THE CASE FOR IMPLEMENTING ELL LITERACY STRATEGIES WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

By Ramona T. Pittman

Ramona T. Pittman is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University–San Antonio. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education. Her research interests include African American English and literacy and increasing preservice and in-service teachers' literacy knowledge and application. She can be reached at ramona.pittman@tamusa.edu

Abstract: This article attempts to address the need for African American students to receive the same level of support that most schools in Texas provide for English language learners due to the underperformance of many African American students on various literacy measures. The intent is to provide readers with the phonological and grammatical features of African American English (AAE) and for the readers to understand that AAE differs from the language that is required to be formerly spoken and written in schools. It is estimated that AAE is spoken by roughly 80 percent of African Americans and is often considered to be a source of reading failure for some African American students. Literacy strategies such as contrastive analysis and modeling, which are used to support English language learners, will be examined and explained as methods for assisting African American students with code-switching from AAE to academic English.

Keywords: ELL, AAE, literacy, code-switching, contrastive analysis

The United States is becoming more diverse as more people from various backgrounds move into the country. With the increase in people, U.S. schools have to embrace the diversity of the country's new landscape. One area of concern for many schools, researchers, and scholars is how to address the language diversity of the many students who do not know English. With increased research studies and school curriculum changes devoted to improving the outcomes for English language learners (ELLs), many African American (AA) students' home language is the focus of very few research studies or curriculum changes. AA students are not receiving the same levels of language support as students who speak a language entirely different than English.

This article argues that many AA students are ELL due to the language they speak at home, African American English (AAE). AAE is a variation of English that has been passed down from generations. It is diverse both phonologically and grammatically and has been considered as a possible source of reading failure among AA students (Labov, 1995). AAE may also hinder students' ability to write and spell due to the variations between AAE and academic English. Academic English is the English that is required in schools to speak and write formally. This article is not to pit AA student support against traditional ELL support, but instead is intended to make the case for why AA students need to be taught ELL literacy strategies when learning to read and write in academic English.

Making the Case

It is well-researched and documented that AA students underperform compared to their counterparts on literacy measures such as reading and writing. On most assessments, African American students' proficiency scores are below those of every racial and ethnic group. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) (NCES, 2016), achieving proficiency at the fourth grade level requires students to integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations. NAEP is the largest national assessment given to students to determine what students can do in each subject area.

Based on the 2015 NAEP fourth grade reading assessment, 81% of African American students were reading below a level of *proficiency*, while only 18% were reading at a level of proficiency or above (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Contrastively, 46% of students who identified as White performed at or above the proficiency level. In addition, 21% of Hispanic students, 55% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 57% of Asian students, 28% of Native Hawaiian, 21% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 40% of Two or More Races performed at or above a level of proficiency.

Similar numbers can be seen for reading at the eighth grade level. The NAEP results show nonproficiency for approximately 85% of African American students, while proficiency rates are 16%. Moreover, 44% of White, 21% of Hispanic, 52% of Asian/Pacific Islander, 54% of Asian, 24% of Native Hawaiian, 22% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 38% of Two or More Races performed at or above a level of proficiency. Eighth grade proficiency means

that the students should be able to provide relevant information and summarize main ideas and themes. In addition, they should be able to make inferences about texts, make personal connections, and analyze text features.

Furthermore, reading levels on the NAEP reading assessment show 31% of all Texas fourth graders are reading at or above a level of proficiency, while the nation's percentage is 36. Again, however, only 17% of African American students in Texas are reading at a level at or above proficiency, while 50% of White, 22% of Hispanic, 66% of Asian, and 34% of Two or More Races students scored at or above the proficiency level; there were no reporting standards for American Indian/Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In addition, NAEP reading levels for Texas eighth grade students show that only 19% of African American students are reading at a level of proficiency, while 43% of White, 19% of Hispanic, 56% of Asian, and 42% of Two or More Races students are reading at a proficiency level, while nationally the percentage is 34. At the eighth grade level, Hispanic students scored equal to African American students; there were no reporting standards for American Indian/Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Using the most current, 2011 NAEP writing scores, only 10% of eighth grade and 9% of twelfth grade African American students reached a level of proficiency. The average of proficiency for all students at eighth grade was 27%, with 34% of White, 14% of Hispanic, 44% of Asian, 22% of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 21% of American Indian/Alaskan Native being proficient in writing. The average of proficiency for all students at twelfth grade was 27%, with 34% of White, 12% of Hispanic, 38% of Asian, 19% of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 22% of American Indian/Alaskan Native being proficient in writing. Fourth graders did not complete the assessment in 2011. Instead, NAEP piloted a computer-based writing assessment. In addition, the 2011 writing assessment scores were based on a national sample only.

In Texas, African American students performed below their counterparts on the 2016-2017 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) for Reading and Writing (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The Reading subtest is given in grades 3-8, while the Writing subtest is administered only in grades 4 and 7 and as an End of Course assessment in English I and English II. Table 1 shows the students who Met the Standard in Reading, while Table 2 depicts the students who Met the Standard in Writing (first-time test takers). According to STAAR performance level descriptors, meeting the standard means that these students have a high likelihood of success in the next grade or course but may still need some short-term, targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to think critically and apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar contexts (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

The results show that African American students are underperforming compared to their counterparts on literacy measures. Many factors can hinder a student's ability to learn to read, such as the teacher's ability to teach reading (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004; Joshi, Binks, Hougen, Dahlgren, Ocker-Dean, & Smith, 2009; McCutchen & Berninger, 1999; Moats & Lyon, 1996; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2003; Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011), motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2009; McGeown, Norgate, & Warhurst, 2012), and a lack of resources (Lee & Burkam, 2002); however, few schools have examined and developed resources for students who speak AAE or offered ways to teach these learners how to code-switch to academic language.

A Closer Look at AAE

In the United States, approximately 80% of African Americans speak AAE (Rickford, 1999), and different speakers can be at different points on a continuum: while one speaker can be between points A and B, another speaker can be between points C and D (Green, 2002). Being on different points of the continuum indicate

Table 1: STAAR Reading Percentage Scores for Grades 3-8 and Racial/Ethnicity Group

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Hispanic/Latino	38	36	38	27	32	39
American Indian or Alaska Native	44	42	43	34	40	48
Asian	70	69	72	67	72	76
Black or African American	**30**	**29**	**33**	**25**	**27**	**35**
Native Hawaiian	44	43	47	36	42	49
White	58	57	59	51	56	63
Two or More Races	53	52	55	48	52	60

Table 2: STAAR Writing Percentage Scores and Racial/Ethnicity Groups

	Grade 4	Grade 7	English I	English II
Hispanic/Latino	26	29	45	46
American Indian or Alaska Native	28	34	52	52
Asian	62	71	80	79
Black or African American	**22**	**25**	**40**	**41**
Native Hawaiian	36	40	57	51
White	42	51	69	70
Two or More Races	40	48	66	66

that people can vary from speaking little AAE (point A) to speaking much AAE (point D). African American English is a variation of standard American English with its own rules. A mismatch exists between the language that is spoken at home and the language required for school. The mismatch can include phonological and syntactical features between both languages, which include omission, insertion, or substitution of sounds and grammar-related differences. As with speakers who have not learned academic English, many nonstandard English patterns will show not only in students' oral language but in their written language as well. Many have even argued that the differences between the home language and academic English impacts the students' literacy performance (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Labov, 1995; Pittman, Joshi, & Carreker, 2014); the strong interrelatedness of reading and writing may be the cause.

Characteristics of AAE

A prevalent characteristic of AAE is the difference between various sounds pronounced in AAE versus academic English. When examining phonological (sound) features of AAE, one can hear a variety of sounds that differ. The phonological features that occur most often are:

- Final consonant blend reduction, as in lass (last), dess (desk), mine (mind), and hole (hold).
- Voiced and unvoiced *TH* as in dat (that), dese (these), baf (bath), and bave (bathe).
- Reduction of the final "r" and "l"as in foe (four), and bia (bill).
- Reduction of final "g" as in flyin (flying).
- Three letter initial consonant blend "str" as in skrike (strike). (Green, 2002).

If a student has not learned to code-switch, the ability to move effortlessly from AAE to Academic English when speaking and writing, phonological errors will show in writing when students are attempting to spell words. In an example from a sixth grade journal, a student who had been assessed using the Dialect Assessment of Language Variation (Seymour, Roeper, de Villiers, 2003) and who was determined to be a speaker of AAE wrote, "My heart was beating out of my chess." The misspelled word, chess (chest), is a clue that the student reduced the final consonant blend, which is common in speakers of AAE. Research shows that one spells based upon the individual sounds heard in words; thus, various spelling errors may occur in students' writings.

The grammatical and syntactical features of AAE are very much rule-governed. Grammatical features that are consistent in AAE include:

- Absence of a "be" verb: She talkin'. (She is talking.)
- Habitual "be": She be talkin'. (She is always talking.)
- Subject-verb disagreement: Yesterday, she talk too much. (Yesterday, she talked too much. [*Yesterday* signals the past tense; therefore, the student may not use 'ed'].)
- She talk too much. (She talks too much.)
- BIN: She should'a BIN finished talkin. (She should have finished talking a long time ago.)
- DON: She don talked herself to sleep. (She has already talked herself to sleep.)

Again, if students are not specifically taught how to code-switch, AAE patterns such as these may be displayed in the students' writings. For more examples of grammatical features, see Green's (2002) *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*.

ELL Teaching Strategies

An ELL strategy that would help AAE speakers to code-switch to academic English is completing contrastive analysis activities. Contrastive analysis (Wheeler & Swords, 2010) allows the student to determine the differences between AAE and academic English. In an English language arts class, the teacher could have the students sort pairs of sentences written in AAE and academic English. Sorting the sentences requires students to notice key differences and distinguish between the two. Once the sentences are sorted, the students can then analyze the sentences to see how the sentence is written in AAE and contrast it against the sentence written in academic English.

Moreover, modeling academic language will allow an AAE speaker to hear the difference between what he is speaking versus the academic language of that version. It is important for the teacher to respect AAE and let the student know that his language is unique to him and a part of his culture but that the language required to be spoken in schools is academic English. The teacher should build trust with the student to help the student learn code-switching techniques for any AAE phonological or grammatical features that the student speaks.

An additional strategy is to allow the student to complete editing practices in which the student is able to edit others' writing or professional writing (e.g., poems, texts) that contain AAE features. Doing so will help the student to home in on those specific AAE patterns and rewrite them in academic English. The student should be able to determine whether the intent and tone of the writing changed based upon the academic English version.

Next, the teacher should focus attention on listening and speaking practices especially with younger students. As the teacher is helping to develop the students' oral language, it is pertinent that the teacher complete phonemic awareness tasks that will assist the students in understanding how individual sounds can be broken down and manipulated (e.g., *list* consists of four sounds, /l/ /i/ /s/ /t/). It is important for the teacher to emphasize the /t/ in the word list, as this sound is often reduced in the students' pronunciation of the word.

Lastly, the teacher can use images and objects to reinforce specific words for students. For example, if a teacher is using the words "toll bridge" and the student has always pronounced "toll" as a "toe bridge," there may be some confusion for the student. An image could help clarify some of the pronunciations and vocabulary for the student; otherwise, this difference could affect the student's overall comprehension of the text. Images and objects could also aid in building background knowledge for the student, which would also help build the student's understanding of the text.

Practical Implications

AAE speakers would benefit most from teachers who have an awareness and knowledge of AAE. Without this knowledge, AA students may be assumed to be speaking slang or just simply being lazy in their speaking and writing. Slang is an informal language used by specific groups of people (e.g., teenagers, the military, race/ethnicity groups), and the language may change based upon the

time or moment in history. Examples of slang would be *dynomite*, which meant "great" in the 1970s; rad, which meant "awesome" in the 1980s, and *dope*, which meant "great" in the 1990s. AAE, on the other hand, is different in that AAE is rule-governed and provides a systematic approach to phonological and grammatical features that do not change over time. The Texas Education Agency through the Texas Education Research Center (Wilkinson, Miciak, Alexander, Reyes, Brown, & Giani, 2011) has developed recommended practices for Standard English Learners (SEL). SEL are those students who speak a variation of a dialect that is different from what is required in schools. The document outlines best practices and teaching strategies for those students who read, write, speak, and listen to English, but their personal English may vary.

Many of these strategies should be addressed with students while they are still in the learning to read (Chall, 1983) stages of reading. The main goal would be to ensure that ELL strategies are being used to help bridge the gap between the home and school language. Throughout all stages of reading and grade levels, teachers should be incorporating culturally relevant practices to safeguard a student's home language as academic language is being developed.

Lastly, educators must determine why AA students are not reaching proficiency levels on literacy measures. AAE should be examined closer and more teachers need to receive professional development on the many AAE features and ways to help students code-switch while respecting their home language. Although AAE is structured and rule-governed, some students will learn to code-switch with traditional English language arts classes while others need more intensive instruction in understanding the differences between the two variations of English. Just as with ELL, we must focus our research and curriculum efforts on improving AA students' reading and writing scores. In all hopes, this article provides enough evidence to help make the case for why AA students need ELL literacy strategies and support in order to become better readers and writers.

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