


Knowledge and Language: Lingua Franca

Lesson 1: Opening Debate

Focus: *Is access to knowledge limited by language?*

Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify how language acts as both a gatekeeper and enabler of knowledge in the digital age.• Recognize the dominance of English in online spaces and evaluate its effects on knowledge access and representation.• Begin to understand the relationship between language, power, and knowledge construction.
Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Introduction (5 mins)<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present the central question: “Does the dominance of a language shape what is visible and valued on the internet?”• Display visual materials, such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Visual Capitalist - Most used languages on the internet◦  How language shapes the way we think Lera Boroditsky TED : A primer on how language influences knowledge creation and understanding◦ A screenshot of Google search results in different languages<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Suggested search can be “how to protect yourself from the flu” English and then Urdu■ Compare the kinds of sources that show up on the first page• Ask students to consider:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Is the internet equally accessible to speakers of all languages?◦ If something isn’t available in English, is it less likely to be known or believed?◦ Does language affect not just what we find online, but how we interpret it?2. Debate Setup (5 mins)<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the Kialo discussion: “Does the dominance of a language shape what is visible and valued on the internet?”• Students will respond to the thesis: Dominance of a single language shapes what is visible and valued on the internet.• The discussion contains six starter claims to prompt students' ideas. These are listed below, along with potential counterclaims and areas for students to explore.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ PRO: Algorithms prioritize dominant languages like English, making content in other languages harder to discover.<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Counterclaim: Many platforms offer localized content and multilingual support, including region-specific search results and subtitles.■ Reasoning Prompt: Even with these features, who decides what makes it to the top of your feed or search? Does visibility equal availability?◦ PRO: Content in dominant languages is often perceived as more credible or authoritative, especially in academia or news.<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Counterclaim: Credibility is based on reasoning and evidence, not language. Bias toward English can be challenged through critical thinking.■ Reasoning Prompt: If most peer-reviewed research and media coverage are in English, do users unconsciously equate English with truth?

- PRO: Non-dominant language speakers face barriers to contributing or sharing knowledge, which leads to underrepresentation online.
 - Counterclaim: The internet is open to anyone; people can create and share content in any language.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Is access to publish the same as access to be heard? What structural or economic barriers affect visibility?
- CON: Online platforms are increasingly multilingual, and users can choose the language they engage with.
 - Counterclaim: Platform defaults, trending algorithms, and content moderation still heavily favor English.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Do users really have equal access to all languages, or are some more algorithmically “pushed” than others?
- CON: Translation technologies and AI tools make knowledge accessible across languages.
 - Counterclaim: Translation often flattens nuance and can misrepresent ideas, especially cultural or contextual knowledge.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Can automated translation ever fully preserve meaning, tone, and cultural specificity?
- CON: Language doesn’t determine value — people and communities choose what matters to them online.
 - Counterclaim: What “matters” is often decided by what is visible, trending, or monetized — which is shaped by language dominance.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Who shapes collective knowledge online — communities or algorithms? Can something still be valuable if it’s hidden?
- Students could also explore the following claims:
 - CON: Language is only one layer — structural inequalities like education, access, and platform design shape knowledge visibility more significantly.
 - Counterclaim: Language remains a primary filter; without understanding the language, no amount of access or education will make that knowledge meaningful.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Even if someone has internet access and education, would they understand or value content in a language they don’t speak? Or is language still the gatekeeper?
 - CON: Multilingual knowledge spaces exist — just not on the Western platforms we most often examine (e.g., Wikipedia, Google).
 - Counterclaim: Despite regional diversity, global influence and reach still heavily flow through English-dominant platforms.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Are we mistaking our own limited platform exposure for global reality? What are we not seeing?
 - CON: The internet fosters hybrid languages and knowledge systems that defy dominance, such as meme culture, emojis, and code-switching.
 - Counterclaim: These forms still rely on dominant linguistic norms and cultural references, often centered in English-speaking internet cultures.
 - Reasoning Prompt: Do new online languages liberate expression — or just remix dominant narratives in new forms?

	<p>3. Debate (15–20 mins)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students present initial arguments in response to the guiding question: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the dominance of a language shape what is visible and valued on the internet? The discussion should explore: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> whether dominant languages (such as English) influence what is seen, shared, or trusted online; if translation can preserve knowledge, or whether meaning is lost between languages; whether access to platforms is the same as access to visibility; the relationship between language, credibility, and global knowledge hierarchies. In this lesson, all students' contributions should be based on their existing knowledge and experiences, including their use of the internet, social media, and multilingual contexts. Examples may include personal search habits, bilingual content experiences, translation challenges, or platform preferences.
Reflection Questions	<p>Reflection (10 mins): Discuss the following reflection questions in open discussion or exit ticket format:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whose knowledge do you think is most visible online — and whose is missing? Why? Have you ever struggled to access or understand information because of a language barrier? What did that experience reveal to you about language and knowledge? Does using translation tools give you full access to knowledge, or do they filter and change it? If most “credible” knowledge is published in English, how might that shape what people believe to be true? Is the ability to access information the same as the ability to understand and value it? Why or why not? <p>Personal Prompt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you could redesign the internet to make knowledge more linguistically equal, what would you change and why?
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lesson Slides Kialo Discussion: Does the dominance of a language shape what is visible and valued on the internet?
TOK Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power: Who controls the platforms, algorithms, and knowledge systems that determine what is seen and valued online? Perspective: Do speakers of different languages experience the internet — and truth — differently? Culture: What cultural knowledge is lost or distorted when content is only available in dominant languages?
Critical Thinking Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confronting Biases and Assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying Linguistic Bias: Recognizing the assumption that knowledge presented in a dominant language (such as English) is more credible, complete, or valuable than knowledge in other languages. Questioning the “Global Internet” Assumption: Reflecting on the belief that the internet is equally accessible and representative of all cultures and languages — when in reality, it may reinforce linguistic hierarchies. Exploring Contexts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder Analysis: Considering who benefits from the dominance of a particular language online — e.g., tech companies, English-speaking academic institutions, or governments — and who may be excluded.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Cultural and Epistemic Influences: Understanding how language shapes not only communication but also how knowledge is defined, organized, and valued across different cultures.● Responsiveness and Flexibility of Thought:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Adapting Arguments: Refining or adjusting perspectives as students encounter multilingual examples, translation challenges, or evidence of linguistic exclusion and inclusion.○ Comparing Contradictory Perspectives: Evaluating how different linguistic and cultural worldviews can lead to conflicting interpretations of the same knowledge or event — and how both may offer insight. |
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