African-American English and Code-Switching in the Classroom:

A Literature Review

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Between 80 and 90 percent of all African-Americans speak what is known as African-American English, also known as African-American Vernacular English, Black English, or Ebonics (Redd and Webb 2005). Going forward, the terms will be used interchangeably, depending on what the authors of the literature used. Redd and Webb (2005) point out that the place of AAE in society has been a topic of hot debate among linguists, cultural theorists and educators: is African-American English a form of “broken” English? Is it a variation of English or could it be considered a language all on its own? Upon further inspection, AAE manifests itself as a language that, while not always following the norms and rules of Standard English, nonetheless follows a set of rules that are just as complex (Redd and Webb 2005, Craig and Washington 2002). Rickford (2000) argues that it is no more correct to refer to African-American English as “lazy” or “broken” English than it is to refer to Italian as “lazy Latin”, citing a rule-governed language rich in conventions, such as the use of double negatives, the dropping of the letter *r* and *g* at the end of words, and rhetorical devices such as “signifyin’” and exaggerated language (Redd and Webb 2005).

No matter the richness of the language, AAE deviates from the standard in the sense that the majorities of African-American students speak AAE, yet attend schools in which Standard English is the primary, if not sole, language taught (Wolfram 1999). African-American students must often go from a home where they hear only AAE to a classroom where they are told by their teachers that the language they speak is incorrect. In an era of high-stakes standardized testing, African-American students take tests that are written in a language with which they are often unfamiliar (Redd and Webb 2005). In the case of African-American students, a difference is viewed as a deficiency, with someone speaking in primarily AAE being viewed in a manner that is “lesser-than” a speaker of SE; a speaker of AAE will find trouble, for instance, in the workforce, where there is a standardized English (Delpit 2002). Teachers find themselves in the position of balancing an appropriate acknowledgment a student’s culture, while also preparing them for success in school and life after school. It is for this reason that the ability to code-switch is of the utmost importance.

The ability to code-switch addresses the differences in AAE and SE in terms of *appropriateness* rather than *correctness*. It involves having African-American students speak in a manner that is appropriate for the situation; for example, African-American students may speak one way around friends and family, or at home, and then a different way when in a public or professional setting. Baker (2002) even makes the case for *three* different languages, or *trilingualism*; students can speak “home English”, which is generally learned from peers, “formal” English, which is generally learned in school and through reading, and “professional” English, generally learned in the university or in the workplace. In the short term, there is hard evidence that students who are able to shift dialects with ease tend to also have higher reading and achievement scores, something that is of importance given the achievement gap, generally believed to be caused by differing literacy practices and early reading instruction (Craig et al 2009). Likewise, socioeconomic factors such as the simple availability of books can account for some of the gap. Meanwhile, African-Americans must reconcile a dilemma of the cultural variety: how to speak in a way that allows for success while also not facing scrutiny from others at home or around friends for “talking white” or “talkin’ proper” (Smith 2002). This stays in line with Gee (1990), who makes the case that speakers of any dialect are looking for the ability to achieve status, as well as solidarity, hence the need for code-switching; people generally have the desire to do whatever works to their own rational self-interest, while also doing what is necessary to achieve solidarity and popularity among peers. Teachers, who are often trained to teach students of the white, middle-class variety in their teacher preparatory programs (Hill 2009), are faced with ways of figuring out the best way to address the situation.

In 1996, there was a substantial debate on the use of Ebonics in the Oakland Public School system, when the district experienced a firestorm that came about when Ebonics were taught in English class. Addressing students’ use of AAE/Ebonics, teachers decided to dive in deeper to the language, in hopes of showing respect for the students’ home life and creating an environment conducive to learning Standard English (Delpit 2002). A firestorm ensued, with citizens, as well as prominent members of the black community, such as Maya Angelou and Jesse Jackson speaking out against the teaching and advocating the teaching of Standard English only (in spite of the fact that both use a great deal of AAE-derived rhetorical devices in their respective positions); as Joanne Dowdy (2002) put it, “Your job, as a survivor of twenty-odd generations of slaves and indentured workers and overseers, is to be best at the language that was used to enslave you.”

With this in mind, it is important not to stifle students or muddle their papers with intimidating red ink for their use of what is only natural to them; Krashen (1982) makes the case that with less stress put on the students’ speech, the students will open up and be more comfortable, which creates an environment conducive to learning. Furthermore, Krashen differentiates between the types of learning, making the case that rule-based instruction is a far inferior method of instruction than the unconscious acquisition of language (1982). Instead, Delpit (2002) and Hill (2009), among others, argue that teachers should create an environment that is first and foremost non-threatening and one which acknowledges the difference in culture without viewing it as a deficiency; furthermore, Delpit suggests that teachers take time in creating assessments that speak to a student’s lived experiences, ones that stray from the formulaic and standardized. The best way to create standard language, especially in writing, is to also allow for the nonstandard; Hill (2009) suggests allowing nonstandard writing in first drafts and informal writing, creating an atmosphere that does not intimidate students and allows them to be themselves. Should the assignment be a more formal assessment, editing is permissible. By offering mini-lessons into the workings behind AAE and other nonstandard languages, students gain a better appreciation of them and see you as an ally rather than someone out to litter their work with red ink. Delpit (2002) argues that doing so does not lower one’s standards, but rather builds an appropriate academic program around the ones already in place.

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