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The Science of Language and Anti-Blackness: Accounting for Black Language in Reading Instruction, Interventions, and Assessment

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About the Author

Dr. Alice Y. Lee is assistant professor of critical literacy in the School of Education at University of California, Riverside. Her research focuses on the raciolinguistic life experiences of Black teachers, and how such experiences are embodied into their pedagogy. She employs this lens to interrogate the continued maltreatment of Black Language speakers, particularly early childhood and elementary-aged children. She also applies her work towards teacher selection, recruitment, and education in efforts to diversify the teacher workforce. She received the More Just World Award from Literacy Research Association for her publication proposing a Black epistemological literacy education. Her work has been supported by the Spencer Foundation, and published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Language Arts*, *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, Practice*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Urban Education*, *Literacy Today*, and *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*.

My Journey Learning About Black Language

I had the honor of giving the opening keynote talk at the Reading Recovery® Teacher Leader Institute this past summer, and it was a joy to share and discuss my scholarship and journey into learning about and loving Black Language. Engaging with practitioners is central to my work, since an important part of my journey entails being an elementary teacher and teacher educator. Practitioners sit on the front lines of such important work, and I believe in powerful possibilities when trustworthy research can guide instruction.

A pivotal turning point for me was when I was both a full-time fifth-grade teacher and doctoral student, and I began to learn under early childhood literacy scholar, Anne Haas Dyson. She taught me about the inequities young Black Language speakers face in classrooms and how teachers hold powerful opportunities to honor the literacies of all children. This topic was new to me because I had not deeply learned about Black Language in my teacher preparation program, nor had my school district mentioned it at all in professional development. Anne created a safe enough learning environment for me to raise my hand in class and ask, "Are we talking about slang? Don't we want students to learn standard English to set them up for success, so they can get a job in the future?"

As I learned about Black Language, I was shocked to find out there was half a century's worth of linguistic evidence of it being a real language (Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977). I was also introduced to research about how Black Language is an asset, not a deficit, for students. As I was letting this cataclysmic truth settle in, I began talking to many colleagues and literacy professionals who relayed a clear message that Black Language was allowed for use on the playground and at home, but it had no place in schools, and certainly not for learning. As I continued to dig, it became more apparent to me that there was a huge gap between what we know to be true and what we do in schools. This was especially surprising to me because one would think that with the amount of technology our generation has within our reach, the gap between research and practice would not be so large. Additionally, given the emphasis on research-based practices in schools, I wondered how such a large body of research was nonexistent in schools, teacher preparation, and professional development.

What exactly is Black Language? In the past, it has been referred to as Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, African American Language, and Black English (Smitherman, 2000). However, I use the term Black Language because leading Black Language scholars want to emphasize how the language is closely connected to Black racial identity.

I also had to contend with my own positionality in this journey. I am not Black, nor am I a Black Language speaker. I am Chinese American and my mother tongue is Mandarin, though I am most literate in White Mainstream English given U.S. schooling's approach to language. As an elementary teacher in majority Black schools, I sought to support my students and set them up for what I thought would be the best success possible. But as I continued to learn more, I came to realize that the large gap between research and practice was not so coincidental, and that we have a long history of seeing and treating Black students and their families in a deficit, and this history continues.

As an Asian American, I realized that White dominant norms facilitated pervasive anti-Blackness across racial lines in our country, and that I also participated in this system. Since my first-year teaching, school mentors and coaches would talk about how "these Black kids can't read or write" and the idea that "their families don't care about their education" was persistent among teachers. I came to buy into these deficit views. There was a pivotal point, however, that I came to confront my own anti-Blackness and had to make a critical decision to depart from those ways.

I now work alongside Black Language scholars across the country and am in community with Black students, families, teachers, and administrators for "Black linguistic justice" (Baker-Bell, 2020). I'm also clear that just because I study Black Language, I will never know more than a native Black Language speaker. As someone who's experienced linguistic racism as well, I am working toward an equitable future for all of our children. This query began what has now been a 15-year journey in learning about, understanding, and seeking Black Language in classrooms. What started as a question about a language unknown to me led me to see larger issues of racism, anti-Blackness, and also how I, as a Chinese American woman, was situated in all of this. Though I no longer teach in an elementary classroom, my research and heart still reside in one. I now utilize my research tools to further develop ways to honor Black Language in our enterprises of teaching and learning. As I continue this journey, I explore solutions that remain unanswered. I begin with sharing my journey because every practitioner may also have their own unique journey towards loving Black Language, if you so choose. The topics covered in this paper are merely a snapshot of numerous research studies and a sample of my 10-week Black Language university course. I first review the linguistic science behind Black Language. Then, I discuss how anti-Blackness is connected to Black Language. We move to consider the science of how language works in learning. I conclude with ways to account for Black Language in reading assessments, interventions, and instruction.

Black Language in Education

What exactly is Black Language? In the past, it has been referred to as Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, African American Language, and Black English (Smitherman, 2000). However, I use the term Black Language because leading Black Language scholars want to emphasize how the language is closely connected to Black racial identity (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Baker-Bell, 2020; Kynard, 2013). Linguist Geneva Smitherman (1977), also known as the "Queen of Black Language," has also pushed for it to be referred to as a language over a dialect of English because of its grammatical roots in West African languages. She describes it best here:

> Black or African American Language is a style of speaking English words with Black flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns… [and] comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community. (Smitherman, 2006, p. 3)

Linguistic science

One of my initial questions as I learned about Black Language was, "How do we know it's an actual language, and not slang, as it is commonly referred to?" It turns out linguists have a checklist they use when determining if something is considered a real language or not (Smitherman, 1977). This checklist includes, "Does it have established language parts — phonology, syntax, morphemes? Importantly, do the sounds, grammar, and word parts have rules that are followed systematically (and not just haphazardly)?" The answer to these questions is YES!

Black Language follows linguistic rules, including phonological (sound/pronunciation), syntactic (grammar), and morphological (word parts) ones. The following rules come from Smitherman's (1977) book, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, which is a seminal text for understanding Black Language. I highly recommend all practitioners, especially literacy specialists, to read and reread this text as an important resource. The linguistic features highlighted in this article are simplified due to space constraints, but another excellent resource to learn more is at www.blacklanguagesyllabus.com. Smitherman (1977) reviews 12 basic linguistic rules (there are many more), but I will only highlight a few of them. One phonological rule requires a word with an initial /th/ sound to be replaced with the /d/ sound. The word "them" would be pronounced as "dem" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 17). However, sometimes phonology, syntax, and morphology are not clearly separated. For example, if a word has *l* at the middle or end of it, the *l* sound gets deleted (Smitherman, 1977, p. 17). The word "help" is pronounced as "hep," and the word "will" can be pronounced as "wi" — this is correct Black Language phonology. However, if the word "will" is used in a contraction (I will? I'll), then the *l* instead becomes an /ah/ sound, and "I'll" gets pronounced as "Iah" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 17). Here we see that a change in syntax and morphology can also incur changes to phonology.

The verb *be* is uniquely employed in various ways in Black Language, and is representative of different worldviews and perspectives on time (Kynard, 2023). One way is through the "habitual be," in which *be* is used to show that an event or condition is recurring (Smitherman, 1977, p. 19). Since the language follows linguistic rules, there are correct and incorrect ways to use the habitual be verb. Smitherman (1977) offers the following examples: "The coffee be cold" means "Every day the coffee's cold" (p. 19).

Conversely, another way the verb *be* is used is when it is omitted to show something is not recurring, such as "The coffee cold" means "Today the coffee's cold"; the omission of *be* is referred to as "zero copula" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 19). The *be* verb in the forms of *is* and *was* are also unique. They do not need to be conjugated based on the subject and are the same for singular and plural subjects. The following sentences are written in correct Black Language syntax: "You ain't sick, is you?" "She ain't home, is she?" "He was my English teacher last year." "They was acting up" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 21). Interestingly, these linguistic aspects of Black Language parallel linguistic aspects of other world languages. The use of the same verb form for both singular and plural subjects is also a linguistic aspect in Mandarin Chinese. Our view, therefore, of Black Language must broaden to consider how it parallels world languages.

Sociolinguistic aspects

Beyond just the language parts, an important dimension of Black Language is the way it is used when communicating, also known as its rhetorical features. Smitherman (1977) identifies four common rhetorical Black Language practices — call and response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing. She defines call and response as the "spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104). This is commonly seen in Black churches between pastors and congregants, in which it is the norm for the audience to respond to the speakers; to stay silent or unresponsive would be wrong. It is important to note that this rhetorical norm is the opposite of most classrooms, in which there are clear speaking turns delineated between teacher and student. Teachers expect students to sit silently as they speak, and are often penalized for responding to the teacher out of turn. I highlight these contrasting norms for practitioners to reconsider how classroom discourses either serve or deter student learning.

Smitherman (1977) defines signification or signifyin' as the "verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down or talks about the listener" (p. 118) or can also be used to make a point indirectly, which can be seen throughout various social media platforms. Tonal semantics is "the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 134), in which the voice becomes like a musical instrument, and sounds and intonations add or change the meaning of words. Tonal semantics is evident in rap, as well as in the speeches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The talk-singing aspect of poetry slams, and the use of repetition and alliteration, such as in King's "I have a dream speech" are also examples of tonal semantics. Narrative sequencing is the rendering of "general, abstract observations about life, love, people in the form of a concrete narrative" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 147). This is evident in classrooms when stories do not follow a linear fashion—beginning, middle, end—and instead, are organized by episodes or themes. Language scholar Sarah Michaels (1981) famously researched this phenomenon in the common early childhood practice of "sharing time" when she documented children telling stories in different ways.

"Standard" English is a linguistic myth

At this juncture, many question, "But what about standard English? Don't kids need to learn 'standard' English in order to get a job in the future?" In order to address that question, we first need to interrogate the idea of standard English. Even though it is a term that is commonly used in schools and even in state and federal standards, it is a linguistic myth and not a real language or dialect. Remember the checklist I described above which linguists use to determine if something is a real language or not? It turns out that standard English doesn't meet any of those criteria (Lippi-Green, 2012). For more information about this topic, excellent resources include Rosina Lippi-Green's (2012) book, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*, and the PBS website, "Do You Speak American?" which has a section on "Standard American English" at https://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/.

Linguists Anne Charity Hudley and Christine Mallinson state: "Different situations yield different forms of talk, and ideas of what counts as 'correct' or 'standard' change over time. After all, no one today still speaks what was considered 'correct English' in Chaucer's time, nor do we in the United States use what might be considered the proper 'Queen's English' in Great Britain." (Hudley & Mallinson, 2013, p. 20)

They make the point that "if any language, language variety, or linguistic feature is considered prestigious, it is only because that type of language is spoken or valued by socially, economically, and politically powerful people and is not due to any independent or inherent linguistic qualities" (Hudley & Mallinson, 2013, p. 21). Thus, the only standard thing about standard English is that those who have power have decided what standard English is and how it continues to evolve. For this reason, just as Black Language scholars are intentional about using the word Black to underscore how race and language are tightly connected, they are also proponents of referring to standard English as White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020), which is also how I reference it.

Race and language (raciolinguistics)

The linguistic science clearly shows us that Black Language is linguistically legitimate; it is a real language. The question, then, is why have few practitioners—who are literacy leaders in schools, districts, and states—never heard of it? This is not by accident. In 2012, anthropologist Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman wrote the book, *Articulate While Black*, to discuss how President Obama's language was scrutinized and considered "articulate" as a Black man. They note: "We can historicize this linguistic monitoring within the American institution of slavery where we find ample evidence that the policing of Black Language goes hand in hand with the policing of Black bodies" (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 49). They talk about how this interconnectedness of language and race is something that undergirds the history of schooling for Black people in America.

In the 1960s, educational psychologists Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) viewed Black Language as both a "cultural deprivation" and "language deprivation," and viewed the language as a "handicap" that interfered with learning. Thus, they developed language and reading curricula targeted at Black preschoolers in order to replace their Black Language with White

Mainstream English (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966). Though Black Language had been recognized before Bereiter and Engelmann's work by Black scholars and communities, much linguistic research developed in the decades after to combat inaccurate and anti-Black views of Black Language (Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1972; Mufwene et al., 1998; Smitherman, 1977). Black Language scholar, April Baker-Bell, has now coined the term, "anti-Black linguistic racism," to specifically describe the anti-Blackness that Black people face based on their language (Baker-Bell, 2020).

Though disproven for over half a century now, the views of Bereiter and Engelmann continue to dominate how we view and treat Black children in schools. In our current schooling practices, we still treat Black Language as a disability and not an asset for Black children. How has this deficit view of Black children helped their learning outcomes? Do we see positive academic results when we view Black students from a negative light? I believe some practitioners do genuinely believe that replacement of Black Language with White Mainstream English will be beneficial for academic achievement and future employment — and they want to set students up for success as much as possible. In this next section, I explain why the contrary is actually true, and that Black Language speakers *need* their language to learn and to succeed.

Leveraging Black Language to learn

Language is the main vehicle for learning. Language scholar, Courtney Cazden, who has collaborated with Reading Recovery's founder, Marie Clay, is renowned for her research on how classroom talk is central to children's learning (Clay & Cazden, 2017). Children must be able to talk and socially interact if any learning is going to happen (Cazden, 2001). This, however, is common sense to teachers' everyday lives. Teaching math, science, social studies—any subject—requires teachers to talk to students and for students to talk to each other. Language is the primary tool used to teach, and it is the primary tool children use to learn. However, when we tell children that Black Language can only be used on the playground or at lunch, but not in classrooms for learning, we are cutting off their primary tools to learn. Imagine asking someone to build a house but only allowing them to use half their tools. We are, essentially, only allowing learning to occur in White Mainstream English and not in any other language.

If we were to engage in some backwards planning, and the goal is truly to set students up for the best possible success in getting a job, let's consider what is required. When we think about getting a job, a big part of that is having expertise in that field. If you want to become an architect, you need to have math and physics knowledge. If you want to become a lawyer, you need to know some history and have writing skills. People do not get a job simply because they speak White Mainstream English well; they need to have knowledge to obtain and keep those jobs. However, we just cut off the primary tools for building that knowledge when we don't let students use Black Language in the learning process. So, in fact, when we cut students off when they use Black Language (i.e., "say it again correctly" or "remember to use academic language in the classroom"), we're actually cutting off the learning that they're going to need to get a job. This is the science behind why honoring students' languages is a prerequisite for student learning.

Accounting for Black Language in Literacy Instruction

Black Language in reading assessments

How does this learning theory and linguistic science translate into reading instruction, interventions, and assessment? I begin with reading assessments because schools often use this as a starting point to determine reading instruction and interventions. On the following page I share a rubric that comes from a preK classroom in one of my previous research projects. In other writing, I have discussed why this rubric follows colonial and anti-Black traditions (Lee, 2022). In this article, however, I share it for teaching purposes. Figure 1 on the following page is a language rubric that was part of a schoolwide assessment, in which students were measured each year in a variety of areas, such as fine and gross motor skills. This one, however, focuses on social communication and language development.

Each box contains a different standard to assess student language. The boxes outlined in red highlight some of the boxes with language standards that are contradictory to Black Language. For example, the standard "Uses possessive 's'" goes

Figure 1. Language Rubric

Social Communication

Strand A
SOCIAL-COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION

G1*	G2*	G3
Informs, directs, asks questions, and expresses anticipation, imagination, affect, and emotions.	Uses conversational rules.	Establishes and varies social communication roles.
Expresses anticipated outcomes.	Alternates between speaker/listener role.	Varies voice to impart meaning.
Describes pretend objects, events, or people.	Responds to topic changes initiated by others.	Uses socially appropriate physical orientation (eye contact, distance from conversational partner).
Labels own or others' affect/emotions.	Asks questions for clarification.	
Describes past events.	Responds to questions related to topic.	
Makes commands and requests of others.	Maintains topic.	
Obtains information.	Responds to others' topic initiations.	
Informs.		

Strand B
PRODUCTION OF WORDS, PHRASES, AND SENTENCES

G1*	G2*	G3*	G4*	G5*
Uses verbs.	Uses possessive and plural nouns.	Asks questions.	Uses pronouns.	Uses complete sentences.
Shows agreement between nouns and verbs (I go, He goes).	Uses possessive "s" (Its', Mom's hat).	Asks yes/no questions (Can I have one?).	Uses subject pronouns (I, he, she).	Uses adjectives to make comparisons.
Uses past tense verbs (He jumped, I ate).	Uses plural nouns (dogs, dishes, mice)	Asks "wh" questions.	Uses possessive pronouns (my, mine).	Uses adverbs.
Uses present progressive "ing" (He is running).		Asks questions using rising inflection.		Uses prepositions.
				Uses conjunctions.
				Uses articles.

Comments:

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against Black Language grammar, which doesn't require the letter *s* at the end of nouns and pronouns to indicate possession. The standard "Shows agreement between nouns and verbs (I go, He goes)" does not account for Black Language grammar that uses the same verb form for both singular and plural subjects. Additionally, the standard "Uses present progressive 'ing' (He is running)" does not account for Black Language grammar that utilizes the habitual *be* verb or omission of the *be* verb altogether. Other standards regarding clear alternation between speaker and listener, and maintaining a particular topic of conversation contradict Black Language rhetorical elements, such as call and response and narrative sequencing. These examples should make us pause and question what exactly is being measured here? It's not students' whole language system, which includes Black Language. In fact, Black Language fluency is counted *against* students. Instead of counting all the language abilities students *do* have, only their fluency in White Mainstream English is counted.

In addition to assessments that work against Black Language speakers, I found that teachers' beliefs about Black Language worked against student learning. The Figure 1 rubric has 38 boxes with 38 different White Mainstream English standards. The teacher I was working with in my study informed me that during one of their staff meetings, the entire faculty of teachers had to agree upon how many complete boxes would indicate a student is considered "proficient" in "social communication."

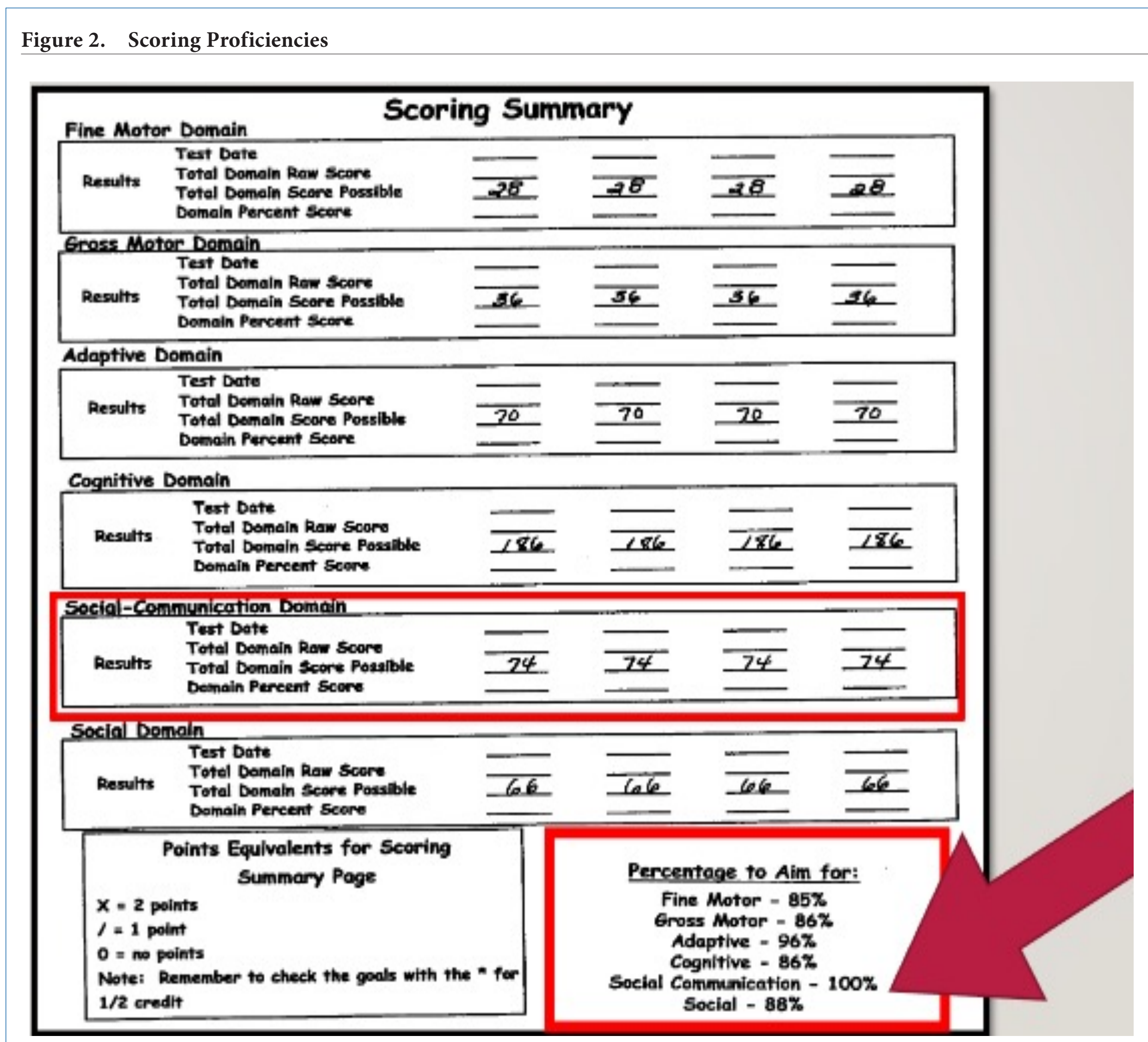
After much debate, Figure 2 shows the percentage decided upon for proficiency. The teachers decided that 100% of the 38 boxes needed to

be complete in order for a student to be considered proficient. Notice for all the other domains—fine and gross motor, cognitive, social—about fall within 85–88% and 96% for adaptive. Language is the only domain at 100%. Teachers understood that for 3-to-5-year-old children, they are still developing in their thinking, how they hold a pencil, and being able to use the toilet independently. However, when it comes to language, students should meet 100% of White Mainstream English standards to be considered proficient. The teacher I was working with informed me that the teaching faculty were on a mission to get Black students to "talk right." The mindset that we need to get rid of students' Black Language—and force them to speak in White Mainstream English as quickly as possible—is anti-Black because it functions on the belief that the way Black people speak is not legitimate. The evidence of this is that if we did see it as a legitimate language, we would see Black Language speakers as bilingual rather than needing to correct their language all the time.

Black Language in reading instruction and interventions

Approaching reading instruction. As we think about instruction and interventions, I want to foreground that instruction should not be for the purpose of getting rid of students' Black Language, and the goal should not be to just get them to talk in White Mainstream English. This

Figure 2. Scoring Proficiencies



Scoring Summary

Fine Motor Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	28	28	28	28
Domain Percent Score				

Gross Motor Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	36	36	36	36
Domain Percent Score				

Adaptive Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	70	70	70	70
Domain Percent Score				

Cognitive Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	186	186	186	186
Domain Percent Score				

Social-Communication Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	74	74	74	74
Domain Percent Score				

Social Domain

Results				
Test Date				
Total Domain Raw Score				
Total Domain Score Possible	66	66	66	66
Domain Percent Score				

Points Equivalents for Scoring Summary Page

X = 2 points
/ = 1 point
0 = no points
Note: Remember to check the goals with the * for 1/2 credit

Percentage to Aim for:

Fine Motor - 85%
Gross Motor - 86%
Adaptive - 96%
Cognitive - 86%
Social Communication - 100%
Social - 88%

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perspective guides how I approach reading instruction for Black Language speakers. The flexible, dynamic use of multiple languages is what language scholar, Ofelia García calls translanguaging (García et al., 2016). Traditional views of bilingualism see language as separate entities — English, Spanish, and Mandarin each exist in separate buckets in our head. Among parents and teachers, there continues to be a fear that if students have too many languages in their head, one could take away from the other. However, what García has taught us is that English, Spanish, and Mandarin do not function separately in our heads, but exist as one whole system (García et al., 2016). What happens, then, when we cut off one part? If it functions as a whole system, it makes sense that when you put down one part, you are disrupting the entire system — and that is a student's main vehicle for learning.

The dominant literacy approach to teaching Black Language speakers has been through code-switching. Popularized in the 2010s, this approach focused on contrasting the differences between Black Language and White Mainstream English (see Wheeler & Swords, 2006). While this approach acknowledged Black Language as a real language, it still functioned as "less than," because the goal was simply to transition Black students into White Mainstream English. In this approach, Black Language was referred to as "informal language" and White Mainstream English as "formal language." Black Language scholar Vershawn Ashanti has written extensively about how this is not only linguistically inaccurate, but also how code-switching is linguistic segregation for Black students (Young, 2009; Young & Barrett, 2018).

The problem with code-switching goes back to what was discussed above with the science of language in learning. Cutting off part of students' language cuts off student learning. Therefore, the big picture to reading instruction is to grow the bilingualism of Black Language speakers, while utilizing both languages for learning. This can be done through a translanguaging approach. Baker-Bell (2020) argues that growing bilingualism needs to be done in a way that also teaches Black students about the beauty of the language and affirms their racial identities. Some may still be wondering, "How do Black students also become bilingual in White Mainstream English then?" In my own research, I have found that Black Language speakers who teachers might label as not talking correctly—as early as 3 years old and through upper elementary school—are actually *already* bilingual in White Mainstream English (Lee, 2023). Oftentimes, teachers may be worried about competency in White Mainstream English because they hear *some* usage of Black Language and ignore the ways students can already understand and translanguage with White Mainstream English. Also, when we consider how White children learn White Mainstream English, I have yet to witness a parent explain subject-verb agreement to a 3-year-old. Most White children learn White Mainstream English by interacting and socializing with people who speak White Mainstream English.

While it should not dominate literacy instruction, some explicit instruction about both Black Language and White Mainstream English can be implemented as long as it is historically contextualized and affirms Black racial identities in the process (see Baker-Bell, 2020). Writing instruction should focus more on audience and give assignments in which students are writing to both Black Language and White Mainstream English-speaking audiences. In other writing (Lee, 2017), I have discussed how teachers can frame writing assignments for White Mainstream English-speaking audiences. For example, a teacher could frame it in the following way: "Not everyone is bilingual and as linguistically gifted as you. Some only speak and understand White Mainstream English, so we're writing this paper so they can understand your brilliant ideas. In the next paper, you'll have a chance to flex your language skills and show off the beauty of Black Language in your writing." Moreover, what happens when some of the stories students write can be for Black Language speaking audiences, and they're able to use the language they know to tell stories about people they love, in their own voices? All students will be growing their content-specific vocabulary and students should be encouraged to incorporate Black Language as they learn. For more ideas on writing instruction, see McMurtry (2022).

Reading structures. Reading instruction can be highly varied, thus my suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive but to begin considering how to account for

Black Language in common reading structures, such as the use of classroom texts for mini-lessons, reading to self and others, guided reading groups, and phonics instruction. The texts we choose anchor reading in the classroom. They can be used as mentor texts for mini-lessons to teach about various features of texts, to develop students' comprehension, and understand different genres. Mentor texts are also often used to set the tone for classroom community and build social-emotional skills.

Consider selecting a book written in Black Language for a mentor text, such as *Young Cornrows Callin Out the Moon* by Ruth Forman. A book about summers in Philadelphia with family, food, and fun, the author shares how "we don really want no backyard, frontyard neither" because they've got "more to watch than tv…we got double dutch n freeze tag n kickball, so many place to hide n seek n" (Forman, 2007, pp. 21, 9, 10). This text has the potential to mentor students in both literary and racially affirming ways. Mini-lessons focused on literary elements could include the genre of autobiographical narrative writing or poetry, incorporating description, visualization as you read, and rich opportunities to practice prosody and oral fluency. Mini-lessons focused on historically contextualizing Black Language and racial affirmation could include introducing what Black Language is, the beauty of how Black Language sounds and feels, why Black Language is not usually honored in classrooms, and helping Black Language speakers love their bilingualism. Additionally, highlighting literary elements do not have to be separate from racially affirming students. For example, a mini-lesson could focus on prosody and the beauty of how Black Language sounds and feels. As you help students pay attention to the syllables and rhythm of the text, you can also feature the beauty of Black Language in its repetition and succinctness in sentences like, "we don really want no backyard, frontyard neither" (Forman, 2007, p. 21). As a teacher, if Black Language is not your mother tongue, consider asking a student who is fluent in the language to read the book aloud, as well as support the hiring of Black teachers who are fluent in Black Language.

Imagine the possibilities for Black Language speakers when they see and hear themselves in official classroom texts, not only from the teacher, but also when they are reading to themselves and to their peers. Another common reading instruction structure is guided reading groups. Guided reading groups are often organized by reading level, particular strategies, or reading skill. Regardless of what the target instruction is, students should not be organized as Black Language speakers put in one group for the purpose of having them use only White Mainstream English as quickly as possible. Consider how Black Language can be leveraged to further students' comprehension and to engage in various literacy tasks.

Accounting for Black Language in phonics instruction and interventions. Phonics instruction in and of itself is a controversial topic, so adding Black Language makes it an even more complex topic. Debates about it refer to "phonics instruction" as one, definable thing. Questions surrounding the topic often include, "Are you for it?" "Are you against it?" "How much should you teach it?" "When should it be taught?" While these questions exceed the scope of this paper, I address a different, equally important question in this debate: "Whose phonics are we talking about?"

At the beginning of this article, we reviewed various phonological aspects of Black Language. Thus, Black Language phonics is an entire system that we never consider in schools nor in phonics instruction. What that means, then, is that all our assessment and instruction is geared at developing Black students' knowledge of written language with White Mainstream English sounds and grammar. As we think about utilizing children's entire language system to learn, what might it look like if Black Language speakers were allowed to tap into their existing knowledge of Black Language sounds and words to strengthen their understanding of this relationship?

This shift in thinking about phonics instruction and accounting for Black Language in it is novel and under researched. I am currently working with Black Language scholars and communities to develop a phonics instructional approach that honors Black Language and Blackness, and invite partners to join me in this work. In the meantime, a guiding principle that aligns with Reading Recovery's approach is that phonics, and reading at large, is inherently about meaning-making. That principle, along with fostering Black Language speakers as legitimate bilingual speakers while affirming

racial identity, are the principles that guide me as I imagine this work.

An activity conducted during my keynote helped illuminate many issues in traditional reading interventions. I describe the activity and share some of the responses from teacher leaders from the institute. As a reader, I encourage you to find the article and try out the activity with a partner. The activity is essentially an oral fluency test in which the text is written in Black Language. The text is written by Black Language scholar, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and published in a research journal. The text I use for the fluency test is the first page of the article, "Should Writer's Use They Own English?" (Young, 2010). The person administering the test will be conducting a cold running record while the other person reads aloud. The rules are the same as many oral fluency tests: Read as many words as you can in 1 minute. The running record should be scored based on correct Black Language pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. Give it a go! During the Teacher Leader Institute, participants had various responses, including slower reading rate due to lack of familiarity with Black Language, very little comprehension of text since cognitive load was focused on decoding, and difficulty pronouncing Black Language correctly. I asked participants if they thought they might have read more words if the text was in White Mainstream English. Imagine if all of your classroom texts, all of your teachers, and everything you learned was in Black Language. How would you feel if you were put down for using White Mainstream English at any time? How would you feel about yourself? How would you feel about reading? How would you feel about learning and school?

Universal screeners, such as Aimsweb tests, often mark Black Language phonics and grammar as wrong, and as a result, channel Black students into low level reading groups and perhaps other identifiers that may not be accurate. As an elementary teacher coach, I helped with weekly progress reports by administering Aimsweb testing. I still remember one of the students who had been identified as needing reading interventions and also a Black Language speaker. In one of her oral fluency tests, 40% of her miscues were related to Black Language syntax. We must question if these assessments are accurate in terms of measuring the language Black students have? As you consider the components of a Reading Recovery lesson, what would happen if one of the familiar texts you used with students was in Black Language? How might your running records change if you accounted for Black Language phonology, morphemes, and syntax? When you teach letter identification and break words into parts, could some of those words be in Black Language? Do students have the opportunity to assign letters based on the Black Language phonology they hear?

The linguistic science of Black Language has been ignored from schools and reading research for almost half a century. It is long overdue for practitioners, especially literacy specialists and coaches, to gain this knowledge and begin accounting for it in literacy instruction.

Conclusion

Amidst longstanding debates surrounding reading approaches and claims for what is scientific, it is important to include other sciences that are the backbones for reading. Not accounting for the codes that students bring as they learn to read yields inaccurate assessment data, and also overlooks one of the larger purposes of reading—to learn—and figure how language fits into that equation. The linguistic science of Black Language has been ignored from schools and reading research for almost half a century. It is long overdue for practitioners, especially literacy specialists and coaches, to gain this knowledge and begin accounting for it in literacy instruction. I conclude with more questions than perhaps you had prior to reading this article. Keene and Zimmerman (2007) remind us: "Most important is the quality of the question itself, because the act of questioning leads us deeper into our thinking" and that for "big questions that don't have a specific answer…just thinking about them helps me to imagine a range of different outcomes" (p. 107, 112).

My hope is that my work has raised questions that will continue to lead

practitioners and administrators into deeper thinking. I love asking big questions that don't yet have answers because they allow me to imagine a range of future outcomes we haven't yet seen.

Author's Note

Some of the data around assessments shared here are from an article published in the National Council of Teachers of English journal, *Research in the Teaching of English*. They are reprinted with permission.

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