

African American Vernacular should be Included in Learning About Writing and Reading

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Most of my life, I have been told both explicitly and implicitly that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is just poorly spoken and written Standard English (SE) and only spoken or written by those too ignorant to fully grasp SE. AAVE is occasionally referred to as Ebonics, Black English, Slang, and Broken English and has carried with it a societal stigma associated with low socio-economic status and minority races. Generally, linguists admit this stigma is unearned, and it is not bad English or indicative of low intellect but is its own stand-alone dialect or language. As such, AAVE should be included in curriculum and available as an alternative option for teaching reading and writing like English as a Second Language (ESL) is.

In, “African American Language (AAL) is Not Good English,” Jennifer Cunningham writes, “Scholars like Lisa Delpit find that teachers in particular are more likely to correct errors related to African American Language, which is why teachers, professionals, and

society at large need to understand that African American Language is different from and not a deficient form of Standard American English” (88). AAVE has its own grammatical and phonetic rules that are not wrong, just different, from SE. Cunningham states AAVE is not bad English but a different language or dialect entirely that uses a combination of African grammatical rules and American vocabulary (89).

Cunningham continues to write of Linguist Lisa Green, who compared African American Language grammar and phonetic rules with other Niger-Congo languages and found many similarities. One of these I have experienced within my social circles is called, *Zero Copula*, which means the sentences do not require the verb “to be” (i.e. be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being) to be grammatically correct (89). An example of this is “she singin’,” which translates to, she is singing, but with extra energy!

Another common trait of AAL is the *Negative Concord*, or double negative. I was always taught this was simply terrible English. In AAL, this pattern is quite intentional and intended to insert emphasis. An example of this is, “I ain’t got no tolerance for racism.” This is intended to be more emphatic than “I do not have tolerance for racism.” AAVE is far from the only language that uses double negatives to communicate emphatically; Italian and American Sign Language are two additional examples. This concept is not only identified in AAVE and other languages but in popular culture as well. Who has heard the song, “Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2,” from Pink Floyd’s, *The Wall*? “We don’t need no education; we don’t need no thought control.” I have never heard sustained

societal outrage that the members of the band were ignorant for their expression of the double negative.

Cunningham further explores AAL as its own language when she explains the common replacement of the Standard English sound, Th, of this, that, and these as being a very difficult, English specific sound to acquire. Many other people who are learning SE as their second language struggle with this sound and find replacement options due to the difficulty (90). One of these replacements in AAL is to replace, Th, with d, f, or t (i.e. dis, dat, wit, wif) (90).

These examples provide proof that AAL is not bad English, after all, but its own language with its own rules. As such, we should modify our approach to teaching Standard English to align with ESL practices. We must get away from teaching in a way that lowers the self-image of the student by communicating AAVE is a sign of low intelligence of students who use it as their home language. This is not only a scholarly opinion that needs to evolve but a societal one as well. We need to help society understand that one language is not better or worse than another in the same way SE is not better or worse than French, Italian, or American Sign Language (ASL) just different.

In “African American Language Is Not Good English,” “Delpit suggests validating students by welcoming their home languages—and, therefore, their cultures and identities—into the classroom so they feel respected and might be more willing to add Standard American English to their linguistic repertoires,” (91). Embracing the home language of others while teaching SWE can only help us reach more people where they

are. This tactic will surely build rapport, minimize judgement, and help students feel a sense of belonging and investment in their education. To be truly effective, however, it will require educators to examine their own implicit and explicit biases. Knowing and understanding my biases has helped me ensure I am teaching my law enforcement recruits as objectively as possible, without the negative impacts of stereotypes.

In opposition to my argument for AAVE having a place in SWE curriculum, researcher Marcia Farr cautions against the class practice of writing in a student's 'Mother Dialect', but instead, "Leave their oral language alone, as it were but teach writing in SE [standard English] (Elbow 1). This idea encourages speakers of AAVE to build a separate writing language, that of SE. It is not the concept or the final product I vehemently disagree with but the way in which we get there that is antiquated. Students should have the opportunity to write rough drafts in AAVE and edit them into SWE throughout the revision process.

Furthermore, Farr's recommendation directly contradicts some of the ideas we discussed in Anne Lamott's, "Shitty First Drafts." If all good writers write awful first drafts as Lamott suggests, then why wouldn't they write them in the vernacular that comes naturally? I feel like having to focus on finding just the right word in SE would give the exact opposite experience Lamott is encouraging (528).

Consequently, I offer that Peter Elbow has the better road map to success with his recommendation of inviting speakers of AAVE to start every serious writing project using their home language and then edit final drafts in SE. This concept aligns beautifully with

the idea of just getting words on the paper to start and then revising and polishing later drafts into Edited Written English (EWE). Elbow writes, “At the moment, most speakers of stigmatized versions of English feel they have no choice but to write in mainstream English” (3). I agree with Elbow in that I believe we need to offer more choices, not fewer. I wholeheartedly believe having this choice may open the door for students to access a level of creativity that may not be readily available if only given the option to write rough drafts in Standard English. We must understand that no one approach will fit every individual.

In fact, many of those who communicate natively in AAVE have a lifetime of experience in Code Switching. Code Switching generally refers to the act of speaking and behaving differently to adjust to different people and environments. This is often done to help others to feel more comfortable in their interactions with them. Code Switching on demand and at a high rate of speed is the norm for most native speakers of AAVE. They will often utilize AAVE socially and SE professionally or academically. Allowing or even encouraging this practice to happen organically in the classroom may build a bridge to much greater understanding.

I took the opportunity to interview my husband, David Massey regarding his experience with AAVE as it relates to his education specifically and his life generally. David is 50 years old and grew up in Vancouver, Washington. David received his undergraduate degree at the University of Oregon and has been in sales for most of his professional life. He is currently attending Warner Pacific University to get his Master’s in

teaching. I asked David how long he has been Code Switching and whether it was intentional when he started. David indicated he has been communicating this way for over 35 years, and it was very intentional. I then asked him, was this modeled for you by your parents? David answered that it was. He expanded this by stating, "There was a conversation with me and my dad. He said I needed to switch between my public and private persona. He used dating outside of my race as an example, emphasizing that some people would not support it. My dad told me I needed to portray a calm, articulate public face to make people more comfortable." During this conversation, I realized that the approach he had been told to take toward his communication and education was very different than in my childhood. I asked him a couple of questions about his learning environment. First, "Were there specific expectations set for you in your early education that required this? High School? College? Career?" David responded quickly, "No. Nothing overt. Standard English was the expectation. However, in college, I was accused of not writing my own papers because they were well written. Teachers and my peers assumed I couldn't be the one writing them. I must be less literate because I was a football player, a black football player, a black football player who spoke in AAVE occasionally. I had to convince people I attended a college prep high school that prepared me for college and did not accept sub-standard work products." I asked David if he knows what triggers his Code Switching, and he shared with me the following perspectives: "It's either business or personal. As a black person growing up, I always knew I had to have a public face and an inside face. The distinction comes into play frequently and is dependent on how comfortable I am with you. I've spent so much of my

life having to Code Switch, I refuse to do that now in my personal life. I'm always amazed at how many white people in society don't know how common that is in African American culture. Latinx people speak Spanish, and yet some people get indignant and demand they speak English. How dare you?" In interviewing David, it occurred to me that it must be exhausting to have to switch so drastically between a native tongue and set of behaviors and a societal expectation of language and expected behavior. It is quite evident to me that it has become an unconscious competency that he no longer notices he's doing.

I understand it may read like I am suggesting we throw out all the tried and true course curriculums and start over for one marginalized group of people; however, this could not be further from the truth. What I am stating is we must evolve our minds and our curriculums to be more inclusive. In a nation that has publicly celebrated its diversity for decades, it is outrageous it has not embraced that same passion and spirit when teaching Standard Written English and communication generally. I wonder how much less resentment we might find in classrooms that allowed students to write rough drafts in their native dialect? I wonder how much creativity we could tap into if we didn't classify AAVE as just bad English and those who use it as just bad students by extension? Wouldn't it be better to be more inclusive instead of offering fewer choices or resigning ourselves to teach Writing the way we do because we've always done it that way?

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Author Bio

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