DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 929 CS 006 230

AUTHOR	Prasad, Sandre
TITLE	Black English Annotations for Elementary Reading Programs.
INSTITUTION	Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO	SWRL-TR-71
PUB DATE	31 Mar 81
CONTRACT	NE-0-00-3-0064
NOTE	12p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Basal Reading; *Black Dialects; *Instructional Materials; Language Variation; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Materials; Teaching Guides

ABSTRACT

This report describes a program that uses annotations in the teacher's editions of existing reading programs to indicate the characteristics of black English that may interfere with the reading process of black children. The first part of the report provides a rationale for the annotation approach, explaining that the discrepancy between written words and the way a black child reads them does not necessarily mean that the child does not understand what he or she reads. The second part describes the annotation approach and outlines many of the consistent characteristics of black spoken English to which the annotations can alert the reading teacher. The third section explains the procedures and criteria used in annotating the teacher's editions of the Ginn 720 and the Houghton-Mifflin reading programs. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy

ED205929

SWRL

SWRL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

TECHNICAL REPORT 71

March 31, 1981

BLACK ENGLISH ANNOTATIONS FOR ELEMENTARY READING PROGRAMS

Sandre Prasad

ABSTRACT

A potential solution to the reading problems of Black children is to annotate the teacher's editions of existing reading programs for characteristics of Black English. The process of annotating and the factors entering into decisions about what is annotated are described.

CS006230

ERIC

This document has been distributed to a limited audience for a limited purpose. It is not published. Copies may be made only with the written permission of SWRL Educational Research and Development, 4665 Lampson Avenue, Los Alamitos, California 90720. The work upon which this document is based was performed pursuant to Contract NE-0-00-3-0064 with the National Institute of Education. SWRL reports do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the sponsors of SWRL R & D.

BLACK ENGLISH ANNOTATIONS FOR ELEMENTARY READING PROGRAMS

Sandre Prasad

The fact that some Black children do not learn to read with adequate proficiency has been a topic of both scholarly and non-scholarly concern for many years. It has again come to national attention in the case of Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al vs. Ann Arbor School District Board. In a measured and carefully stated decision, Judge Charles W. Joiner ordered that the school district

> . . . submit to this court within thirty (30) days a proposed plan defining the exact steps to be taken (1) to help the teachers of the plaintiff children at King School to identify children speaking "Black English" and the language spoken as a home or community language, and (2) to use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read standard English. (emphasis in original)

The Ann Arbor case is of interest because, out of the wide-ranging allegations brought by the plaintiffs, only the issues of language and reading, and the relationship between the two processes met the test of law.

The home language of a large proportion of the Black population of the United States is frequently called Black English (BE). BE is a family of dialects* with roots that go back to the earliest contacts between Black Africans and Europeans. Linguistic research demonstrates that these dialects are not garbled or "substandard" versions of English; they are fully developed forms of communication in their own rights. Like all dialects, they have their own grammar and pronunciations. Some dialects of BE are highly distinctive compared to other American regional and ethnic dialects, and these differences are often claimed to be the source of Black children's reading problems.

However, speakers of other varieties of English spoken throughout the world do learn to read. Children from Australia and Scotland learn to read from conventional English orthography even though their pronunciations differ markedly from the Queen's English or from any standard variety of American English. The varieties of English spoken in former English colonies in Asia and West Africa have grammatical structures that differ markedly from the spoken standards of Great Britain or of the United States. Yet educated people in those countries learn to read the same variety of English that is used throughout the English speaking world even if they never do learn to speak like a native Britisher or American.

---

*As used here in its linguistic sense, "dialect" has no pejorative connotations. A dialect is simply a language form spoken by a group of people. All speakers of English speak some dialect of that language, and all dialects are capable of expressing complex communication.

To be more specific, word-final consonants are devoiced and deleted on occasion by virtually every speaker of English. Yet somehow this seems to be more of a problem when it occurs in the speech of those who are low in the educational or economic hierarchies. Black children may not pronounce every written r, but neither did John F. Kennedy. Yet somehow this characteristic seems to cause more problems for economically depressed Blacks than for the social el, e of the eastern seaboard.

It may be argued, and legitimately so, that Black children use more forms that diverge from textbook expectations than people like John F. Kennedy and that they use them more often. It may also be argued that educators frequently know how to make the transition from the spoken word of the local standard to written English, but that they do not know how to make the same kind of transition for many varieties of Black English. Herein lies the crux of the problem. If teachers are not aware of the systematic differences between a child's normal speech and the way written English is presented in the teaching materials, they have no consistent way to tell the difference between a bona fide reading error and the usual spoken form. The result can be either undercorrection or overcorrection of the child, or, as is more likely to happen, random corrections that bear no consistent relationship to the child's normal speech or to the ability to decode and understand what is written on the page.

The basic problem of teaching Black children to read is not the home language of the child and not the dialect of the teacher. Nor is it the vagaries of standard English orthography. It is the mismatch between the home language of the children and the dialect assumed by the writers of the instructional materials, combined with the lack of readily available, easily usable information to help the teacher bridge the gap.

It only takes a brief look at some of the materials used to teach beginning reading to find items that are problematic. For example, in one reading series, the first three words that are introduced for word recognition are words where dialect differences between the teacher and the pupils could cause problems. In another program, the word and is used to introduce the sound of d at the end of a word. But for many speakers of Black English, and usually sounds like an', and the d is effectively a "silent letter." Neither of these programs contains strong explicit information about the variations in pronunciation that a teacher may find in the classroom.

Further examination of materials shows that part of the problem results from equating reading aloud with the process of decoding and understanding what is written. When the dialect of the child is similar to that of the teacher or to that which is assumed by the authors of the reading program, this is not a problem. Oral reading is frequently a good indicator of whether or not a child has mastered the skills. Divergent pronunciation or grammar will usually correspond to reading errors. But when the dialect of the child differs markedly from that which is familiar to the teacher or assumed by the authors of the reading program, divergent pronunciation and grammar may actually be an indication that the child has comfortably understood the task of translating text on the page into language and is using normal spoken forms (Goodman, 1965). For example, a child who normally does not use the -s ending on present tense verbs may read Lad run when the book says Lad runs. To insist on a standard of pronunciation and usage that differs markedly from the home language of the child can lead to frustration and eventual decrease in interest in learning to read.

There is more than one potential solution to this problem. Textbooks and teacher's manuals could be written to reflect the speech varieties of the Black community, but this approach has met with resistance from both parents and educators when it has been tried experimentally. Teachers could be taught to speak Black English, but to do this would add inordinately to the load that educators already carry and to do this less than well would be condescending to the Black community and probably create more problems than it resolved. Furthermore, proficiency in a given language does not automatically confer an understanding of the structure of that language or of how it functions grammatically. Work in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages has shown that it is not necessary for a teacher to know how to speak the language of the person being taught. What is necessary, however, is an understanding of how that language background interacts with English so that the teacher can build bridges between the two languages for the student.

ANNOTATIONS

SWRL has developed an experimental approach that does exactly what the Ann Arbor court decision demanded. It applies knowledge of Black English for teaching children to read in standard English. The SWRL approach is to annotate the teacher's editions of beginning reading programs with information about pronunciations and usages that a teacher might encounter with speakers of Black English. In 1976, the SWRL/Ginn Reading Program was annotated for use with children who speak Black English (Berdan, 1976). These annotations were successfully used in a tryout in selected classrooms in the Dallas, Texas, school system (Berdan, 1977). The purpose of the project was to help teachers separate the teaching of decoding and comprehension skills from the teaching of standard English pronunciation. Both teachers and reading specialists evaluated the materials and the reading performance of the children. Response to the project was generally good.

The present project is an expansion of this research. Annotations were written for two reading programs that are widely used throughout the country: The Ginn 720 and the Houghton Mifflin reading programs.* These annotations inform the teacher about Black English pronunciations and usages that might be heard when their Black English speaking students read aloud. The basic position in relation to language and the teaching of reading that underlies the annotations is as follows: To teach a child to read, start with how the child speaks. Any instruction in an alternate dialect should be clearly separated from instruction in reading until the child has acquired most of the basic decoding skills.

Black English differs from textbook English in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. These differences are neither random nor arbitrary in terms of specific dialects of PE as language systems. However, not all of the characteristics included in the annotations are necessarily found in any given dialect of BE, nor are they are all necessarily found in the normal speech of any given child. Many of the characteristics are not exclusive to BE. Speakers of other minority dialects may use them as well. The annotations include a broad spectrum of possibilities about usages that might differ from what teachers and/or textbook authors might expect. If a child normally does not speak the dialect expected by the authors of the textbooks, any such pronunciations should be counted as within the range of normal variability of language rather than as reading errors.

The basic areas in which BE may differ from the standard of the textbook are listed below. (The following descriptions are written to be understood by laypeople. For more precise linguistic descriptions of these features, see Fasold & Wolfram, 1970.)

Pronunciation

d: At the end of a word, d is often pronounced somewhat like t, or it may not be pronounced at all.

l: At the end of a word or in the middle of a word before another consonant, l may sound somewhat like h or w, or it may not be pronounced at all.

r: At the end of a word or in the middle of a word before another consonant and sometimes even between vowels, r may not be pronounced.

---

*The teacher's manuals for the first through third grade readers of these programs were annotated. For the Ginn 720 program, these were levels 2-9 of the 1976 edition. For the Houghton Mifflin reading program, these were levels B-J of the 1979 edition. The first level of each program was omitted because each is a pre-reader: There is not enough actual reading material to annotate. By the end of third grade, most of the basic decoding skills have been taught, and children are no longer reading aloud as frequently; consequently, the annotations do not go beyond the readers generally used in third grade.

consonant clusters: At the end of a word, the last letter in a consonant cluster (blend) may not be pronounced: *t* may not be pronounced in some words ending in *nt* and is rarely pronounced in *st*, *ft*, *pt*, and *ct* clusters; *d* may not be pronounced in *nd* and *ld* clusters; *k* is usually not pronounced in *sk* clusters.

wh: At the beginning of a word or in the middle of a compound word, *wh* may sound like *w*.

th: There are several pronunciations for *th*. At the beginning of a word like *the*, it may sound like *d*. In the middle of a word like *mother*, it may sound like *d* or *v*. At the end of a word like *bathe*, it may sound like *d* or *v*. At the beginning of a word like *think*, it may sound like *t*. At the end of a word like *breath*, it may sound like *f* or *t*.

Grammar

be: In many sentences, *is*, *are*, *'s*, and *'re* are not pronounced.

ain't: *Am*, *is*, *are*, *'m*, *'s*, *'re*, plus *not*, or *isn't* and *aren't* may all become *ain't*.

was: *Was* and *were* are frequently interchangeable, or they may be pronounced *wuh*.

has: *Has* may sound like *have*, or *have*, *has* and *had* may all be pronounced *ha'*.

do: *Do* and *does* may both be pronounced *do*; *don't* and *doesn't* may both become *don't*.

-*s* and -*es*: The -*s* and -*es* endings on nouns and verbs are frequently not pronounced.

-*ed*: the -*ed* ending on verbs is frequently not pronounced, especially on words like *missed*, *laughed*, *stopped*, *talked*, and *planned*, which sound like the consonant clusters *st*, *ft*, *pt*, *ct*, and *nd* at the end of the word.

In addition to these larger systematic differences, some verbs that have an irregular past-tense form in standard English are either regular or unmarked for the past tense in Black English. For example, the past tense of *run* may be *run*, just as the past of *hit* is *hit*. There is also variable pronunciation for some of the nouns with final *f* in the singular that changes to *v* in the plural; e.g., the plural of *leaf* may sound like *leafs*, *leaf* may sound like *leave*, or the singular and plural may sound like *lee* and *lees*, respectively.

PROCEDURES

The teacher's editions of the Ginn 720 and the Houghton-Mifflin reading programs were scanned for text from the reader. The first grade workbooks for the Ginn program were also scanned, as they are included in the teacher's edition. Each page was examined for words and grammatical constructions that contain features in which BE may differ from the language presumed in the text. Suggested teacher activities were also examined for places where the home use of Black English could interfere with students' ability to complete the activity or effectively learn from it. Words related to features found on two facing pages in the teacher's edition were listed for potential inclusion on the same page of annotations.

These features were then compiled on a chart. Each time a new feature was put on the chart, it was highlighted. A strategy of presentation was then devised in which the contents of a single page of annotations were coordinated with the contents of the textbook as a whole.

It was neither practical nor desirable to include every occurrence of each feature in the annotations. In the early textbooks, the same material appears over and over again, and the introduction of new material that requires annotation is sometimes quite slow. This level of repetition may well induce boredom and encourage tuning out on the part of the teacher. In the later texts, some features occur on virtually every page while others are less frequent. And sometimes all of the regular characteristics as well as some less regular ones are found on a single pair of pages. If everything were included all of the time, features that do not occur frequently could well be lost in the profusion of detail. Furthermore, there is the possibility that teachers will gradually internalize knowledge of some of the highly regular characteristics of Black English. Being innundated with information is not likely to encourage this process, but gaps where it is to the teacher's advantage to remember may help.

The annotations have two basic forms: full descriptions of the grammar and pronunciations that children who speak Black English may use when reading, and brief reminders about features or words that have been described earlier in the annotations. When a feature that may cause a problem is first introduced into the annotations, a full annotation is automatically included. The teacher's editions for the early levels have full annotations each time that the same feature appears in a new word or a new context. However, as the amount the children are expected to read increases, this becomes burdensome.

Rather than trying to develop a neat structure that would permit a mechanical decision about including or excluding a specific feature, the following questions were applied to the problem.

- Has the feature been introduced before at this level?
- Is it now being introduced in a new context?
- How often has this same feature occurred, and how long since its last occurrence?
- How much information needs to be presented about this feature and on this specific page of annotations?
- Is this feature socially marked (e.g., the pronunciation of th as d, t, f or v)?
- Has this feature been a matter of controversy in the literature on language and education (e.g., not pronouncing the -s and -es suffixes on plural nouns or present tense verbs)?
- How repetitive have the visual format and the kind of information contained in the annotations become?
- How continuous and natural is the language that the children are expected to read?

Features that had never been introduced before had the highest priority in terms of annotating, with features that were introduced in a new context coming next. Those features which have been the focus of controversy also had high priority. After the first level, the information that was presented in the previous levels was introduced as quickly as possible. In the later levels, when there were more items than could reasonably be included on one page of annotations, features that are controversial or socially marked were often selected for annotation.

Difficulties in relation to the exercises for developing reading skills were always annotated. When necessary, alternate lexical items, sentence types, or activities were suggested. These alternatives were suggested only when the instructions or examples given in the teacher's edition might cause serious confusion for children who speak Black English. As much as possible, the wording and examples or structure of the teaching exercise were preserved.

Once all of the considerations and possible forms of annotation were taken into account, a rhythm of presentation was developed in which variety in pacing and in the visual form of the annotations would hopefully maintain teacher attention and encourage learning.

DISCUSSION

It is not necessary for a teacher to use Black English as a medium of instruction in order to use these annotations. Nor must a teacher assume that it is wrong to expect children who enter school speaking some dialect of Black English to learn to speak the local standard as well. If the annotations are used to their fullest potential, it is not even necessary to segregate the children in reading groups on the basis of home language use. However, these possibilities may not be readily apparent to the beleaguered teacher in an inner-city school.

The educational system in general and teachers in particular often serve as the main bridge that Black children have to the larger culture of this country. This means that many teachers will also feel responsible for teaching children how to use standard English pronunciation and grammar. The annotations tell the teacher when dialect interference might occur in the process of learning to read; this information can be used to help children learn to translate text into their own language. However, the annotations do not indicate when--outside the reading lesson--a teacher might work with pronunciation and grammar. This decision must be made by the teacher based on a more complete understanding of the children's capabilities, progress, and environment.

The ideas about language and how it functions that provide the background for the annotations are simple and fairly pragmatic. However, in terms of the received or orthodox views about language that have been impressed upon teachers during their own education, those ideas may be novel or even radical. The introduction of a new approach to the way that language relates to reading requires teachers to alter their procedures somewhat even when the teaching materials themselves stay the same. To make this kind of shift, teachers may need some kind of support system that will validate their successes and give them a forum for exploring solutions to the problems that they encounter In order to be fully effective, that support system may need to include time to discuss the program with other persons who are trained both in classroom teaching and in the use of the annotations.

The purpose of these annotations is to help change the way teachers react to children who are learning to read. Any tool that helps the teacher wait until the child can understand the difference between learning to read and learning to pronounce standard English can potentially have a great impact on that child's overall performance in school. But the annotations are only a tool, and no tool will work if it is not used and used well. In order for teachers to learn to use BE annotations well, they must be given as much support in their learning as they are expected to give the children that they teach.

References

Berdan, R. Distribution of Black English linguistic parameters in annotations to SWRL/Ginn Reading Program (Technical Note 3-76-3-76-04). Los Alamitos, Calif.: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1976.

Berdan, R. Tryout of the annotated reading program for speakers of Black English (Technical Note 2-77-04). Los Alamitos, Calif.: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1977.

Fasold, R.W., & Wolfram, W. Some linguistic features of Negro dialect, in Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (eds.), Teaching Standard English in the inner city. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970. Pp. 41-86.

Goodman, K.S. Dialect barriers to reading comprehension. Elementary English, 1965, 42, 853-860.