



BCS-1749217, BCS-1749257



# 504 VOICES DIALECT AWARENESS CURRICULUM

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2024

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# The 504 Voices Project



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## WHO WE ARE:

**504 Voices** is a multi-year research project on language, culture and traditions in New Orleans. Via audiorecorded interviews with lifelong New Orleanians, **we aim to document the language practices** in our city, and the distinctive linguistic features that make New Orleans so unique.

If you have feedback, questions, or wish to lend your voice to this project, please contact us at:

[504voices@gmail.com](mailto:504voices@gmail.com)



To learn more and keep up with our project, visit our website: [www.504voices.com](http://www.504voices.com) or follow us on instagram @504voices !

## SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS:

The development of this dialect curriculum, and the research required to create it, was generously supported by the National Science Foundation (BCS-1749257; BCS-1749217).

We also received support from from Tulane University and Virginia Tech.

This Curriculum Guide was designed and edited by Kendall Medford, Tulane University. 2024.

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# INTRODUCTION



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## OVERVIEW:

Welcome to the 504 Voices Dialect Awareness Curriculum! This document is intended to be a guide for teachers, especially those involved in literacy instruction at the K-3 level, in the New Orleans area. While we've written this to target a K-3 audience, we hope it will be of use to those teaching older students as well, in particular those providing remedial instruction.

We've arranged the curriculum into five modules; you can start at the beginning and read straight through, or you can skip around to the sections you find most interesting. If you'd like to contribute ideas, we'd love to hear from you directly! If you'd like to share comments and ideas with other educators, we'd love to have you at the [504 Voices: Dialects in the Classroom](#) group on Facebook!

The purpose of this guide is to highlight the importance of dialect awareness in the instruction of reading and to provide teachers in New Orleans with a primer on features they may encounter in the classroom that may affect their instruction. Reading, per the Simple View of reading, is the product of **decoding** and **comprehension**<sup>1</sup>. Just as any number times zero is still zero, without decoding comprehension is lost, and without comprehension, all the decoding in the world won't get you anywhere. If I know the Greek alphabet, I might be able to decode words on signs in Athens, Greece – but since I don't speak Greek, I won't comprehend the meaning of what I'm reading. For example, I may see a sign that says 'νερό' and recognize each letter and how to pronounce it. But if I do not know that νερό means 'water,' that decoding process is useless. Likewise, it is possible to speak a language, but if one cannot make sense of the marks on the page, they are entirely useless.

Consideration of **dialect** is important to both decoding and comprehension. One hundred years of research into literacy instruction provides us with strong evidence that despite the sometimes opaque orthography that English uses and the automaticity with which good readers recognize written words, phonics-based early instruction is key to reading success. Volumes of research from multiple fields, including psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience – including data on eye tracking<sup>2</sup> – have shown the mechanisms by which our brains process the written word, and evidence from educational studies<sup>3</sup> supports an early focus on phonics as indispensable to early literacy instruction. When we encounter written text, we mobilize parts of the brain intended for other functions, building associations between written symbols and the sounds they represent, associating first sounds and

then specific spellings with the lexical entries in our heads (you can think of the lexical entry as the dictionary storage in your brain)<sup>4</sup>. Because dialects may differ between individuals in terms of the pronunciations of these lexical entries, the path between decoding the words and retrieving the lexical entry may look different for speakers of different dialects, but the *process* is the same regardless of dialect. For example, for speakers of some English dialects, *which* and *witch* begin with different sounds: the WH is a digraph representing a voiceless labial-velar fricative (essentially, /hw/). For most speakers of modern American dialects, however, WH is just another way of transcribing the /w/ sound.

## RESEARCH ON DIALECTS AND READING:

Another example of how dialect may come into play is found in a series of studies<sup>5</sup> from the 1980s and 1990s conducted by John Barnitz in New Orleans. These studies demonstrated how correcting students on their failure to pronounce the plural -s while reading aloud results in frustration on the part of the student: the student knows that like many other letters in English orthography (consider the B in *climb* or the S in *island*), that /s/ is not pronounced in their native dialect. Comprehension tests confirmed that students have seen and understood the grammatical function of the plural -s, even though they did not pronounce it when reading aloud. Repeated correction of what in their native dialect represents a non-error resulted in confusion and eventually disillusionment and disengagement.

Barnitz was a supporter of an approach, pioneered by Frank Smith and especially Ken Goodman<sup>6</sup>, called Whole Language, which placed emphasis on comprehension over decoding. This approach, counterintuitive to begin with, has been disproven by volumes of research. However, the importance of respecting dialectal variation in the classroom, which Whole Language advocates firmly supported, has been repeatedly confirmed<sup>7</sup>, and viewed through this lens, the example provided above of -s demonstrates a feature that can be used in phonics instruction by a teacher with linguistic awareness and understanding of the distinction between **Playground English** (the dialect students speak at home, amongst friends, and in informal contexts) and **Classroom English** (the dialect students are expected to speak – and write/read in! – in the classroom). We chose these terms instead of ‘home language’ and ‘school language’, terminology which teachers may be more familiar with, for three reasons: (1) students may have a language other than English at home, in addition to an informal dialect they speak outside the classroom, which is outside the scope of this guide and generally well handled by ESOL teacher training; (2) all students have shifts in their speech that they make in informal contexts – even students who speak relatively standardized dialects of English – and we want to acknowledge and normalize style shifts and **code switches** as linguistic moves that all students make; and (3) we want to be clear that students need not abandon their most comfortable form of speaking altogether at school – their informal speech is a key form of self expression which of course carries social value amongst their peers; rather, we want teachers to empower the students to learn that they are able to communicate in a number of different ways, in different contexts, according to their needs and the norms of those interactions. Lastly, *Playground English* as a phrase implies that language – especially language without the strict bounds of standardization – can be a fun and creative outlet for students, acknowledging that no matter how they speak in the classroom, all

students will employ slang or playful catchphrases over time (see module 2), and showing them that we see and honor how these forms of language hold value to them.

The second part of the simple view of reading, comprehension, may also be influenced by language variation. Comprehension may be compromised when a student’s native dialect does not match academic language. Students may misunderstand texts, and (far more likely) teachers may misinterpret a student’s use of their native dialect in writing. Key to success in reading instruction is understanding that dialectal differences may be at the root of student struggles, and that some students may need explicit instruction about the differences between their informal dialect (Playground English) and formal, academic ways of speaking (Classroom English).

## WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS GUIDE:

This guide will provide readers with a list of common features instructors may encounter in a New Orleans classroom. Some of the features will affect decoding and encoding *words*, others will affect the comprehension and encoding of *sentences*. A student whose native dialect includes **consonant cluster reduction**, for example, in places where a teacher’s does not, may state that the word *left* has three phonemes rather than four because it is pronounced [lɛf], without the final /t/, in their native dialect. Failure to write a T on the end of the word when encoding, likewise, should not be seen as a lack of phonemic awareness or a problem in identifying clusters (often referred to as “blends” in the literature on reading). Students may pronounce two words the same way that their teacher pronounces differently, and vice-versa – which could create challenges for otherwise seemingly straightforward rhyming activities. Likewise, a student may misunderstand or have more difficulty identifying standard usage than would a student who speaks a dialect closer to the formal standard, for whom the process may be intuitive.

## OVERVIEW OF THE MODULES:

We begin in **Module 1** and **Module 2** with a quick review of dialects and their formation. In **Module 3** we turn to the history of writing and the importance of standardization, stressing that speaking a nonstandard dialect is not an impediment to orthographic mapping. In **Module 4** we provide a brief history of New Orleans English and we give some examples of the features a teacher may find in the classroom, divided by those that may affect decoding and encoding words (i.e. phonetic and phonological variation) and those that may affect the comprehension encoding of sentences (syntactic and semantic variation). In **Module 5** we discuss some issues of particular importance in New Orleans, where charter schools may result in a wide range of dialectal variation in a single early elementary school classroom.

We wish to stress that while we are outlining some potential educational pitfalls related to dialect, and while some research suggests that reading may be more difficult for speakers of some dialects (Washington et al. 2013), we do not want to overstate the difficulty students may encounter in

learning to read. Research (e.g. Chall et al. 1990) confirms that students who speak nonstandard dialects often have a good deal of receptive experience with standard English – consider Barnitz students, who understood very well what that -s represented and had no trouble understanding it – and when given the same instruction achieve comparable levels of competence in grades 1, 2, and 3 (Chall et al. 1990). Nor do we wish to suggest that all cases in which students pronounce words in ways teachers may not expect or who misinterpret a text should be dismissed as dialectal variation; it is best to send students who struggle for further evaluation. Our goal is to answer frequently encountered questions to facilitate teachers' jobs, and to serve as a supplement to instructional materials that describe sound-grapheme correspondences but cannot account for all the variation present in the country. In short, we aim to answer the question, "Why do my students pronounce/write [x] like this?" While this guide is targeted at K-3 instructors, the material – especially that targeting semantic and syntactic variation – may prove to be of use to teachers working with students at higher levels, who have passed through the phonics-heavy phase, as well.

We hope that you will join us in our Facebook group, a place to share problems, solutions, and brainstorm new ideas! You can find it by [clicking here](#).

1. Gough & Tunmer (1986)
2. e.g. Rayner et al. (2012), Kim et al. (2019)
3. Bond et al. (1967), Chall (1993), National Reading Panel (2000)
4. See Ehri (1987, 2014); Dehaene (2009) provides an accessible, comprehensive account of the process by which the brain is rewired for reading
5. John Barnitz (1980; 1994; 1997a, b)
6. See for example Smith & Holmes (1971), Goodman (1967, 1986)
7. Reaser et al. (2017), Washington et al. (2013), *inter alia*

# MODULE 1: CELEBRATING VARIATION



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## OVERVIEW:

People who come from different places or have different backgrounds might pronounce their words in different ways. They might also use different words for the same thing, and they may structure their sentences differently. All of these differences in speech are linked to their dialect. Everyone speaks a dialect – even those who speak in a way most people would identify as standard. Like your fingerprint, your dialect is personal. It reflects the combination of influences on your personal identity over the course of your life. Things like your hometown, nationality, gender identity, ethnicity, education, and neighborhood may affect the way you speak. In short, your dialect tells your story. For this reason, it is essential to value all forms of speech as representations of individual identity. Moreover, studies have shown that students respond more positively to instruction when both the language of the classroom and the language of the home and/or wider community are valued and treated with dignity. Understanding differences will also help you to teach students the sound-grapheme correspondences necessary to become successful readers and to recognize where students may be misunderstanding academic writing (and why they produce the forms they do when they write their own words down).

Nonstandard dialects are often misunderstood to be failed attempts at speaking the standard. They are consequently often characterized as wrong or bad. As we'll briefly outline in module 2, linguists have shown that this is not the case. Dialects develop independently but in tandem, and the features selected as standard are not chosen for some objective superiority – indeed, features seen as nonstandard (and therefore wrong) in one language may be perfectly standard (and therefore correct) in another. For example, in English we consider the use of multiple negatives in a sentence like *I ain't never done that* to be incorrect, but in French, the same construction (*je n'ai jamais fait ça*) is considered correct.

## KEY CONCEPTS:

One speaker's dialect may differ from someone else's in word choice (**lexicon**), word meaning (**semantics**), sentence construction (**syntax**), sounds and pronunciation (**phonetics** and **phonology**), and word formation/conjugations (**morphology**). In linguistics, we refer to differences in specific features as **variants**. In this document, we hope to help you identify common forms of variation you may encounter in your students native dialects, and to celebrate that while also providing key adaptations to literacy materials to acknowledge the varied linguistic backgrounds your students bring to the classroom. We'll be presenting variables at all levels, beginning with those that affect the encoding and decoding of individual words (phonetic and phonological variables) and then moving to those that affect sentence construction and comprehension (morphological, syntactic, and semantic variables).

## VARIETIES OF ENGLISH:

While we stress the equal value of all dialects, we all know that within the US some forms of language are more highly valued by society than others (linguists say they have **overt prestige**). People usually call this **Standard English**, but as noted above, here we will call it **Classroom English**, because school is one of the places where standardization pressures apply. While many people believe that Classroom English means speaking without an accent, it can actually be described as a specific set of linguistic features – a dialect of its own. For example, below identify the example written in Classroom English:

1. I ain't done nothing today.
2. I haven't done anything today.

Often teachers, parents, and other authority figures identify what is 'wrong' or 'bad' about (1), instead of sharing with children what is *different* between (1) and (2). If we want students to say the Classroom English version of this sentence, we must share with them what those features *are*, rather than what they *aren't*. One way to do this is as follows:

With friends or family, you might say "I ain't done nothing," but in the classroom we say "I haven't done anything."

In this example, the teacher (a) identified the difference between Playground English and Classroom English, (b) codeswitched it for the student, providing a model for them to do this, and (c) retained a neutral tone about this difference instead of identifying the child's native dialect as bad or wrong.

While this example demonstrates a way that variation can have overt negative judgments about it, many forms of linguistic variation are viewed less negatively – one way of showing students that

variation can and should be celebrated is to share those examples with them, to provide some framing for how common variation is. For example:

### **What do you call a sweetened, carbonated beverage?**

(Throughout the US you might hear *pop*, *soda*, or *coke*; in New Orleans you might also hear *cold drink*. None of these is more or less correct than the other.)

### **How do you pronounce *pecan* and *praline*?**

(In some parts of the US this might be pronounced as PEE-can and PRAY-leen.

In New Orleans, it is more likely to be pronounced puh-CAWN and PRAH-leen; but you may find that even in your classroom there is variation in these words!)

As a teacher of young children, you have the opportunity to reframe their understanding of variation, and to take pride in their native dialect (and to value the native dialects of other students!) while also understanding the value of Classroom English. You can also learn to recognize when certain 'errors' in your students' reading and writing ARE derive from their native dialect, and provide them with the support to spot these challenges and overcome them.

## **UNDERSTANDING NON-STANDARD DIALECTS:**

If so-called Standard English is overtly valued over other dialects in institutional settings like schools, then why do nonstandard dialects continue to exist? The obvious answer is because they **are** valuable to their speakers – either as a marker of identity, community, or group solidarity. Linguists call this more community-specific valuing of nonstandard dialects **covert prestige**. And indeed, most individuals **style shift** across contexts – think, for example, of how you might speak over the phone to a close friend or family member, compared to how you might speak to a customer service representative; if you spoke with your friends/family in the same tone as you spoke to a customer service representative, they might wonder if something was wrong! That is because your informal speech (your Playground English, as it were) signals to them that you are comfortable with them, while more formal modes of speaking (standard or Classroom English) often signal social distance.

Though even very young children have been shown to exhibit stylistic shift in different contexts (Fischer 1958), your students may not yet be overtly aware of this style shifting (also sometimes called codeswitching) and may need your help to understand in what contexts to switch from Playground English to Classroom English in addition to learning the linguistic differences between Playground and Classroom dialects. By telling them explicitly, you help to build their **sociolinguistic awareness**, and also their ability to understand and value the various forms of linguistic expression they have access to – varieties that feature covert prestige, or value within their personal circles, and varieties that feature overt prestige or value within the classroom and beyond. By noting variation and style shifting as normal and common phenomena, you signal to them that their language practices are something to build curiosity around, and that they are not a source of shame or concern.

## ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1:

Language can vary according to word choice (lexical variation), conjugation/word order (grammatical variation), or pronunciation (phonetic variation). The examples below feature Playground English and Classroom English phrase pairs. For each pair, identify the level of variation that they demonstrate: grammatical, lexical, or phonetic. *(Correct answers are provided at the end of this section.)*

1. I got **buku\*** groceries last night.  
I got **lots of** groceries last night.
  
2. She **be walking** to that store every day.  
She **walks** to that store every day.
  
3. Then he **axed** if he could borrow my pen.  
Then he **asked** if he could borrow my pen.
  
4. My niece just **made** 11.  
My niece just **turned** 11.
  
5. You **bettah** fill up that gas tank before the **stawm**.  
You **better** fill up that gas tank before the **storm**.
  
6. **They not** home right now.  
**They're** not home right now.
  
7. He **ain't** finish yet.  
He **didn't** finish yet.

8. I'll meet you there **for** 3 o'clock.

I'll meet you there **at** 3 o'clock.

9. I wrapped it up in tin **ferl**.

I wrapped it up in tin **foil**.

10. I **might could** do that later.

I **might be able to** do that later.

Have you heard anyone say things like the 'Playground English' examples above? Later, we will return to these examples and provide names and descriptions of these features.

\*Note on spelling: From the French *beaucoup*. We use this spelling in accordance with data collection from 2010 by the first author, in recognition of the fact that it is often not recognized as French and that it has taken on new, local meaning that renders it distinct from the French. *Buku* was the spelling provided to her by the New Orleans teenagers who used it.

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## ACTIVITY 2:

Peruse the [Yale Grammatical Diversity Project](#) and identify some features that you use, or that you have heard students use. After reading about the features and their rules, try to generate an example sentence yourself.

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## ACTIVITY 3:

Watch Jamila Lyiscott's spoken word poem '[3 Ways to Speak English](#)' and consider the ways that codeswitching takes place in your own everyday life, and in the lives of your students. What motivates Lyiscott's codeswitching? What do her English varieties mean to her?

## Answer key to Activity I

1. *Lexical*

2. *Grammatical*
3. *Phonetic*
4. *Lexical*
5. *Phonetic*
6. *Grammatical*
7. *Lexical*
8. *Lexical*
9. *Phonetic*
10. *Grammatical*

## FURTHER READING FOR MODULE 1 TOPICS:

- ‘Everyone has an accent’ by Walt Wolfram

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2000/everyone-has-an-accent>

*A brief essay explaining some forms of dialectal variation in US English, and the importance of dialect awareness.*

- ‘Sociolinguistics Basics’ by Connie Eble

<https://www.pbs.org/speak/speech/sociolinguistics/sociolinguistics/>

*A quick description of what sociolinguistics, or the study of language & society, is and how sociolinguists think about language variation.*

- Wolfram, Walt & Natalie Schilling. 2016. *American English: Dialects & Variation* (3rd Edition). Wiley-Blackwell.

*A textbook on dialectal variation in American English that identifies features of various regional, ethnic, and socially differentiated dialects.*

- Bauer, Laurie, and Peter Trudgill. 1998. *Language Myths*. London & New York: Penguin Books.

*A collection of useful and easily understood articles, each dealing with a common myth about language structure, use and history. A good way to sample the linguists' perspective.*

# MODULE 2: ALL LANGUAGE CHANGES OVER TIME



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## OVERVIEW:

All language, even ‘nonstandard’ language, is **rule-governed and regular**. Language is also constantly changing, which is why your students may speak slightly differently from you, even if you are from the same neighborhood of the same city. The rules that determine what words, and in what order, come out of our mouths when we speak are called the **grammar** of the language. You may associate the word grammar with school, and with the idea that there is good and bad grammar (or right and wrong grammar), but linguists think of grammar as a neutral set of rules that are stored in our brains, built up over time based on what we hear and experience around us. Linguists have demonstrated that all spoken and signed languages have grammars, or sets of rules, even if those rules are different from the standard.

Interestingly, grammatical rules are not set in stone, and they can change over time. As a result, young people’s speech tends to differ slightly from that of their parents and grandparents. One example of this in American English is the past tense of ‘dive’. Do you say *dived* or *dove*? Does one sound more correct than the other to you? This might have to do with your age – the older form is *dived*, but many younger speakers use *dove*. Neither is more or less right than the other. But over time, *dove* will win out as users of *dived* become fewer (pass away) and users of *dove* pass their usage down to the next generation. This is language change in action.

While this is a pretty subtle example, anyone who has had to read Chaucer or Shakespeare in school knows that these slight differences accumulate, resulting in much more drastic language change over time. As language changes, sometimes natural **variation** develops between two forms – like *dived* and *dove* above. Language changes, all the time, no matter what, but some things may affect the *direction* of the change. For example, contact between speakers of different languages or dialects, especially if that contact is sustained and across multiple domains of interaction (at school, work, worship, and play, for example).

In New Orleans, since Hurricane Katrina, there has been rapid change in local demographics, which may lead to lots of speakers of different dialects interacting with each other more than before the storm. This may in turn lead to language change, and to a significant period of variation between

dialects spoken by longstanding New Orleanians versus newcomers. Moreover, the shift to an all-charter system has shifted the city away from neighborhood-based schools, sometimes bringing children from all over the city into classrooms together. The relevance for teachers is that there may be more linguistic diversity in the classroom now than there was a generation ago.

## OBSERVING STUDENT LANGUAGE CHANGE:

A fun way to observe and discuss language change with your students is through **slang**, or informal language. Providing any examples of local slang here would instantly date this pamphlet, because slang changes rapidly along with cultural trends. It is usually defined and developed by society's youth, and can be incredibly creative and productive. In American culture, a significant amount of slang originates in African American communities before becoming more mainstream (just as many musical, cultural, and other trends can often be traced directly back to African American traditions). For this reason, there is a common misconception that African American language practices are 'just slang.' This is entirely inaccurate, as linguistic research has repeatedly demonstrated; in fact, **African American English** (AAE) is a rule-governed, regular dialect just as any other. One way we know this is that some variants in African American English are **stable**, or unchanging over time – unlike slang which changes rapidly. One example of this is the word **stay** in African American English. Linguists have demonstrated that this term, in combination with a verb, indicates habitual aspect, as in the sentence 'he stay bothering me' (meaning: *he is always/constantly bothering me*). An 80 year old AAE speaker and an 8 year old AAE speaker would likely both use this construction, which is simply a feature of AAE grammar, rather than a fleeting trend. And just like any other feature of AAE, it is rule governed, meaning there are ways to mis-use it, as in the examples below, which would be **ungrammatical** for speakers of AAE (linguists mark ungrammatical utterances, defined as utterances no native speaker would ever utter, with an asterisk):

- \*He stay bother me
- \*He be stay bothering me
- \*They stays bother me

In noting the ways certain features *cannot* appear within the grammar of AAE speakers, we see that contra frequent misperceptions, there are indeed specific grammar rules governing the use of these features. When teachers bring these misconceptions into the classroom, they risk alienating students who use these features in their Playground English. A key example of this comes from applied linguist Uju Anya<sup>1</sup>, who shared this slide from her teacher training materials:



The answer, of course, is Cookie Monster, though he is not actively eating in the image and Elmo is. Anya explains that this is “[b]ecause the ‘be’ is grammatically significant. It means normally, usually, perpetually eating cookies, and that’s Cookie Monster.” She goes on to note that this common feature of AAE, called **‘habitual be’**, is often considered ignorant or dismissed as slang by teachers who are unfamiliar with its grammatical structure and meaning, which creates a classroom environment in which Black students are devalued and marginalized. Understanding these features makes their value clear and allows us to celebrate diversity rather than misidentify it as pathological. The result is more inclusive, supportive classrooms (and hopefully, society!).

1. <https://x.com/UjuAnya/status/1308456859557396480?s=20> Uju Anya, Tweet from September 22, 2020.

# ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY 1:

Listen to '[Why Chaucer said ax instead of ask and why some still do'](#) and answer the following questions:

1. How long has 'ax' been a common pronunciation?
2. What are some negative stereotypes linked to this pronunciation?
3. How can you explain to students the 'story of ax' while also describing the difference between Classroom English/Playground English pronunciations of this word in a neutral, nonjudgmental manner?

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## ACTIVITY 2:

Watch '[Talking Black in America](#)', available on YouTube, and work through the [discussion guide](#) made by the producers. The film presents information about African American English from the perspective of linguists, historians, and speakers themselves.

## FURTHER READING FOR MODULE 2 TOPICS:

- Crystal, David. 2011. *A little book of language*. Yale University Press.

*A fun and approachable book providing key information about how languages and dialects have*

*changed and evolved over time, and where the trajectory of human language use is headed.*

- McMahon, April. 2012. *Understanding Language Change*. Cambridge University Press.

*A somewhat more advanced consideration of the mechanisms of linguistic change.*

- Trask, R.L. 2012. *Why do languages change?* Cambridge University Press.

*A textbook providing myriad examples of language change in action, explaining how language change can be the source of dialectal differences (e.g. American English vs. British English).*

- Lanehart, Sonja. 2016. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*. Oxford University Press.

*A collection of chapters about different aspects of African American Language, considering the expressive power of AAL, but also highlighting variation within the African American community.*

# MODULE 3: A HISTORY OF WRITING & THE ROLE DIALECT PLAYS IN READING WRITTEN TEXTS



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## OVERVIEW:

While speaking is natural and something all children learn to do without explicit instruction, reading and writing are not. Speech (and, almost certainly, signing) is ancient. We don't know exactly how long human beings have had the capacity for such a highly complex communication system, but we can be sure it goes back tens of thousands of years at the very least, given the archaeological evidence we have for abstract thought (ranging from pictographs to elaborate cave paintings to the burial of the dead). In all likelihood, given that it appears to be hard-wired into our brains that we will learn to speak (though the specific language is not hardwired and depends on exposure), the earliest anatomically modern humans – emerging about 200,000 years ago – already had this ability.

In contrast, writing is an invention whose timing can be pinpointed with a fair degree of accuracy. It has only been independently invented three or four times, to the best of our knowledge. Though we have examples of precursors to writing from all over the world (writing-like activities like pictograms or possible logographic symbols on, for example, the Narmer Palette in Egypt or the Indus Valley script from India), with the oldest dating back about 10,000 years, writing proper emerges first around 3500 BCE in the Fertile Crescent. At roughly the same time, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian Cuneiform were invented. Whether these two writing systems represent independent innovation or whether one civilization invented writing and the other borrowed the idea is a matter of ongoing debate, but in any case, the earliest clear examples of writing that we have date to only 5,500 years ago. Writing was also independently invented around 1600 BCE in China and around 600 BCE in Mesoamerica. Whenever writing has appeared, it has rapidly spread from its inventors to their neighbors and then beyond, with other groups either borrowing a system wholesale (though often adjusting it) or borrowing the idea but creating their own symbols.

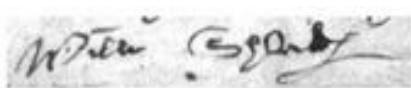
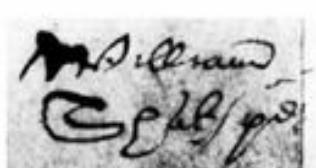
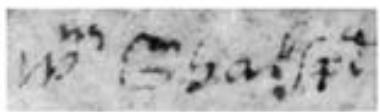
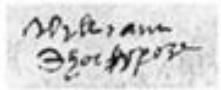
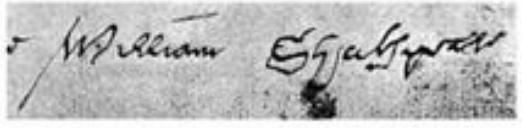
## DIFFERENT WRITING SYSTEMS:

Writing systems may represent language at different levels. **Logographic** writing is a system in which symbols, known as graphemes, represent entire words. Purely logographic writing is rare in practice and exists primarily as an early step on the way to systems that encode speech at lower levels.<sup>20</sup>

Systems often said to be logographic, like Chinese, are in fact morpho-phonemic in their modern form. **Graphemes** in **syllabaries** (for example, Japanese *katakana*) represent sound at the level of the syllable, as the name implies. The first alphabet, the system we use, emerged roughly 3,000 years ago when the Greeks adapted the abjad (a **phonemic** system representing only consonants, as modern Arabic and Hebrew writing do today) used by the Phonecians—who, in turn, had borrowed Egyptian writing. In fact, some of the symbols we use today can be traced directly to Egyptian hieroglyphs. The Romans in turn borrowed the alphabet from the Greeks, adapted it to their own language (changing, adding, and deleting some symbols along the way) and then spread it around Western Europe. The English alphabet is thus an adaptation of the Roman alphabet (and thus traceable directly to Egyptian hieroglyphs), though it has undergone some important changes that affect literacy instruction since it was first used to write down English. These changes have rendered English a comparatively difficult language to learn to read – for all English speakers everywhere.

## THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH WRITING:

Early English writing was variable – both regionally and between writers in the same region. It is possible to identify the regional origin of English documents prior to standardization by the spelling – people employed a direct “speech to print” process, using the symbols to represent their own pronunciation, regardless of how someone somewhere else would spell it. In fact, writing was so variable prior to standardization that even individual writers did not necessarily spell a word the same time every time they wrote it. Consider that Shakespeare, possibly considered the greatest writer in the history of the English language, couldn’t even decide how to spell his own name consistently!

	Willm Shakp Bellott-Mountjoy deposition 12 June 1612
	William Shakspēr Blackfriars Gatehouse conveyance 10 March 1613
	Wm Shakspē Blackfriars mortgage 11 March 1616
	William Shakspere Page 1 of will (from 1817 engraving)
	Willm Shakspere Page 2 of will
	William Shakespeare Last page of will 25 March 1616

With the Norman invasion of England in 1066 and subsequent French control of the British government, the English writing system underwent some important changes (as did the spoken language). Gone were the symbols representing interdental fricatives, ð and þ; these were gradually

replaced by TH. Likewise, the ȝ symbol (representing the /x/ phoneme) was replaced by the digraph GH (in turn, the /x/ phoneme also disappeared from almost all dialects of English – Scottish being the exception – replaced by /f/ in some contexts and by nothing at all in others). The æ disappeared in favor of a simple A. Variation in spelling remained, however, and in the fifteenth century the situation came to a head and a move to standardize the written language was put into motion.

## STANDARDIZATION:

There are several advantages to **standardization**. The most important is that it allows us to read efficiently and focus on the content, not the form. You can recreate the process of reading without standardization by reading the work of a beginning reader/writer – for example a first or second grader's writing. You will necessarily read more slowly, even if the letters are clear; this is because beginning writers often use nonstandard spellings that force you to sound everything out (and focus on context in the case of homophones) to identify the words. Standardization allows for **orthographic mapping** (Ehri 1995, 2014; Ehri & Wilce 1987; Ehri & McCormick 1998), the process by which specific spellings are associated with individual words in the brain, including their pronunciation, thereby allowing us to access them automatically and effortlessly, bypassing the sounding out stage (though that stage is necessary to connect the spellings to the lexical entries in the brain and become a mature reader, and mature readers still employ it when encountering new words)(Dehaene 2009). For mature readers, it is so automatic that it is impossible to stop yourself from reading when you are presented with written material, as Stroop (1935) and others (e.g. Ehri & Wilce 1987) have shown. When reading is automatic, you no longer have to think about decoding and you can instead devote all your attention to the message. A side effect of this is that people who speak mutually intelligible dialects can now read each other's words with the same ease they understand them when spoken (and in some cases, possibly with *more* ease). Orthographic mapping, in short, neutralizes the effects of dialect on reading. But to get to that point requires instruction that acknowledges and understands dialect and its relation to the standard.

Standard spellings in English reflect many things, including personal choices of foreign-language press holders (e.g. the GH in *ghost* is the product of Flemish typesetters), but the most important is that while standardization was a long process and small changes continue to be made to the system, it fundamentally represents the pronunciation of the region surrounding London in the 17th century (though with additional complications: note that it also preserves the orthography of borrowed words, e.g. *pizza* from Italian or *beautiful* from French; that morphology is preserved, as in the case of *musician*; or that etymology is represented, as in *psychology*). Unfortunately for every English speaker (and writer) in years to follow, this standardization was also taking place at a time of great change. Specifically, a major change in the way vowels were pronounced was initiated in the 16th century: the **Great Vowel Shift**. This shift, a slow process that is technically still in progress in some places, most notably resulted in the diphthongization of English long vowels (and in fact we call them “long vowels” because historically they were just longer-held versions of the short vowels). “Silent [or Magic] E makes the vowel say its name” is a product of the Great Vowel Shift.

But languages are *always* changing, and this is particularly true of English. A quick rundown of changes to the language in the past 500 years at Wikipedia (see, for example, [here](#)) will give you an

idea of the many ways English has changed since Shakespeare's time (reading Shakespeare, of course, will also give you a feel for it). This is compounded by the fact that English spread all over the globe during this period, creating new communities of English speakers and new opportunities for the language to develop independently. The result is a vast array of English dialects, distinct but related to each other, created as the language developed differently among groups separated by geography, class, ethnicity, and other factors.

The upshot of this is that nobody alive today speaks the dialect that was encoded in the standard spellings (especially since this standard took some time to settle into its modern form). But despite updates and some minor regional variation (e.g. Noah Webster's decisions regarding American English spelling that solidified spellings like *color* and *neighbor*, resulting in the rest of the world selecting *colour* and *neighbour*), English spelling world-wide is remarkably uniform. The good news, however, is that language change is **regular**. What this means is that generally speaking, it changes systematically: if you pronounce the vowel /a/ differently in one word, you now pronounce it that way everywhere (or at least everywhere that shares the phonological context). This results in predictable patterns: **phonics**. While speakers in Australia may pronounce *day* [dai] and Americans pronounce it [dei], the spelling of the word remains unaffected. Australians simply learn that AY stands for [ai] and Americans learn that it stands for [ei]. Across dialects, there may be many rules that differ (speakers of non-rhotic – or r-dropping – dialects, like some varieties of British English, must learn to contend with the R that only surfaces under certain conditions), but these are not insurmountable problems.

Likewise, grammatical structures may pose problems for comprehension. In the eighteenth century, English was not yet the global powerhouse it is today. Inspired by the Enlightenment, people like Samuel Johnson, suffering from a sense of insecurity regarding his own language, applied rules from mathematics and from classical languages (Greek and Latin) to the English language. Thus it was decided, for example, that "double negatives" (*I ain't never*) were incorrect (after all, in math, two negatives make a positive), despite their widespread use. While the formal standard is not specifically codified in a single place and the boundaries are fuzzy, a comparison of several style guides will reveal a number of core, generally agreed-upon features.

Spoken language has a standard as well; this standard is entirely uncoded but represents the collective agreement of the speech community. In short, features that are associated with people who hold wealth and power are favored over those used by those occupying lower positions in the social hierarchy. The features selected, as the example of multiple negation in standard French outlined at the beginning of this pamphlet demonstrated, are not chosen for their objective superiority, but rather for this association with wealth, education, and power (which tend to coincide). Consequently, there are a range of pronunciations and structures deemed prestigious and there is no single dialect that represents the spoken standard. There are also a range of dialects that speakers consider incorrect, however unfair this may be. The common misconception of the public is that these are poor attempts at speaking the standard rather than equally valid, if different, ways of speaking.

It would be impossible for any guide to present every possible variation in pronunciation that teachers may encounter in a classroom, especially with materials that are distributed across, for

example, the entire United States. Teacher's materials may sometimes present grapheme-sound correspondences that don't match what instructors find on the ground in the classroom (for example, you may be asked to pronounce *cot* and *caught* for students who don't make that distinction – and you may not make it, either). In the next module, we will present some of the major features that distinguish New Orleans' English varieties from other dialects, but it should be noted that not all students will use all the features presented, and students may use features that we don't cover here (we'd love to hear from you in that case!).

## ACTIVITIES

*(Answers to all activities can be found at the bottom of this section.)*

### ACTIVITY 1:

One reason that the English writing system is so challenging to learn is because some letter combinations in English may result in different pronunciations in different words due to historic changes and borrowings from other languages over time. Compare the vowel sounds in the following pairs:

- ‘ou’ in *souvenir* vs. *out*
- ‘o’ in *hotel* vs. *move*
- ‘i’ in *fatigue* vs. *whine*
- ‘au’ in *fraud* vs. *laugh*
- ‘e’ in *supreme* vs. *ledge*
- ‘ei’ in *receive* vs. *eight*

Using [Etymonline](#), a free online etymology dictionary, look up the source of the first word in each pair, and hypothesize about why its spelling maps to different sounds than in the second word (hint: you'll find a pattern in the source for the first word).

## ACTIVITY 2:

Note the following words that demonstrate the Great Vowel Shift in English:

Current word	Middle English (ca. 1400) pronunciations
bite /beit/	bee-tuh /bitə/
beet /bit/	bait /beit/
beat /bit/	beh-t /bɛt/
abate /əbeit/	ah-bah-tuh /abatə/
boat /boot/	bot /bat/
boot /but/	boat /boot/
about /əbaʊt/	ah-boot /əbut/

Say the words above aloud in both the current and Middle English pronunciations, then read the example from Chaucers *Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English pronunciation. Consider how the changes in pronunciation since 1400 have affected the transparency of the spelling of these words (and the consistency of spelling in English).

1 **Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote**

When April with its sweet-smelling showers

2 **The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,**

Has pierced the drought of March to the root,

3 **And bathed every veyne in swich licour**

And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid

4 **Of which vertu engendred is the flour;**

By which power the flower is created;

5 **Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth**

When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,

6 **Inspired hath in every holt and heeth**

In every wood and field has breathed life into

(full annotated poem can be found at: <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/general-prologue-0>)

**Answer to Activity 1:** The first word in each example is a borrowing from French!

## FURTHER READING FOR MODULE 3 TOPICS:

- ‘A brief history of English spelling’ by The English Spelling Society  
<https://www.spellingsociety.org/history#/page/1>

*A quick historical summary of some of the spelling changes that the English language has seen over time, providing context for why these changes took place.*

- ‘Where did writing come from?’ by Shelby Brown <https://www.getty.edu/news/where-did-writing-come-from/>

*A brief article providing descriptions of the origins of writing, tracing back to ancient times.*

- ‘What was the Great Vowel Shift and why did it happen?’  
<https://www.discoveryuk.com/mysteries/what-was-the-great-vowel-shift-and-why-did-it-happen/>

*An engaging and condensed account of the Great Vowel Shift with examples and timeline.*

- Crystal, David. 2005. *The Stories of English*. Penguin Books.

*A thorough historical view of how the English language developed and changed over the course of several centuries, integrating examples from literature spanning from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Lord of the Rings.*

- Eide, Denise. 2012. *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy*. (2nd Edition). Logic of English, Inc.

*A deep dive into the historical developments that led to English’s spelling system being as it is, unlocking the ‘logic’ of some of the baffling spelling practices in modern day English.*

- Bonfiglio, Thomas Paul. 2010. *Race and the Rise of Standard American*. De Gruyter.

*An accessible and fascinating deep dive into the way Americans developed over time ideologies of what ‘standard’ American English sounds like, considering the roles that race and racism played in the process.*

# MODULE 4: DIALECTS IN NEW ORLEANS



504 VOICES  
DIALECT AWARENESS  
CURRICULUM

## OVERVIEW:

Although everyone has a dialect, some students' **Playground English** features are accommodated better than others at school. Likewise, some dialectal features may affect encoding and decoding more than others, or may affect encoding more than they do decoding. For example, a student may have less difficulty reading words with a post-vocalic /r/ than they do in writing them. Recognizing a word is easier than remembering where to put an R for an /r/ you don't normally pronounce. As a result students may leave out R when writing a word like *car*, or they may insert one where it doesn't belong (classically, *idear* for *idea*). Having said this, it bears remembering here that the British deal with this all the time, as it's part of their standard dialect. Many American teachers may not be accustomed to r-less pronunciations and materials don't often present it, but it's not something unknown in the world or impossible to accommodate in teaching literacy.

In this section we will identify specific features you may encounter in your New Orleans classroom. We'll begin with those that can affect the **decoding** and **encoding** of words, and move on to those that can affect sentence comprehension and composition (i.e. the decoding and encoding of multi-word utterances). The features we present here are the most important ones we've encountered in our research, but you may well encounter something we haven't addressed. We'd love to hear from you if you do! ([504voices@gmail.com](mailto:504voices@gmail.com))

## FACTORS THAT AFFECT DECODING AND ENCODING WORDS:

- **AI monophthongization**

A diphthong is a combination of two vowels in the nucleus of a single syllable. If you pronounce *wide* in Standard American English, for example, you'll notice that when you pronounce the vowel you start with your mouth in position for /a/ and glide to /ɪ/. All of what we call "long vowels" in English are in fact diphthongized. Historically they were actually short vowels held longer – thus the name. You can get a feel for what this means by pronouncing *teeth* and *teethe*; you'll notice that you hold the vowel longer in the second word. Today they have been diphthongized, but the

term *long vowel* has stuck. In any case, in some dialects, /aɪ/ is monophthongized (i.e. reduced to one vowel) to /a:/ (the colon indicates that the sound is held longer, i.e. lengthened). Thus, *wide* may be pronounced [wa:d] rather than [waɪd].

- **FOIL/FERL**

On the other hand, the /ɔɪ/ diphthong may interchange with /ər/. This is a classic feature of New Orleans English, though it's not limited to the city and is (or was, at least) found in many American dialects – perhaps most famously that spoken in New Jersey. Today it's not heard as often as it once was, but it's not unusual to come across people who use it. Speakers may pronounce *spoil* as *sperl* or *oil* as *earl*. The reverse phenomenon (*girl* as *goyl*) is extremely rare these days and you're unlikely to come across it at all (and if you do, we'd love to hear from you!).

- **PIN-PEN merger**

In many American dialects, including here in New Orleans, the vowels /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ sound the same when they appear before a nasal (as in *pen* or *hem*). These vowels are already so similar that even children who distinguish them in all contexts often have trouble learning the sound-letter correspondences; those who merge them may encounter a little more confusion.

- **CAR-CORE merger**

Likewise, the vowels in *car* and *core* are neutralized before /r/ in dialects across South Louisiana. This can result in occasional confusion (Nathalie once completely misunderstood the word “carpet” as “corporate” and didn’t catch a *car door / corridor* pun) for instructors from elsewhere who don’t have the merger and may have never encountered it. Perhaps the most important effect of this merger that we’ve encountered is the frequent use in writing of **are** for **or** and vice-versa (“would you like chocolate **are** vanilla ice cream?” “**Or** you coming with us?”). It’s worth checking with a student who appears to be misusing these words to see if it’s not linked to their pronunciation.

- **COT-CAUGHT merger**

A major sound change that is currently underway in America, originating in the West and Midwest and spreading nationwide, is the merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ so that *caught* and *cot* (or *Dawn* and *Don*) are indistinguishable from each other. This merger is not widespread in New Orleans, but confusion may arise when teachers with merged vowels teach those with distinct vowels or students with a merger encounter teachers who maintain a distinction.

In places where the phonemes are distinct, the difference may be readily apparent to speakers with the merger (classically, New York, as exemplified by Mike Meyers on *Saturday Night Live* with his series of “Coffee Talk” sketches), or it may pass unnoticed. In New Orleans, the distinction is clear to speakers who have it, but it may not be heard by those with a merger. Nathalie once confused an entire class of high school students by repeating a word they were trying to teach

her with the wrong vowel – fortunately the confusion was quickly cleared up when Nathalie realized what was going on.

Many teaching materials (notably, the first edition of *CKLA*) do not address this variation, often insisting that the vowels are distinct, and directing teachers to ask students to identify the vowel based on their own production of a series of words. While these materials assure teachers it's okay if students have trouble with the exercise, they also insist that the exercise is valuable. This type of exercise has the potential to produce frustration or at least confusion, however, when someone with a merger asks students to identify a distinction they don't make or when students with a merger are asked to identify a vowel distinction that is irrelevant to their literacy and in fact very difficult for them to distinguish, if they can do so at all.

An easy trick to get students who do not read yet and may not know the word *cot* (or understand what you mean when you ask them to give the past tense of the word *catch*) is to show them a picture of a hotdog and ask them what it is. Those with the merger will pronounce both syllables with the same vowel. If you have a merger, you should be able to hear the difference for those who distinguish it (though it will be subtle), since the syllables are adjacent to each other.

- **Mary-merry-marry**

Historically, across America, these three words were pronounced differently. In many dialects today, two or even all three of these words are pronounced the same, as a result of a merger in the pronunciation of the vowels preceding /r/. In New Orleans, you may encounter students for whom *Mary* and *merry* are pronounced [məri] but *marry* is [mari]. Other words affected include *character* and other words in which orthographic A precedes R.

- **Raising of /aʊ/**

This feature appears to be relatively new in New Orleans, though it is well-documented in other varieties of North American English, notably that spoken in Canada, to which it has become ideologically linked. We're talking about the pronunciation of *about*, often mischaracterized in Canadian speech as *about*. As a Canadian, Nathalie would like to assure you that a *boot* is something you wear on your foot and a *boat* is something that floats. *About*, however, is pronounced entirely differently. What is actually happening is that the initial vowel of the diphthong in /aʊ/ (also transcribed /aw/) is raising and centralizing to /ə/. This only happens before voiceless consonants. So, *lout* and *loud* have different vowels because of the voicing of the consonant that follows.

The same process occurs for many speakers to the diphthong /aɪ/: in many dialects, *eyes* and *ice* have different vowels, as do *ride* and *right* or *prize* and *price*.

In both cases, speakers may not even notice the difference in pronunciation, but we have encountered people who recognized it, so we present it here.

- **R-lessness**

R-lessness (i.e. not pronouncing /r/ after vowels, as in *Park the car at Harvard Yard* → *Pahk the cah at Hahvahd Yahd*) was used by almost all New Orleanians in the 1950s. Today, however, as in

many places where r-lessness is attested, it is in rapid decline. Many speakers still retain it, however; most notably, it remains a feature of African American English.

Most American literacy materials don't deal with the issue of r-lessness. We recommend looking to British material for teachers who need to address it in their classroom.

- **-s deletion**

In some dialects, most notably African American English, final -s may be deleted. While this is generally interpreted as the deletion of a morpheme, as the -s affected is usually the one found in plural (bags), possessive (Mary's), or third person singular (she walks) suffixes, some analyses have proposed that the process may be phonological instead, as non-morphemic -s may also be affected. In New Orleans, you can find this in the pronunciation of names such as *Tchoupitoulas* or *Ursulines*, which you may encounter as *Tchoupitoula* and *Ursuline*.

- **-ed deletion**

Similarly, the past tense marker -ed may also sometimes be deleted. When this occurs between a final /r/ and a vowel, the /r/ may also be deleted and a glottal stop may appear (i.e. the sound that occurs between *uh* and *oh* in *uh-oh*).

- **Possessive *mines***

Conversely, the word *mine* may appear with a word final /s/. This occurs as a result of a process linguists call **paradigm leveling**: speakers make an analogy with other items in the same paradigm. In this case, the analogy is with the rest of the set of possessive pronouns (*yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, and *theirs*), all of which have a final /s/. So why shouldn't *mine*? The feature is widespread across South Louisiana and can also be found elsewhere in North America.

- **Consonant cluster reduction**

All speakers of North American varieties of English reduce groups of consonants in certain contexts. For example, in casual speech, it is normal to delete the /t/ in *left* when it precedes a word beginning with a consonant, such as *side*. When the following word begins with a vowel, however (such as *arm*), the /t/ is retained. Thus, *left* in *left side* is pronounced [lef] but it remains [left] in *left arm*.<sup>1</sup>

In some dialects, however, the final /t/ may be deleted even if the following word begins with a vowel. While even in these dialects it is not systematically deleted, it presents a possible location for misspelling to occur.

- **Th-stopping, th-fronting**

A very common feature of English dialects spoken in South Louisiana (and indeed around the country and the world, especially for speakers whose heritage communities did not speak English) is the pronunciation of the interdental fricatives /θ/ (as in **thing** or **bath**) and /ð/ (as in **this** or **breathe**) as /t/ and /d/ respectively (ting for *thing*; dis for *this*), or as /f/ and /v/ (baff for *bath*; breav for *breathe*). This presents little impediment to decoding, but may present occasional

issues with encoding – for example, some students when encoding words they may write them with a T, D, F, or V, since this is how they pronounce them out loud.

- **Metathesis of ask**

Then he **axed** if he could borrow my pen.

Phonetic feature - ask as ‘ax’. This pronunciation dates back to the 8th century AD. It is not specific to New Orleans English, and can in fact be heard just about anywhere English is spoken. It was famously used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*.

- **Skr- for str- clusters** (e.g ‘skreet’ for ‘street’)

As you can see from the list above, many of the features you will hear your students use are not specific to New Orleans, and in fact are forms of variation they will encounter throughout their lives wherever they go in the US.

## FACTORS THAT AFFECT SENTENCE COMPREHENSION AND ENCODING:

It is not only spelling that presents a challenge for the varied dialects that students may come to school with – there may also be misunderstandings of meanings and interpretations based on grammatical differences between students’ Playground and Classroom English. While it bears remembering that speakers of nonstandard dialects generally have lots of passive (i.e. listening) experience with the standard) and consequently these issues may be minor, they may occasionally occur. Our stress here, therefore, is primarily to caution the standard-speaking teacher who may encounter nonstandard constructions in student writing to approach these issues as dialect rather than error.

- **Copula absence**

The *copula* is a verb, in English a conjugated form of the verb *to be*, that appears between subject and predicate. In some dialects, notably African American English, it may be dropped in certain contexts, resulting in utterances like “**They not** home right now.” This is not specific to New Orleans English but is commonly heard here.

- **Ain’t (for be, have, AND do)**

The use of *ain’t* for negative *to have* or *to be* (“I ain’t hungry,” “I ain’t been there”) is common throughout the world. The use of *ain’t* for negative forms of *to do*, as in a sentence like *He ain’t finish yet*, is less common, though it is heard across the US. It is generally considered a feature unique to African American English, though in New Orleans there is evidence that it is used by other speakers as well.

- **Multiple negation**

Multiple negation, often called *double negative*, has long been derided by grammarians as illogical and incorrect. It is doubtful, however, that there is a person alive who would misinterpret *I ain’t done nothing* to mean I have done something (unless the speaker were to use intonation that implied a coy

use of *nothing*). Bachman-Turner Overdrive sang “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet” without confusing a world of listeners. Linguists have shown that the use of multiple negation, which may include more than two negatives—consider a construction like *I ain’t never been nowhere with nobody*—serves to reinforce the negativity, helping the listener to interpret the sentence as negative, not to cause them to perform mathematical gymnastics in their heads. This feature is common to many dialects of English world-wide.

- **Existential *they***

The use of *they(ve) got* to indicate the existential there is is typical in New Orleans, resulting in sentences like ***They(ve) got*** *a tree at the end of the street* meaning There’s a tree at the end of the street. You may also hear *it’s* used the same way: ***It’s a tree at the end of the street.***

- **Habitual *be***

You have likely come across constructions like *She be walking to that store every day* at some point, even if you don’t speak a dialect that uses it. The use of unconjugated *be* (as opposed to *she is walking to that store*) indicates that the action occurs habitually, or regularly. For example, you could not say *she be walking to that store right now*, as this implies a punctual aspect to the action. This feature is common in African American Language used throughout the US; other dialects of worldwide English have also been shown to have similar constructions – for example, Irish English (McCafferty 2014).

- **Simple past tense *had***

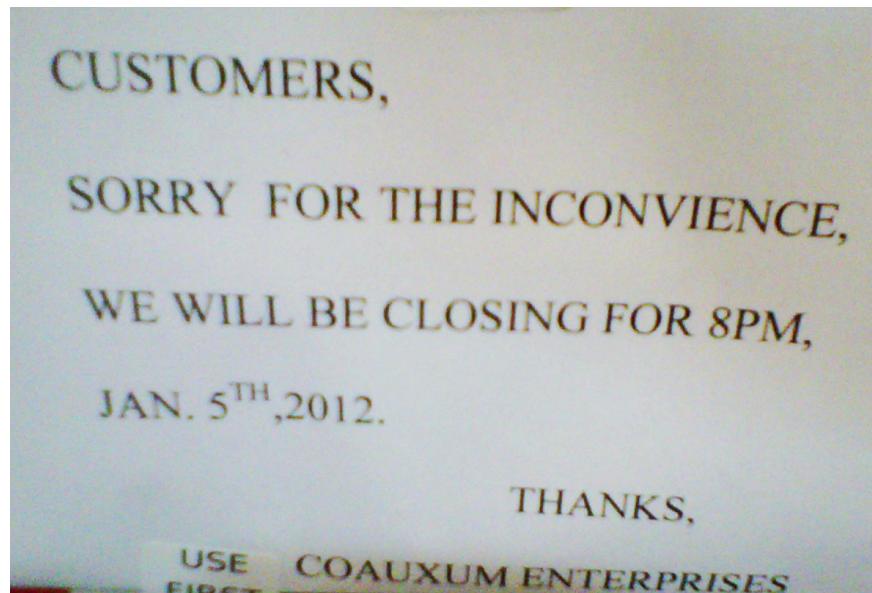
For some speakers, the simple past tense is formed using the auxiliary verb *had*. To non-speakers of such dialects, it can sound as though the speaker is relating an event that happened prior to another in the past, when this is not the intended meaning. A student who says *I had went to the store* means, simply, ‘I went to the store.’ (Other speakers might use this construction only when introducing an event that also happened in the past, but later, as in *I had gone to the store to check if they had king cakes in stock, but I quickly discovered there were none left*).

- **On yesterday/today/tomorrow**

In New Orleans, you can do something *on Tuesday* or *on Sunday*. You can consequently also do it *on yesterday, today, or tomorrow*.

- **For {time}**

The use of *for* [time] instead of *at* [time] is a common New Orleans way of expressing when an event will happen. For example: *I’ll meet you there for 3 o’clock.*



Sign on McDonald's door, Claiborne Avenue, 2012. Photo by Nathalie Dako

- **Make (an age)**

Make [age] is the New Orleans way to say turn [age]. For example, *My niece just made 11*. Its origin is unknown. We have been able to eliminate Irish and German as sources, but there is only weak evidence that it may come from French (that is, some French speakers in France have been willing to accept it as something they think they have heard somewhere).

- **Be by someone's house**

The use of *by* to mean *at* is in all likelihood one of very few (if not the only) feature that made its way into New Orleans English from German. While New Orleans is (quite fairly) understood to be a French city, in the nineteenth century, when New Orleans was a major port of immigration, millions of German immigrants passed through on their way to the Great Plains via the Mississippi River, and a significant number of them chose to put down roots here instead of continuing on (Nau 1958). The German immigration made important contributions to Louisiana culture, notably in the importation of the accordion to the Louisiana music scene, but left very little evidence of its passing linguistically. *I'm by my mamas* 'I'm at my mamas [house]' is thus far the only feature linguists (Reinecke 1985:60) have so far identified (German *bei* and Dutch *bij* are used the same way). The feature is also found elsewhere in America.

- **Stay**

As is the case in other regions, in New Orleans, speakers may use the word *stay* to mean *live*, as in, *I stay over there* 'I live over there.' The past tense of this meaning of *stay* is *stood*, as in *Before the storm, I stood in the sixth ward.*

## LEXICAL ITEMS OF NOTE:

While it is unlikely that specific words used in New Orleans will cause problems for either encoding and decoding, these words may appear in written work, so it will be important to understand their meaning (rather than interpret them as a misspelling or mistake).

- **Buku**

*Buku* is derived from French *beaucoup* and means a lot. While people all over North America use the French *beaucoup* (usually with some irony) to mean ‘a lot,’ in New Orleans, it’s used a little differently. Here it’s pronounced /buku/ (and you may see it spelled *boocoo* as well; we use this spelling because this is how teenagers once spelled it for us), and while it also means ‘a lot,’ as in *I got buku groceries last night*, it can additionally be used as an intensifier (i.e. meaning ‘very’), as in *It’s buku hot out*.

- **Neutral ground**

The term *neutral ground* was first used to designate a buffer territory separating the French and Spanish at the Louisiana-Texas border. It was eventually imported to New Orleans to designate Canal St., separating the French and Creole neighborhoods (the French Quarter, Marigny, etc.) from the later American-dominated Central Business District. Over time it shifted to designate a dividing strip, usually filled with grass, separating lanes on a divided road.

- **Make groceries/[age]**

*Make groceries* is a direct translation (a *calque*) of the French expression *faire les courses*. The French verb *faire* can be translated in English as either ‘to do’ or ‘to make’; New Orleanians chose the latter and produced *make groceries*. This verb is also used in combination with [age] instead of the word *turn* such that one who is about to become 12 years old might describe this as *making 12* (e.g. *I made twelve last month and my family had a big party*). Other terms of French origin include (but are by no means limited to) *beignet* donut, *flambeau* torch bearer [at Carnival parades], *parrain* ‘godfather,’ and *banquette* ‘sidewalk.’ *Parrain* and especially *banquette* are heard less often today than they once were.

- **Huckabuck/huckle-buck/frozen cup/zip cup, etc.**

In the hot summer months in New Orleans, enterprising locals would make and sell (or simply distribute to the local children) drinks (like Kool-Aid) frozen in their home freezers. These took on different names in different neighborhoods of the city.

- **Dressed**

Sandwiches, including burgers, in New Orleans may be garnished with lettuce, tomato, pickle, and mayonnaise. To order a sandwich this way is to order it *dressed*.

- **Cold drink**

Different regions of the U.S. have different names for the fizzy, sugared drink that comes in many flavors, such as cola and lemon-lime. While most of the U.S. uses either *soda* or *pop* for this beverage (see: <https://archive.nytimes.com/ideas.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/11/the-soda-vs-pop-map/>), some New Orleanians use the term *cold drink* – regardless of whether the drinks in question are actually refrigerated (for example, *The cold drinks need some ice because they are too hot*)

- **Padna/podna**

Arising from the word *partner*, some Louisianans (this is common outside the city as well) use the word *padna/podna* to mean ‘friend.’ Usually this can refer to anyone from a best friend to a casual acquaintance, but the word is not used for romantic partners.

1. Example from Wolfram & Schilling (2016)
2. This entry is a short paraphrase of Campanella (2015)

## ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1:

New Orleanians vary across the city in how they pronounce certain words – ask 5-10 locals how they pronounce the following words/street names, and note the variation you observe:

1. Praline
2. Pecan
3. Mirliton
4. New Orleans
5. Mayonnaise
6. Melpomene (St)
7. Calliope (St)
8. Burgundy (St)
9. Foucher (St)
10. Carondelet (St)
11. Clio (St)

## ACTIVITY 2\*:

In some dialects of English, including some in New Orleans, the ‘r’-sound in words like *car* or *park* can be dropped so that these words sound like ‘cah’ and ‘pahk’ – this is called ***r-lessness*** or variable ***nonrhoticity***. However, not all ‘r’-sounds can be dropped. By comparing lists of words where the ‘r’ may be dropped with lists of words where it may not be dropped, you can figure out a pattern for ‘r’-dropping, and the rules that users of these features employ in their grammar to determine whether ‘r’ can be dropped or not.

### List A: Words that can drop ‘r’

- car
- father
- card
- bigger
- cardboard
- beer
- court

List B gives words where the r sound may NOT be dropped. In other words, speakers who might sometimes drop their ‘r’s in the words presented in List A would **ALWAYS** pronounce the ‘r’ in the words in List B.

### List B: Words that cannot drop ‘r’

- run
- bring
- principal
- string
- okra
- approach
- April

What rule/hypothesis explains why ‘r’ can be dropped in List A but not List B? (It can be helpful to formulate this as an ‘if/then’ statement – ‘if X, then ‘r’ can(not) be dropped’).

\*Activity adapted from Wolfram/Pippin

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## ACTIVITY 3:

Watch the classic film on New Orleans dialects, ‘[Yeah, You Rite!](#)’ (Alvarez & Kolker 1985). Though this short film was made in the 1980s, some of the features and dialects in it can still be heard in the city.

After watching, consider:

1. What patterns mentioned in the film do you think still reflect dialects in the city nowadays? What things do you think have shifted or changed?
2. What social patterns were identified distinguishing different ways of speaking in the city? Why do you think that is the case?

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## ACTIVITY 4:

Check out the website [Online Resources for African American Language \(ORAAL\)](#). The website has links to videos and podcasts, as well as activities for learning more about African American Language. Choose one video/podcast to listen to on your own time, and consider how the info you gain from it could be integrated into your teaching.

**Answer to Activity 2:** If 'r' occurs at the beginning of a syllable or within a consonant cluster, it cannot be dropped. 'r's that occur after vowels can be dropped

## FURTHER READING FOR MODULE 4 TOPICS:

- Alvarez, Louis & Andrew Kolker. 1985. *Yeah you rite!* Video recording. Center for New American Media.

*A dated but evergreen documentary on New Orleans accents across the city, according to neighborhood and ethnicity, providing some context for the different forms of language that one may encounter in the city.*

- Interview with Anne Charity Hudley on The Ling Space <https://youtu.be/xKjrnrsiKv4?t=1>

*Anne Charity Hudley is a trailblazer in communicating the insights from the field of linguistics into K-12 classrooms (and beyond), especially considering the role of regional and ethnic dialectal variation on student and teacher success. This interview offers space for her to discuss her ideologies and roles as a linguist-educator, and the ramifications of this important work.*

- Anne Charity Hudley & Christine Mallinson. 2011. *Understanding English Language Variation in*

*US Schools.* Teachers College Press.

*Teacher-oriented text with insightful stories and activities to think through the ways linguistic variation may come into play in K-12 classrooms.*

- Lisa Green. 2002. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

*This volume provides a thorough description of African American English, making occasional references to New Orleans African American English specifically.*

# MODULE 5: THE NEW ORLEANS CLASSROOM



504 VOICES  
DIALECT AWARENESS  
CURRICULUM

## OVERVIEW:

Any classroom, in New Orleans or elsewhere, will feature linguistic variation, at the very least between the students and teacher(s). In most cases, this does not affect communication, since we as speakers are able to accommodate variation across levels of language: grammar, pronunciation, and word choice. When teaching literacy, however, this may sometimes pose problems, and it may be challenging if a classroom is particularly diverse linguistically. This module includes a discussion of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, the five components of effective reading instruction, and how New Orleans students' dialects can be incorporated as a bridge when teaching students how to read. Before we begin, however, a brief history of developments in New Orleans schooling in the past two decades is in order.

## NEW ORLEANS AND CHARTER SCHOOLS:

Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, most children attending public school in New Orleans attended neighborhood schools. In 2003, the Louisiana Legislature created the Recovery School District (RSD), a state-level district that was charged with overseeing underperforming schools. RSD had overtaken five schools in New Orleans and turned their operation over to charters prior to Katrina; these joined a handful of existing charters in the city. Hurricane Katrina severely damaged or destroyed nearly all of the 128 public schools in the city; in November 2005, the state legislature passed Act 135, which transferred 107 New Orleans schools to RSD. Most, if not all of these were then turned over to charters selected by the state to operate<sup>1</sup>. In New Orleans, it is possible for high-performing magnet schools to convert to charters, and schools anywhere in Louisiana may also open under a charter (Type 2 charter) provided by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)<sup>2</sup>. By the 2023-24 school year, there were 189 public schools in New Orleans; only 63 of these were overseen by New Orleans Public Schools, and all schools in New Orleans were charters, six of them chartered by BESE. The 2024-25 school year will see the opening of Leah Chase School, the first permanent direct-run school in New Orleans in 18 years<sup>3</sup>.

With the shift to an all-charter system, admissions moved to a centralized lottery system, though existing charters such as Audubon and Willow (formerly Lusher) continued to hold their own admissions processes for years; parents famously camped out overnight to be first in line to register

for a spot at Audubon<sup>4</sup>. Lusher/Willow, which has an additional testing requirement for entry, was the last school to be added to the centralized lottery system, joining in 2022-23.

Over the past twenty years, the public school population has changed demographically as well. Prior to the storm, 93% of public school students were Black<sup>5</sup>; by 2023 this number had dropped to 74%<sup>6</sup>. The difference was largely filled by a doubling of both the White and Hispanic populations<sup>7</sup>. The public school system primarily serves students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with 86% of students in 2023 falling into that category<sup>8</sup>. Roughly 25% of children in New Orleans attend private schools<sup>9</sup>.

The change to an all-charter system in tandem with changes to the district's demographics have had an effect on the composition of classrooms. While many schools give priority in the lottery to students living within a certain radius of the school, and while most if not all give priority to siblings of existing students, public school students in New Orleans today are more likely than not to travel outside of their neighborhood to attend school and may even attend different schools than their siblings. By 2011, only 37.6% of students attended school in the same city planning district in which they lived<sup>10</sup>; the percentage of students who lived within a one-mile radius of their schools in the 2004-2005 school year was 49.9%; by 2011-12, that number had dropped to 21.5%.

With students criss-crossing the city to attend school, classrooms may feature more diversity at all levels (racial, ethnic, socio-economic, neighborhood) than they once did; this often translates to linguistic diversity. While many schools have a student body with a fairly uniform background, others will have variation to greater or lesser degrees. A linguistically diverse classroom can prove to be challenging to the teaching of literacy, but it can also be a wonderful opportunity for learning and celebrating differences between students and faculty, in itself a step on the path to student success.

In this model, we will discuss the implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the New Orleans classroom. Being culturally responsive includes recognizing and respecting dialectal diversity: Recognizing the way students pronounce words and construct sentences is vital to ensuring success. We will therefore do three things: first, we will review four cornerstones of teaching: assessment, small-group instruction, and explicit and systematic instruction. We then review the Five Pillars of literacy instruction and provide some suggestions for the New Orleans classroom. Finally, we return to the concept of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and discuss ways in which dialect may be explicitly addressed in the classroom in order to ensure student success.

## FOUR CORNERSTONES OF TEACHING:

The four cornerstones of teaching are essential and should be incorporated into all planning and instructional delivery for every student.

- **Assessment**

**Assessment** plays a pivotal role in effective instruction. Evaluating the five components is crucial for successful teaching and learning. In Louisiana, all K-3 students must take a literacy screener within the first thirty days of school. The Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)<sup>11</sup> is the assessment approved by the Louisiana Department of Education. DIBELS measures were specifically designed to assess Phonemic Awareness, Alphabetic Principle (Phonics), fluency, and reading

comprehension. Each DIBELS measure has been thoroughly researched and demonstrated to be a reliable and valid indicator of early literacy development (University of Oregon online). These components are critical for reading success and the scores indicate the status and progress of all learners.

- **Small-group instruction**

**Small-group instruction** offers significant benefits as it enhances the impact of lessons on students. Numerous research studies have demonstrated the superiority of small-group reading instruction over whole-class instruction. Smaller groups, typically consisting of 3 to 4 students, have proven to be more efficient in terms of teacher and student time, cost-effectiveness, increased instructional time, enhanced peer interaction, and improved skill generalization. Implementing small-group instruction necessitates careful planning, organization, and adaptation of instruction, methods, and materials to suit the groups specific needs. Tailoring materials to individual students further amplifies the benefits<sup>12</sup>.

- **Explicit Instruction**

**Explicit instruction** involves clear and visible teaching methods. Teachers use concise language to explain new concepts and strategies. This instructional approach entails modeling and providing explanations using multiple examples. Teachers offer extensive support to students as they practice and apply the newly acquired knowledge and skills. Throughout the process, there is a gradual shift in control from teacher to student.

- **Systematic Instruction**

**Systematic instruction** introduces skills from simple to complex, following a meticulously designed plan of instructional steps. It is purposeful, planned, and sequentially structured. For reading instruction, this means we begin with the simplest and most regular phonics patterns (short vowels in CVC syllables) and progress to more and more complex and/or rare patterns (such as silent letters or the OUGH rime). During the initial stages of learning, systematic instruction provides students with extensive teacher support.

Below is an outline of practices that should be incorporated in a New Orleans classroom. The next section is designed by component. Each component area includes the definition of the component, discussion of the research supporting its implementation, and identification of the best practices and instructional suggestions.

## WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY?

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy** is a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about their cultural place in the world. Culturally responsive pedagogy is divided into three

functional dimensions: the institutional dimension, the personal dimension, and the instructional dimension.

- *The institutional dimension* emphasizes the need to reform the cultural factors affecting the organization of schools, school policies and procedures (including allocation of funds and resources), and community involvement.
- *The personal dimension* refers to how teachers learn to become culturally responsive.
- *The instructional dimension* refers to practices and challenges associated with implementing cultural responsiveness in the classroom. (citation needed)

Bennet<sup>13</sup>, in a study of developing preservice teachers' understanding of CRP, and merging Culturally Relevant and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as two sides of the same coin, elaborates this division, explaining that:

*"The first belief [i.e. the institutional dimension] suggests teachers consider teaching as an art by understanding and empathizing with students; teachers do not use a set script or technique to teach. Culturally relevant teachers hold high expectations and believe all students can succeed.*

*The second principle [i.e. the personal dimension] suggests that teachers develop connections and sustain meaningful relationships with the students. Culturally relevant teachers appreciate the value of community and social interaction within the classroom for students' success, a community of learners<sup>14</sup>. The last belief [i.e. the instructional dimension] suggests teachers consider the conception of knowledge. Culturally relevant teachers connect learning to the students' lives to facilitate and scaffold development from personal schema, knowledge, and skills to more difficult and more bigger ideas. Through learning communities, culturally influenced instructional techniques develop for diverse student populations, and positive teacher connections, students develop empowerment, and culturally responsive teaching is achieved."*

With this document we advocate the use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as conceived and elaborated by Bennet; as we've noted, dialectal variation can be an excellent entry to positive student-teacher interactions. We will return to this point after a quick review of the five components (or pillars) of reading instruction.

## THE FIVE COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION:

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released its *Teaching Children to Read* report. The NRP provided a comprehensive overview of the five components of reading instruction, sometimes called the "Fab Five" or the "**Five Pillars**" of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. The National Reading Panel detailed these components as follows:

- **Phonemic awareness:** the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds- phonemes- in spoken words.
- **Phonics:** the ability to understand the predictable relationship between phonemes (the sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (letters and spellings representing those sounds in written language).

- **Fluency:** the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with expression (prosody).
- **Vocabulary:** the ability to understand the meaning and pronunciation of spoken and written words. Vocabulary is broken down into two parts; expressive (words children use to express themselves when speaking or writing) and receptive (spoken, written, or signed words children understand).
- **Comprehension:** the ability to make sense or get meaning from printed text (words, phrases, sentences, passages, etc.). Reading comprehension requires good phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary skills working in concert together and automatically to be effective.

These five components have become the cornerstone of all tier-one reading programs approved by the state of Louisiana and used in New Orleans public schools today. We will look at these instructional practices and identify what this instruction should look like in a New Orleans classroom.

## TEACHING THE FIVE PILLARS:

In this section we define each of the five pillars and then address their instruction. Each subsection will include a definition, a description of how the pillar looks in the New Orleans classroom, and activities to incorporate in the classroom to bridge the New Orleans Dialect to the Classroom Language. The activities in this module are found on the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#) and each activity will be clearly marked.

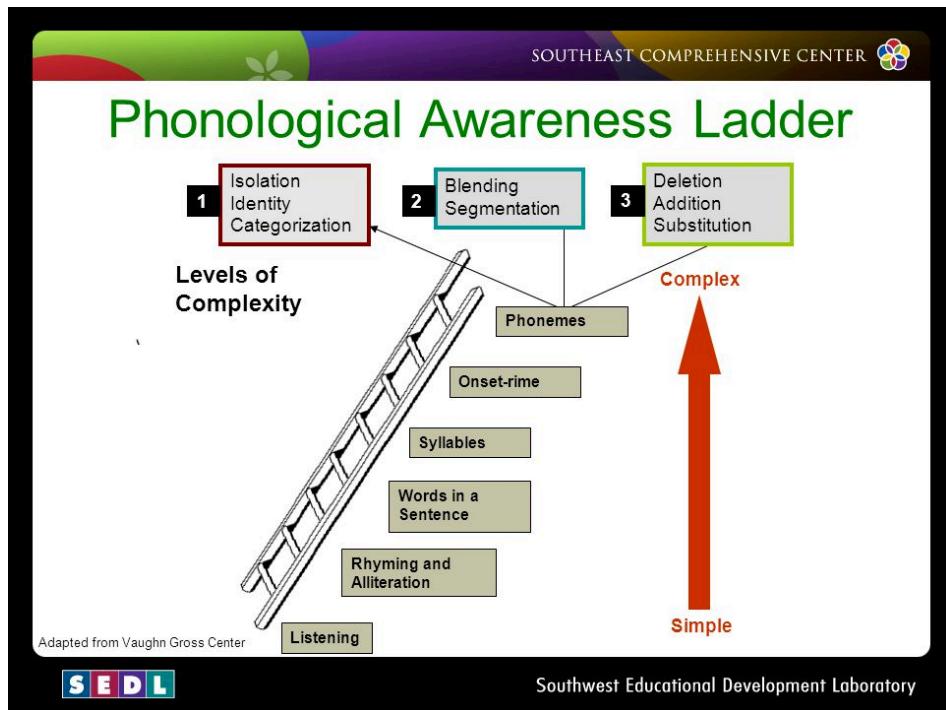
### Phonemic Awareness

The first step toward phonemic awareness is *phonological awareness*: the ability to recognize and identify words that rhyme, identifying alliteration, words in a sentence, syllables, onset-rimes, initial, medial, final sounds in words, and manipulating sounds in words to create new words.

Reading ability begins with the ability to process the phonological features of words. There is ample evidence that phonological awareness training is beneficial for beginning readers starting as early as age 4<sup>15</sup>. In a review of phonological research, Smith et al.<sup>16</sup> concluded that phonological awareness can be developed before reading and that it facilitates the subsequent acquisition of reading skills. The most common cause of reading difficulty in children is their inability to process the phonological features of words. Research has shown that weaknesses in the phonological awareness areas can be measured by a variety of reading tasks such as a phonemic awareness assessment.

Phonemic Awareness is the highest form of Phonological Awareness and it is where we want our students to be. (See PA Ladder<sup>17</sup>) Phonemic Awareness is the ability to identify, think about or manipulate individual speech sounds in words. Students with basic phonemic awareness can identify the sounds in the word cat as /k/-/a/-/t/; those with advanced phonemic awareness can take a word like *splat* and produce *spat* when asked to remove the /l/ sound. Students with a good understanding of phonological awareness have the underlying framework in place to become good readers (decoders) and writers (encoders). This understanding begins when students receive explicit instruction in phonological awareness.

When good readers attempt to read and write an unfamiliar word, they do the following: look for familiar patterns in the word segment the sounds in the word match the sounds with the known letters. Students with a poor understanding of phonological awareness have problems trying to figure out how sounds in words work in print. These students have not received proper instruction in the phonological awareness area and/or have experienced difficulty in learning HOW to identify the sounds in printed words. PA instruction is a critical component of effective reading instruction, but it is only one component.



(PA Ladder)17

### ○ Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic Awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with individual sounds in spoken words. Before students learn to read print, they must become aware of how the sounds in words work. Phonemic awareness is the highest component of phonological awareness. Phonemic Awareness is measured using the following tasks:

- **Categorization-** Which word has a different first sound: bed, bus, chair, ball? (chair)
- **Identity-** Which word(s) begins with the same first sound as **bat**: ball, cat, bake? (ball, bake)
- **Isolation-** Tell me the sound you hear at the beginning of the word **go**? (/g/)
- **Blending-** what word do these sounds make:/c/-/a/-/t/? (cat)
- **Segmentation-** how many sounds do you hear in the word **pie**? (3)
- **Substitution-** say the word **man** now change the /m/ to a /p/, what is the word? (pan)

- **Addition**- Students make a new word by adding a phoneme to an existing word. What word do you have when you add /s/ to take? (stake)
- **Deletion**- say the word spot without the /s/. (pot)

### ○ **Phonics and pronunciation with the New Orleans dialect**

Effective Phonics instruction teaches children there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (speech sounds) and graphemes (the letters that represent the sounds in written language). English has about 44 phonemes – depending on dialect, it may be a few more or a few less – but only 26 letters to write them. As a result of this fact and the factors listed in module 2, there is not a 1:1 relationship between phonemes and graphemes in English orthography. Effective, efficient phonics programs begin with the simplest correspondences (usually CVC syllables like *cat* or *dog* in English) and progress systematically to the most rare/complicated (e.g. OUGH).

Module 4 provides a list of New Orleans features that may affect your instruction in a New Orleans classroom; some of these features – notably, the deletion of post-vocalic /r/, and the replacement of interdental sounds (the sounds represented by TH in writing) with alveolars stops (/t/, /d/, so that *that* becomes *dat*) – may make it a little harder for speakers of some dialects to learn to read that it is for others<sup>18</sup>; this may require some explicit instruction in standard pronunciation to overcome.

#### **Things to keep in mind when teaching Phonics-Sound-Symbol Relationships:**

- Teach **letter sounds first**, then letter names. Introduce lower-case letters before teaching upper-case letters. Teaching letter sounds first and matching the sounds to the letter second is more valuable. For Example, the Teacher- points to the letter t and says this LETTER makes the /t/, /t/, /t/ sound as at the beginning of the word *tiger*. Instead of saying the name of the letter is “tee,” the sound is /t/. Teachers should refer to the letter sounds more often than the name of the letters.
- **Introduce vowel sounds** using words with the short vowel sound at the beginning of the word (in *initial position*) For example, short a=apple, e=egg, i=igloo, o=octagon, and u=up
- **Introduce short vowel sounds** using words in which they are not followed by a nasal sound. For example, do not teach the short /a/ sound as in the word *ran*. The /n/ distorts the /æ/ sound in that word. Begin with a rhyme like /æt/ (*sat, mat, fat*) and explicitly explain to the children (who will likely hear the difference) that the vowel changes when it is followed by a /n/ or /m/ because your brain is getting ready for that /n/ so it opens up your nose early. You can try to pronounce *rat* and *ran* slowly to illustrate the difference, or you can plug your noses and see how funny you sound trying to pronounce words with /n/ and /m/ to illustrate that air flows through the nose when you're making those sounds.
- Students must learn the short vowel sounds to the point of mastery to blend c-v-c words easily and quickly.

### **Vocabulary**

Key to reading success – both decoding and comprehension – is the development of vocabulary (students will also learn new words via reading, but at the early stages, word recognition aids in making crucial grapheme-sound correspondences). In Module 4 we presented some key New Orleans vocabulary items that may differ from other dialects. It will of course be key for students to learn the vocabulary of academic language, but lexical items are excellent starting points for building acceptance and appreciation, and including local terms in your pedagogy may well provide for greater buy-in.

## Vocabulary Development for the New Orleans Dialect

Identifying common words and phrases in the New Orleans dialect:

- Buku
- Neutral ground
- Make groceries
- Huckabuck/huckle buck/frozen cup/zip cup
- Dressed
- Cold Drink
- Podna/padna

Building Vocabulary through Storytelling and Folktales

Word games and activities incorporating local language

## Comprehension

Comprehension may be particularly affected by vocabulary and sentence structure. While searching for key ideas is something that speakers of all dialects may struggle with, we are concerned here with the potential for students in the New Orleans classroom to misunderstand, without realizing it, the basic meaning of the sentences that comprise a text. In Module 4 we presented some common New Orleans words and expressions. You may encounter more in your classroom; should this happen, we recommend explicit discussions of the structures and words you encounter, perhaps with some additional activities.

Reading Comprehension

- Reading and understanding texts in the New Orleans dialect
- Developing comprehension skills through New Orleans folklore
- Guided reading activities with local literature

## Fluency

Fluency has been shown to best be developed via repeated reading and, for polysyllabic words, by breaking words into chunks (by underlining vowels, identifying known syllable structures, and similar activities). This skill is not affected by dialect except as a byproduct of earlier acquisition strategies – in other words, teaching grapheme-sound correspondences may vary dialectally, but whichever correspondence you've learned must then be practiced to automaticity. Practice is universal. A few suggestions for fluency activities are linked here:

## Writing

### **Grammar and Sentence Structure (Contrastive Analysis Activity)**

- Sentence construction in the New Orleans dialect
- Identifying and using dialect-specific grammar rules
- Writing exercises incorporating the New Orleans dialect

### **Writing Skills (Contrastive Analysis Activity)**

- Narrative writing using the New Orleans dialect
- Descriptive writing capturing the essence of New Orleans
- Persuasive writing with a local focus

1. Amedee & Robertson 2015, Louisiana Believes 2015
2. Cowen Institute 2023
3. NOLA Public Schools 2024
4. e.g. as described in White 2019
5. Black Brilliance 2020
6. Cowen Institute 2023
7. Louisiana Believes 2015, Cowen Institute 2023
8. Cowen Institute 2023
9. Cowen Institute 2023
10. Zimmerman & Vaughan 2013
11. University of Oregon 2023
12. Burnette 1999: 3
13. Bennet 2013: 382
14. Ladson-Billings, 1992
15. e.g., Bradley & Bryant 1985, Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley 1991
16. Smith et al. 1998
17. Image from a slide deck created by Kathleen Theodore for the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (<https://sedl.org/>); retrieved from <https://slideplayer.com/slide/3968211/> (last accessed 3-1-24)
18. Washington et al. 2013

## APPLYING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN NEW ORLEANS:

Recognizing students' existing knowledge is important, as it fosters confidence in the students (they already know things – things their teacher may not!), affirms students' sense of self and their right to be who they are, and builds trust between students and teachers. Discussing dialectal differences can be a fun and effective way to build a strong learning environment regardless of the diversity of the classroom population, and it can help prepare students to learn to read and to use standard language when needed. When we confirm the value of the language the students already know, they are more likely to be receptive to adding new ways of speaking to their repertoire; in a linguistically diverse classroom, these discussions can also highlight the knowledge that all students have and foster appreciation and acceptance.

But how do we go about implementing these suggestions? One way to do this might be to start and post in the classroom a list of words the students know that teachers do not; often these are slang terms. Teachers can adapt this activity in various ways. A teacher new to New Orleans, for example, might want to ask the children for help learning the local way of speaking, and then provide their own and/or standard equivalents for the words or expressions the children provide on a separate, contrasting sheet. A teacher in a classroom with students who speak other languages at home may choose to have the students teach them a new word or expression in their home language and then provide the English equivalent.

We encourage teachers to discuss overtly with students the different ways we have of saying the same thing, and the value that each way of speaking holds. Particularly with older children, ask the students what the difference is between the way they speak on the playground vs the way they speak in the classroom, using a specific expression they provide – is there a difference in effect? Is one more precise in some way? Is one not easily translatable? Each day (or week, or whatever time period you choose), select a new word or expression to highlight to keep their interest up.

It's important to stress to the children that in school they are not going to be taught to replace the way they speak with another. The way they speak outside the classroom is not wrong or bad! Rather, they are going to learn *different* ways of saying things. There is value to all ways of speaking, and just like speaking a second language, being able to change the way you speak in different contexts gives you access to more than one community.

## ACTIVITIES

### PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS ACTIVITIES:

- Compare the sounds in the New Orleans words (Playground English) to the sounds of words used in the classroom at the syllable level. Words such as ***pen-cil, bathroom***, etc. Use [FCRR activity PA. 019](#). Syllables
- **Contrast Analysis** of New Orleans words and Classroom words.
- Practice the tasks listed in the Phonemic Awareness section using the New Orleans words. Pay close attention to the beginning and ending sounds of New Orleans words. For example, words such as *fork, desk, test*, and *car*. Practice segmenting the words at the phoneme level, emphasizing the ending or the beginning sounds of each word. /f/-/o/-/r/-/k/; /d/-/e/-/s/-/k/; /t/-/e/-/s/-/t/. (I will add more New Orleans words here.) Use [FCRR activity PA.026, PA. 044](#) Phonemic Awareness Activities.
- **Words that can drop 'r'**

car  
father  
card  
bigger  
cardboard  
beer  
court

Use the phoneme-grapheme mapping activity to practice and include the “r”. (Phonemic awareness lesson)

- Phonics and Blending instruction to help New Orleans children pronounce the beginning and endings of words; “Say it, Move it” and Slide and Say activities with an emphasis on the beginning and the ending of words. Sound Symbol Relationship for c, t, m, s and the short vowel sound
- FCRR Phonics Activities: Variant Correspondences – P. 049; Variant Correspondences – P.051 R- Controlled Spin (K-1st grade); Variant Correspondences – P.023 (2nd-3rd grade)

- Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping activity with the following words: there, they, these, etc. This activity will allow students to map the sounds they hear in these words to the spelling of these words.

Steps:

Teacher: How many sounds do you hear in the word *they*? Student: **2**

Teacher: Let's spell the sounds you hear. What is the first sound? Student: /th/?

Teacher: How do you spell it? Student: **t-h**.

Teacher: How many letters? Student: **2**

Teacher: How many sounds? Student: **1**.

Teacher: What is the second sound? Student: **/ey/**?

Teacher: How do you spell it? Student: **e-y**.

Teacher: How many letters? Student: **2**

Teacher: How many sounds? Student: **1**.

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## **VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES:**

- FCRR Vocabulary Activity- Word Meaning -V.012 (Kdg-1st grade)
- FCRR Vocabulary Activity- Word Meaning- V.015 (Kdg-1st Grade)
- FCRR Vocabulary Activity- Word Meaning- V.017 (2ND - 3rd grade)
- FCRR Vocabulary Activity- Multiple Meaning Match V.032 (2nd- 3rd Grade) use New Orleans Language for this activity.

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## **COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES:**

- Read a New Orleans (folklore) containing the New Orleans dialect and discuss the story. Have students rewrite a few pages into SE or vice versa.
- Complete a guided reading activity using a book with New Orleans dialect.
- FCRR Silly Sentence Mix up- Sentence Meaning -C.004 (Kdg-1st grade)
- FCRR Build a Sentence- Sentence Meaning- C.005 (Kdg-1st Grade)
- FCRR Retell Ring- Narrative Text Structure- C. 008 (2ND - 3rd Grade)
- FCRR Story Sequence – Narrative Text Structure – C.004 (2nd- 3rd Grade) use New Orleans Language for this activities.

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## **FLUENCY ACTIVITIES:**

- FCRR Fluency- Speedy Rime Words -F.007 (Kdg-1st grade)
- FCRR Fluency- Speedy Phrase F. 014 (Kdg-1st Grade)
- FCRR Chunked Text- Chunk-King- F. 016 (2ND - 3rd Grade)
- FCRR Word Parts- Syllable Speed Practice -F.005 modified (2nd- 3rd Grade) use New Orleans Language for this activities.

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## WRITING ACTIVITIES:

### Grammar and Sentence Structure (Contrastive Analysis Activity)

- Sentence construction in the New Orleans dialect
- Identifying and using dialect-specific grammar rules
- Writing exercises incorporating the New Orleans dialect

### Writing Skills (Contrastive Analysis Activity)

- Narrative writing using the New Orleans dialect
- Descriptive writing capturing the essence of New Orleans
- Persuasive writing with a local focus



While we have tried to include as many activities as possible throughout this guide, we hope that you will help each other create a database of activities by joining the Facebook group [here](#). Share your struggles, your successes, and your ideas for classroom activities with fellow educators to help everyone create strong, dynamic classrooms!

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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The completion of this document would not have been possible without the help of many people. We would like to thank the following for their contributions:

**Kendall Medford** for creating the final version of the PDF and making it look professional.

**Emma Kainz** for her help in researching the demographics of New Orleans schools and the shift to an all-charter district.

And most importantly, the amazing group of educators who joined us for a feedback session in June 2024. These included the people listed below; others chose to remain anonymous, but their anonymity should not imply that their input was less important. This dynamic group of experienced educators provided us with invaluable feedback and we are grateful to them beyond measure for the gift of their time and expertise.

**Miranda Washington**

**P. Jihan Goodly**

**JaLisa Brown**

**Myriana Bierria**

**Shakia Rogers**

**Cora M. Allen, M.A.**

### Pronunciation

- Rlessness/variable nonrhoticity
- Th-stopping
- Consonant cluster reduction
- FOIL/FERL
- Ax for ask
- Ai-monophthongization
- Raised THOUGHT
- Canadian raising of MOUTH
- PIN/PEN merger
- FEEL/FILL merger

### Grammar

- Make {age}
- Make groceries
- Copula absence
- ain't/double negation
- Habitual be
- For {time}
- Existential it's
- -s absence (i.e. no final -s in suffixes [plural, possessive, 3sg])
- Yes/no and personal pronoun tags ('they not joking, no' / 'I'm going to the store, me')
- Use of 'already' to indicate 'at least 1 time before' ('have you been to Disney World already?')
- Lack of subject-verb inversion ('where she went?')
- On yesterday/today/tomorrow
- Go by someone's house

### Lexical items

- Yat
- Neutral ground
- Buku
- Cagoo
- Banquette
- Beignet
- Flambeau
- Parrain
- Huckabuck/huckle-buck/frozen cup
- Cold drink (vs. coke vs. soda)
- Po boy (dressed)
- Padna/podna
- Creole
- Bobo
- Red gravy
- Mines