights and sounds of the Chinese coastline with that of the North Carolina coastline in efforts of comparison and connection. We could further discuss what kinds of environments and ecosystems there are at the coastline and look at ocean life in North Carolina as opposed to ocean life in China. Additionally, we could discuss special landmarks or must-see destinations in China and share similar places to visit here on the coasts of North Carolina that may help students living abroad feel more at home. If this were an ELL class at the college level, we could use this first-hand and in-depth knowledge to create a personal essay and presentation. Based on Lulu’s responses to his favorite teacher, I would most likely have to keep the lesson light meaning and would have throw-in a joke here and there.

Reflection:

The most difficult part of this interview was the amount of personal information one can extract without being in and or around the subject’s dwellings. Because Lulu had specifically requested we meet via Zoom, presumably due to the current state of the global pandemic, I was unable to see where he lived and if there was anything of special interest (pictures of family, trophies, books, video games, etc) that could be further investigated and informative. Because of the language barrier, it was also somewhat difficult to go more into depth about certain subjects such as whether or not Lulu held any special relationships with family members and knew of any specific instances of generational knowledge. This being said, Lulu liked talking about his family most but was unable to articulate (in English) why he felt certain ways about them.

Another example of miscommunication was when Lulu expressed his affinity for vacations and travel. Though it was clear that he found travel important, due to a limited vocabulary, he was unable to make connections as to the importance of specific destinations. For future studies, I would redesign the interview insisting on a meeting place that more closely defined him personally and culturally such as his house or office.

There I would be able to ask about particular items privy to those who are allowed within a personal space.

Choosing a more personal setting could potentially paint a more accurate picture of the subject. Also, personal items are more likely to be out on display. Here, I could create follow-up questions more organically. For instance, during an interview, if I feel the subject is not responding with useful information pertaining to future lesson plans, I could always redirect the conversation by pointing to an item that is significant to the subject (a picture, trophy, video game collection). From here, I could create more personal questions and acquire more useful answers.