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## **Black Lives Matter in Teaching English as a Second Language!**

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# A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

Kristin Lems

## About This Column

The Winter 2020 issue of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* published a special issue focusing on “action for equity,” with thoughtful articles and abundant family and classroom resources. This issue of the “wELLcome” column, which is dedicated to topics regarding English language learners (ELLs), continues in that same vein. In this issue, we place the spotlight on ELLs of African descent, their teachers, and their schools.

## Black Lives Matter in Teaching English as a Second Language!

*Note: In this column, the author chooses lower case letters to identify a racial category except when it is capitalized in a direct quotation.*

Every aspect of life in the United States has been shaken by the upsurge of the “Movement for Black Lives.” As we become more exposed to obvious injustice, and primary sources become more widely available, Americans have been forced to confront the realities of a society built on European-white supremacy—from the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of African people brought in chains to work for free, to the crippling conditions of the Jim Crow era, to violent policing and an unfair criminal justice system which continue to this day, all creating a legacy of trauma for Americans of African descent (Wilkerson, 2020).

How does this legacy and climate affect English language learners (ELLs) of African descent? I will touch upon three aspects: (1) the unique experience of ELLs of African descent in English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education programs; (2) the low representation of black ESL and bilingual teachers and weak responses by TESOL professional

organizations to doing something about it; and (3) the low enrollment of students of African descent in dual language programs. I will give a brief overview of the problems and then suggest some ways that English language educators and teachers in general can make real progress toward equity for students of African descent. I apologize in advance for the brief and superficial nature of the column, which touches only glancingly on so many deep and nuanced topics. I can only hope this column will open up some good conversations as the articles and columns in this journal so often do.

## Immigrants of African Descent

The Pew Research Center has studied the main groups of black immigrants to the United States (whom I will refer to as *immigrants of African descent* for reasons that will be clear later in the column). They consist of immigrants from African countries, Central America, South America and Mexico, often referred to as Afro-Latinos, and the Caribbean. Much of the data in this summary can be found in the 2013 Pew Research Center report, which was released in 2015 (Anderson, 2015). Immigrants from these groups vary enormously in demographics, but they all share common experiences when they come to the U.S. and are faced with a racially inequitable society.

Black immigrants from African countries are often already bilingual or trilingual,

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and they have a lower poverty rate and higher educational level than Americans in general (Anderson, 2015). The greatest number of these immigrants come from Nigeria. Many other immigrants from Africa, on the other hand, come to the U.S. as refugees and have suffered war, trauma, ethnic cleansing, civil war, interrupted formal education, and dispossession.

African immigrants may come from countries in which English is the language of instruction or the *lingua franca*, such as Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, so many children of English-speaking African immigrants do not enroll in ESL or bilingual programs. It should be noted, however, that even when families indicate that English is their home language, an additional language may be spoken routinely in the home.

The second group of ELLs of African descent consists of immigrants from South or Central America or the Caribbean Islands who are Spanish speakers, including immigrants from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, or Cuba. In addition, there are an estimated 70,000 black immigrants from Mexico, which is part of North America. These native Spanish speakers are enrolled in ESL/bilingual classes. They may or may not have experienced overt racial discrimination in their countries of origin.

The third major group consists of immigrants and refugees from islands of the Caribbean who are not Spanish speaking, the foremost numbering from Haiti and Jamaica (Anderson & Lopez, 2018). Both Haiti and Jamaica have distinct native languages which evolved through a combination of trade, slavery, colonialism, and intermarriage. In addition to words and structures from colonial languages, these languages have many linguistic elements traceable to African languages spoken by Africans kidnapped and taken to these islands to work as slaves. In Jamaica, English is woven into Jamaican Patois, but Haitian Creole has French, not English, words. Although these

black immigrant groups of African descent speak a language other than English at home, most are not enrolled in ESL programs. Another sizeable group consists of immigrants of African descent from the island of Belize. They, too, speak a distinct Patois, but English is the official language of Belize, and students are educated in English (“Languages of Belize,” 2021). Therefore, Belizean immigrants are not likely to be identified for ESL or bilingual services.

Many black immigrants from African countries do not need to learn English as a new language because it is the language in which they were educated, even if there is an additional home language. Black immigrants from Central and South America and Mexico are Spanish speakers and receive ESL, bilingual, or dual language services. However, there are two subsets of black immigrants who are not as well accounted for. One consists of African immigrants who are enrolled in ESL but do not have first language support, such as speakers of Amharic, Twi, or Kiswahili, to name only a few African languages. Although some schools make extraordinary efforts to support these students, their small numbers and the fact that they are often in schools with no students or staff who speak their native language present special challenges.

The other group which is of special interest and concern to English language educators consists of Caribbean islanders who speak a language indigenous to their island but are not literate in it because it is not the language of instruction at their school. Such is the case for students from Haiti and Jamaica.

As we know, Illinois requires bilingual education for a school with 20 or more speakers of the same home language, but speakers of less represented languages do not have this resource. Even if the number of students hovers around 20, many schools do not set these programs up for fear they cannot offer a quality program due to a lack of curriculum, staff, or resources to pay for it. A heartening exception is Cruz Acero

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School in Rogers Park, Chicago, which offers a Yoruba bilingual program headed by a licensed teacher endorsed in Yoruba (personal conversation, April 2021).

Because most students speaking African or Caribbean languages are not enrolled in bilingual education services, many students end up without the much-valued home language component that those in the language teaching field endorse. Literacy in one's native language positively affects literacy in a new language and increases positive academic outcomes (Farver et al., 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Wong Fillmore, 2000).

Students from Haiti offer a dramatic example of students who could and should benefit from English language education programs but usually do not. Haitian immigrants make up about 15% of the U.S. black immigrant population, with 586,000 immigrants reported in 2015 (Anderson, 2015), second only to Jamaicans. Haitian Creole (alt. spelling Kreyol) is a full-fledged language, with more than 12 million native speakers and several regional dialects ("Haitian Creole," 2021). Reading researchers have shown that "systematic classroom use of Kreyòl—at all levels, but especially in early grades—promotes academic success in Haiti" (DeGraff, 2016, p. 1). Nevertheless, French is the language of instruction in Haitian elementary schools, although only 8% of the Haitian population speaks French at home ("Haitian Creole," 2021; Holenstein, 2020). In the U.S., Haitian students do not fit well with bilingual Creole programs since robust teaching materials have not been developed in Creole, and the experiences of many Haitians have led them to believe that becoming literate in Creole in the U.S. is a waste of precious time. (This dilemma is not exclusive to Haitians but applies to Assyrians, Hmong, Kurdish, and Karen immigrants, to name only a few groups). In sum, the combination of the low incidence of African languages and the lack of formal language instruction in indigenous languages

creates an unfavorable situation for some—but not all—immigrants of African descent.

## Immigrating to a Racialized Society

What immigrants of African descent share when they come to America is that they enter a highly racialized society, with its long history of slavery and systemic discrimination (Wilkerson, 2020). Although the educational level of African immigrants is higher than that of Americans in general, with 35% reporting a college degree in the most recent data (Anderson, 2015), learners from African countries may still be regarded as "less than" due to racial prejudice. In one high school, for example, African refugees were singled out as the cause of a "yawning achievement gap" in the school district although they performed just as well as other English learners (Shapiro, 2014, p. 389). African ELLs may be stereotyped as intellectually inferior (p. 392), despite their multilingualism and the educational achievements they bring to the U.S.

Kemi Seriki (2021), an immigrant Nigerian parent, unpacks the double burden of being an immigrant and black while trying to raise children in America: "[In Nigeria,] we all were blacks. We didn't identify ourselves by race. . . . [W]e never lived in a racialized society," she explains in a recent podcast. "I started understanding what it is to be black in this country, what is it like for children, how do I go about raising children. As an African, I only have the immigrant experience, not the black experience."

African immigrants may not be prepared to assimilate with American black culture, Seriki (2021) explains, because it adds a burden to the challenges they already face. However, the preponderance of segregated neighborhoods and schools, and racial profiling by police create situations African immigrants must come to understand and deal with.

Abiodun Durojaye (2021), a doctoral candidate at Governor's State University who came

to the U.S. from Nigeria at age 9, echoes this discomfort. In another episode of the same podcast, she discusses why she felt she needed to shorten her first name to gain acceptance or feel more confident in the U.S. and shares her research about other African immigrants who shorten or Anglicize their African names.

Immigrants of African descent from Central and South America and Mexico, or Afro-Latinos, also face racial discrimination within the U.S. Colorism, or discrimination against those with darker skin tone, is also present in Latino culture, probably due to the legacy of European colonialism. Many Afro-Latino teachers have recounted to me the Spanish phrase *mejorar la raza* or “to better the race,” which was told to them as a warning or heard if they gave birth to children with darker skin or if they had darker skin than their siblings. The highly engaging Afrosaya podcast, started several years ago by a Teach for America graduate and high school Spanish teacher, explores these and many other facets of being a Latino with African roots (“The Afrolatino Broadcast,” 2021). The podcast also mentions that 10% of Hispanics can be considered Afro-Latinos.

Aren’t liberal white folks exempt from colorism because they seek out tanning salons? Doesn’t that show white folks have overcome prejudice? The National Academy of Sciences did a study shortly after the election of Barack Obama, our first black/biracial president, that suggests otherwise. College-aged participants who self-identified as liberal or conservative were shown pictures of President Obama with a lightened or darkened skin tone. The conservatives, who presumably opposed the president, identified the darker skin tone as a more accurate portrayal of Obama, whereas the liberals, who presumably supported the president, identified the lighter skin tone as more accurate. This suggested that for liberals, the positive feelings they held matched with a lighter face. The head researcher was asked about the common practice in political ads in which a

black or biracial candidate’s face is darkened by their opponent:

*We’ve seen this throughout, you know, a number of campaigns. People are, you know, they have this association with dark and, you know, ominous and the sort of thing that . . . may be employed to try to create more negative associations with the candidate. (Eugene Caruso, interviewed by Ludden, 2009)*

Bias against community members of African descent is confirmed in another study of interest to language teachers. The language that police officers in the Oakland (California) Police Department used when they stopped drivers was recorded and analyzed through multiple algorithms and showed that black drivers were consistently addressed with less respect, even accounting for mitigating factors including the race of the officer (Voigt et al., 2017).

To sum up these points, immigrants of African heritage are less likely to have home language support or resources at their schools, and many do not receive services although another language is spoken in the home. Also, regardless of income or education, all will face racial profiling and bias of some kind when they come to live in the U.S.

## **Low Representation of Black Teachers in the ESL Profession**

In 2006, *TESOL Quarterly*, the premier publication of teachers of English to speakers of other languages, put out a special edition on the topics of race, racism, and racialization. In the introduction, the editors wrote, “[O]ur field is in dire need of an explicit exploration of race” (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 472). After that exploration, there is another long gap until the forming of the Diverse Voices Task Force in 2019, which issued recommendations in 2021. Language policies and ideologies underlie the way that languages, and new languages, are taught, and these can have profound effects

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on students' sense of identity and self-efficacy. Teachers, mainly white, may consider students' language to be "incorrect" or "inappropriate" and stigmatize or even pathologize students' use of nonstandard dialects, even when that same language is lauded when it is sprinkled into speech by white writers, speakers, and entertainers (see Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Racial bias in English teaching and learning has been confirmed in several studies. In one, Rubin (1992) found that the exact same "accents" paired with Caucasian faces were seen as superior to those of Asian faces, despite the same audio track. Non-native speaker teachers of ESL/EFL have long maintained a caucus in TESOL to discuss the discrimination they face in hiring; in fact, these teachers note that native speakers of English without training are selected over non-native English teachers with training. Although explicit criteria for native speakers are no longer allowed in the TESOL hiring area, the native speaking ESL/EFL teacher still reigns supreme, even though an estimated 80% of English teachers around the world are non-native (Bernat, 2008).

And then there is the question of black students in teacher education programs. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) reports, "A large majority of education majors and, more specifically, students enrolled in teacher preparation programs, are white" (p. 3). Even among licensed teachers, very few ESL teachers are black. The job research site Zippia.com (2021) reports that only 9.4% of ESL teachers are black compared to 74.1% who are white. (**Note:** The numbers are also low for Hispanics at 11.1% and Asians at 3.2%, although the data do not include teachers in bilingual education settings [Zippia.com, 2021].) Even black teachers who do enter the teaching profession often feel vulnerable to "internalizing racism" one study finds (Kohli, 2014, p. 367). "If these students go on to be teachers," Kohli (2014) continues, "the consequences can be particularly detrimental" (p. 367).

A black English language teacher in New York uses the term "altruistic shield" to describe

*a psychological mechanism used by educators that allows us to outright deny or otherwise defend ourselves from anticipated or in-the-moment accusations of racism because of what we consider to be the altruistic nature of our work. (Gerald, 2020, p. 22)*

He continues,

*More specifically, some ELT professionals believe that choosing this field means that we do not play a role in systemic racism, despite extensive evidence of the persistent and pervasive White supremacy in the ELT field. (p. 23)*

In this short article, Gerald (2020) provocatively suggests that English language teaching can have undertones of "white saviorism." This might invoke the legacy of Indian boarding schools, whose alleged purpose was to bring English to the "underprivileged" but whose actual practices resulted in cultural genocide, with all the grief the boarding schools caused.

## **Low Representation of Students of African Descent in Dual Language Programs**

In Illinois and nationwide, dual language programs have enjoyed robust growth. Finally, Americans are coming to understand that bilingualism and biliteracy are not only useful but can be considered a form of giftedness (Lems et al., 2017). However, gifted African-American children are badly underrepresented in such programs. A survey of dual language participants between 2011 and 2015, for example, found that black children were only 6% of students enrolled in dual language programs (Park et al., 2017). In Illinois, one of the hallmarks of successful completion of dual language programs is the State Seal of Biliteracy, which is given at the end of high school or sometimes at the end

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of junior high. The Seal of Biliteracy is a very important credential on a student transcript that shows advanced language study. It also bestows a financial benefit because some colleges and universities accept this advanced language proficiency for college credit. The Director of the Office of Language and Cultural Education at Chicago Public Schools, Luis Narvaez (2021), states, “Currently less than 1% of recipients of the State Seal of Biliteracy at CPS are Black, yet these students make up over 35% of the total enrollment across our district.”

## **Taking a Deep Breath: What Can We Do?**

How can we as educators move English language teaching and learning in the direction of greater racial equity? Just because it is not easy does not mean it is not urgent. Here are a few ideas, and I am sure you will think of more:

- Even when children are not able to take advantage of bilingual education, teachers can make sure to have books available in the home languages of all the children in the classroom, whether in the classroom library or the school library. There are now several excellent publishers of bilingual books in African and diasporic African languages, including Alikobooks, Language Lizard, and Hoopoe Books. When books in their home language are in the classroom, children feel that their heritage is represented and that they have a voice. If possible, a reader, possibly a family or community member connected to the child, can come in to read the books out loud. Hearing a story as an interactive read-aloud gives all children the opportunity to experience a new language and makes the child who speaks that language feel special.
- Recognize that black immigrant children are dealing with (at least) two different seismic shifts—adjusting to life as an immigrant and dealing with racism and colorism—and

for some, also learning a new language. It is important to know that black immigrant children are “black-presenting” to the world and that influences their lived experience in the U.S. If we do not acknowledge or support children’s lived experiences in school, they will gradually come to believe that school is not for them. Also, even for very young children, skin tone will come up as darker-skinned children will receive some kind of opprobrium, possibly from their own elders and often from their classmates. A kindergarten teacher who worked in a school with all children of African descent recounted to me that when she asked the children to tell something they liked about themselves, the child with the lightest skin announced that he liked that his skin was light. What does an anti-racist educator do in that moment to support all of the students?

In preschool classrooms in which white children come in contact with black children for the first time, preschool teachers have told me that the white children may ask black children if their brown skin color will rub off. As inconceivable as these comments might sound in contemporary, diverse America, black and brown children hear these things and internalize negative messages about themselves. This is only one reason that young children of color need teachers who look like them, who affirm them, and who understand their experiences. For teachers who are white, having guest speakers and visitors in the classroom and a good collection of black-affirming books for all ages can also go a long way toward reassuring children that they are beautiful and precious.

- Afro-Latino students should be encouraged to become teachers—especially bilingual teachers for which there is a teaching shortage!
- Black American students should be encouraged to become teachers, study abroad, study world languages, and consider becoming trained as ESL and/or bilingual teachers.

- American students of African descent should be strongly recruited for dual language programs so that they will have the blessings of biliteracy and the Seal of Biliteracy, with all that that means.
- Districts offering dual language programs should take a hard look at the low enrollment of students of African descent in their programs. What messages are put out to families by the school administration, teaching staff, and alumni? How are current students showcased to prospective families? Does recruitment of the native English speakers from wealthier white families outweigh efforts to reach families of African heritage? What supports are in place to maintain the students of African descent in dual language programs if their families are presented with challenges, whether from income, healthcare, immigration status, or other factors? Are children who are already bilingual, such as African immigrant students, given the opportunity to become fluent in a third language, which is normal in Europe? If not, why not?

I had planned to write about using music in the ESL classroom for this issue, but equity tugged at my sleeve until I put that other topic aside and answered the “fierce urgency of now.” Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something. This invocation comes with an extra, belated, and heartfelt “wELLcome” to any black teacher who might consider teaching ESL or bilingual education. You are precious!

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