

Interventions Foregrounding and Honoring Black Language in FYC from a HBCU/PBI Perspective

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Teaching at a small HBCU in the Midwest, students in our first-year composition classes are predominately black and the majority of our students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. What struck me early on in my role as a writing program administrator and a classroom instructor is how many of my students came into the writing classroom with a fear of failure and a belief that they cannot language or use English well. In early introductory writing, over 70% of our first-year students report a fear of failure and/or a belief that they cannot write well. As I've discussed and listened to first-year students, it is clear that they have this belief in part because of what they have been taught in educational settings. Instructors must problematize and question our own standpoints. Coming from the standpoint of a woman in a white body teaching my students about language and writing, I know that I stand in front of my students from a place of privilege and that it is therefore imperative to foreground their experiences and thoughts, rather than my own. Using Jacqueline Jones Royster's ideas about listening, Krista Ratcliffe's ideas of "rhetorical listening," and Asao B. Inoue's ideas about "deep listening," can help us begin to problematize our classes. While our writing program is working toward implementing changes to create a more equitable and just program, and hopefully by extension society, we know that we still have a lot to learn and do. So this essay will share some of the changes we are making to our program to foreground and honor Black Language in the first-year writing classroom.

When students come into our first-year writing classes, they mention how they can't use "proper," "professional," "correct," or "standard" English. In these early writings students contrast these positive adjectives for White Mainstream English (WME) with negative adjectives for Black Language (BL), calling it "ghetto," "uneducated," "unprofessional," etc. To be clear, for the majority of these students, BL is what they speak at home, with their friends and family, so in essence they are naming their own language with these negative adjectives. It is impossible to reconcile these pejorative terms with the professional resolutions and position statements, such as "Students Right to Their Own Language" (1974). Obviously just educational and professional organizations saying that we need to change is not enough. If we want to dismantle racism, we must dismantle linguistic racism systemically. CCCCs/NCTEs focused statement on Black Language

“This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” offers some steps to move toward linguistic justice.

Therefore, in our classes, we begin by questioning and critiquing “standard English” through teaching students about the connections between language and power. How do we help students recognize the power structures and how they are present in language? How do we help students move from a lived reality and understanding of linguistic power structures and their relationship to racial power structures to being able to critique and challenge racist systems of power? We begin by lecturing to students about the history of BL, which was born in the disparity of power given to slaves who were linguistically separated in order to diminish power and control people. Giving students an understanding of the socio-historical systems in which language and linguistic racism began helps students understand that humans made decisions about language to maintain power and control, and it helps students understand where and how linguistic differences were created. Most of the students in our first-year writing classes report that they have never learned about language in these terms. Building a shared language where we can discuss code switching, code meshing, and linguistic and rhetorical choices is of paramount importance in the writing classroom. And giving students the right to decide how they write and the opportunity to critically think about how their writing has been judged in the past is of utmost importance to making changes in the racist systems. Essential to this discussion is a critique of the moralising language used for WME and BL. To call WME “proper,” “correct,” or “respectful” is to place a morality around different language varieties that we should help students reconsider. As we discuss the role of language in classrooms, educational systems, and in the broader society, we have students reflect on their language choices and the racist systems they encounter when they code switch or code mesh. Students report an appreciation for learning about language and privilege, and this helps them develop their own critical awareness of the racist systems in which we live.

Because students have been taught to think of their own language in negative ways, it is important to bring in articles, literature, and books that use BL. Students in our writing classes read portions of April Baker-Bell’s book *Linguistic Justice*, Vershawn Ashanti Young’s chapter “Should Writers Use Their Own English,” Victor Villanueva, and literature that is written in BL. We must reinforce that it is truly not a mark of inferiority to use BL, but rather a powerful choice. We need to build pride and help students believe they truly have a right to their own language. With an understanding of the socio-historical underpinnings of BL and an appreciation for how it developed, several students choose to change how they talk about their

own use of BL. As we show, model, and build curiosity for other people's languages and usage—in reading and in speaking—making rhetorical and linguistic choices without shaming and disadvantaging any one group of people, especially in school, students begin to form their own critical language awareness.

Students discuss and analyze what several scholars have said about how our culture perpetuates White language supremacy. One such quotation that we use comes from Baker-Bell, who writes, “If we honestly believe that code-switching will save Black people's lives, then we really ain't paying attention to what's happening in the world. Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer while saying “I cannot breathe.” Wouldn't you consider “I cannot breathe” “standard English” syntax?” (5).

We know that it is vitally important that we make systemic changes. We must make room in grading/judging of student writing to give students the right to their own language and to help them develop and use their voice in writing in the ways they want. As Asao B. Inoue said, “If you use a single standard to grade your students' languaging, you engage in racism. You actively promote White language supremacy, which is the handmaiden to White bias in the world, the kind that kills Black men on the streets by the hands of the police through profiling and good ol' fashion prejudice” (359).

While many students welcome the ability to use their own language, several students are resistant to opening up their writing to a variety of language choices because they believe that our linguistic systems or prejudice and privilege are unjust, but that they still must learn to operate within an unjust and racist system. We cannot ignore voices of descent against this opening of curriculum and learning, but nor can we continue to raise the mantle of white language supremacy in our classes and writing programs lest we are complicit in violence against black bodies and language, so bringing students into our discussion helps us privilege and listen to their voices.

Throughout the classes, students question if there is a loss of culture and loss of self for themselves or others as they conform to fit into racist linguistic systems. Most students say something along the lines of “That's just how society is,” but they also voice their frustrations, calling it “not fair” because the burden is placed only on certain individuals. Our students often report that they feel more comfortable in a PBI because they get to use their own language more freely. But students also move this into a discussion of the outcomes of linguistic prejudice. Students begin to question how and under what conditions corporations strive for diversity and point out that this often does not include linguistic diversity.

Through constantly engaging in a discussion of critical language awareness and problematizing society with our students, it is one way we can begin to change power structures, and we can hope some of it will emanate from our classroom communities. Asking students to think with us about how we dismantle racist systems and power structures that privilege race and class and unfairly disadvantage groups of people allows us to engage in listening and work forward together as a classroom community. From there we just need to continue to move toward an equitable future together as a society.

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