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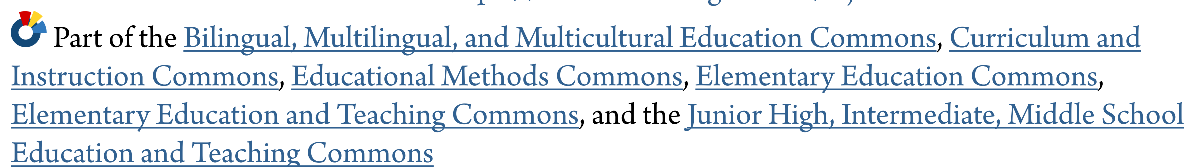
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PRACTICE

Why "Correcting" African American Language Speakers is Counterproductive

ALICE LEE

On a Spring afternoon in 2010, I sat in the back of a university classroom doing my best to listen to my professor talk about language diversity, a topic I had heard about many times before. I was exhausted from teaching my fifth graders all day, and graduate school only fit in my schedule "part time" as a full-time classroom teacher. Most classes were a struggle to turn on my "intellectual cap" and to theorize about best practices when the majority of my day was spent surviving all the moving parts of being a teacher. But on this particular day, my ears perked up when, in the midst of talking about language diversity, the professor mentioned the term "African American Language." She said it in such a nonchalant, every day manner. I thought I might have misheard what she said, and began to listen more intently as she discussed the need to honor African American Language (AAL) in the classroom. As someone who had never heard that term before, I quickly looked around the room to see if any of my peers were as perplexed as I was. To my surprise, the other students sat calmly and quietly, without any confusion as to why she continued to refer to AAL as something I knew as "slang." I finally raised my hand and asked, "Are we talking about slang here? Aren't we doing our students a disservice by allowing them to talk like that in the classroom, when they'll be expected to speak standard English in the real world?"

Those questions began my quest to better understand AAL and what role it should play in the classroom. The professor and course mentioned above were monumental in my journey to know and accept AAL as linguistically legitimate; this truth changed how I understood my students and teaching. I also became more attuned to the ways teachers' lack of knowledge about AAL played a role in their instruction. In one conversation with another elementary classroom teacher, he wondered how he would be able to teach his student math when the student could not even "talk right." In another conversation with a literacy specialist, after broaching the topic of AAL, she informed me that AAL usage was only acceptable at home. The divide between research and practice became blaringly apparent to me when I invited a Reading Recovery coach into my classroom to assist with writing instruction, and she would cut off speakers of AAL mid-sentence and yell at them to "say it again" in "standard English." These conversations are representative of the ideas many teachers (and those soon-to-be) have about accepting AAL in the classroom. Ball and Muhammud (2003) have called this a "zero tolerance" stance when working with pre-service teachers and their attitudes of AAL in the classroom. Other research (Delpit 1998; 2006) has also documented negative in-service teacher attitudes towards AAL in their classrooms. In my experience working with pre-service teachers, while many are open to accepting AAL as a "real" language, there are still questions and hesitations about allowing its usage in the classroom. In this article, I would like to address the topic of AAL usage in the classroom, particularly the line of thinking that assumes "correcting" the language is what will "set students up for success" in the future. By providing some abbreviated information on how children acquire language, I will explain how AAL "correction" is not only a faulty perspective (since AAL is linguistically legitimate), actually counterproductive for student "success"—in both language acquisition and learning. Additionally, I will offer practical suggestions for how AAL can be incorporated in curriculum and instruction.

Historical and Linguistic Highlights of AAL

Much has already been written about how AAL is a legitimate language (Baugh, 1999; Labov, 1969; Smitherman, 1977; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974). My goal in this article is not to provide a comprehensive linguistic background for AAL, but to provide cursory information to help readers understand why AAL is and should be considered a "real" language. For a list of resources that can offer a more comprehensive perspective of the linguistic and rhetorical prac-

tices within AAL, please visit: http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/ebonics. The term, African American Language, has also been referred to as Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Vernacular English, and is defined by Smitherman (2006) in the following way:

> Black or African American Language (BL or AAL) a style of speaking English words with Black flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns. AAL comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community. (p. 3).

AAL became particularly salient in education during the Civil Rights era when some in academe began paying attention to the achievement of Black students, especially as schools moved towards racial integration. Among them were education psychologists Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann (1966) whose research interpreted Black students through a culturally deficit lens, and labeled AAL as a "language handicap" (p. 5). William Labov (1969) is one of the first linguists to present research refuting Bereiter and Engelmann's claims, and to provide evidence for AAL as linguistically legitimate. Geneva Smitherman (1977) is a pioneering linguist who not only documented its linguistic rules, but as a speaker of AAL, she was also able to bring insight into the language's unique rhetoric and discourse styles. Smitherman (2006) has been a proponent of referring to AAL as a language (versus a dialect) for a couple reasons: 1) the language has roots from various African languages, and 2) the variation between AAL and "standard English" is similar to the variation of other White Europeans languages that are recognized as such, Norwegian and Swedish for example. The difference between a language and dialect is often defined by whether or not it is understood by speakers within the same group. Some would argue that speakers of AAL understand "standard English" and vice versa, while the same communicative properties would not apply to monolingual speakers of Chinese and English. However, as noted above, languages such as Norwegian and Swedish are considered two different languages, even though monolingual speakers of each group often understand those from the other group because of the linguistic similarity between the languages. Smitherman argues, therefore, that what is considered a dialect versus a language is not solely based on linguistics, but involves decision-making entrenched in power.

As linguists, both Labov and Smitherman have documented how AAL is systematically governed by rules—a defining marker for what is considered a "real" language. Examples of linguistic components include syntax (grammar), semantics (closely related to vocabulary), and phonology (pronunciation). Linguists look for the ways these and other linguistic components follow rules. One characteristic feature of AAL is the usage of the habitual "be" copula verb. The sentence "They be happy," for example, is often perceived as using "wrong" grammar. However, Smitherman (1977) explains that there are rules (correct and incorrect ways) to use the habitual "be" verb. The habitual "be" signifies repetition of occurrence over time. Therefore the statement "They be happy" means that they are generally happy people, even if they may not be happy at this very moment. The usage of the habitual "be" verb is one of the many ways AAL syntactically (grammatically) varies from "standard English." Other examples in which AAL varies phonologically and semantically include: 1) the substitution of the nasal sound /n/ for /ng/ in the word "walking," which would be pronounced as "walkin'," and 2) the form of address of others as "Sister" or "Brother," even if s/he is not biologically related to you (Smitherman, 1977).

It is important to note that there are many variances from "standard English," or the Language of Wider Community (LWC) in America. Linguists Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (2006) explored 37 American dialects, categorized by geography and social group. Included are Southern American English, Appalachian English, Maine English, Midwest English, California English, Chicano English, and Jewish English. It is equally important to note that these, and other dialects, are not exclusively spoken by "other" race/cultures/ethnic groups. In fact, Wolfram argues that *everyone* speaks a dialect of English, and the idea of a "standard English"—in which some people speak "correctly" and others do not—is linguistically inaccurate. The dialects mentioned above (with the exception of Chicano and Jewish English) are all spoken by White Americans of European decent. Of course, all dialects are represented by multi-racial, multi-ethnic speakers. Not all African Americans speak AAL, and conversely, not all AAL speakers are African American. Research (Martinez, 2017) has shown the intersection of non-Black social groups incorporating AAL within their own speech practices. Popular White mainstream discourses have also appropriated AAL semantics, such as "bad" (meaning "good"). We see, then, that language is far more multidimensional than being simply "correct" and "incorrect." This dichotomous perception points to a linguistic hierarchy that, in many ways,

is representative of a racial hierarchy that overarches our society. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explain that a "social stratification" exists and privileges those who are part of the following groups: "White," "middle class/wealthy," "men," "heterosexual," "Christian," "able-bodied," and "perceived citizens" (p. 42). The work of sociologists Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) document the ways White dominance continues to pervade institutional and social norms in our country. White dominance and anti-Blackness, two sides of the same coin, can be seen in myriad facets of our society—historically, politically, educationally, and socially (Ladson-Billings, 2013) The linguistic devaluation of AAL is yet another example of both White dominance and anti-Blackness at play.

AAL for School Use

At this juncture, teachers may be able to accept AAL as linguistically legitimate but still reject its usage in school. Like me, they may wonder how allowing them to use AAL (versus LWC) will "set them up for success" in the future, particularly when they face job interviews in which speaking AAL may put them at a disadvantage? Underlying this common inquiry are several issues: 1) what language should students be allowed to use in schools, 2) the linguistic goal for AAL speaking students, and 3) how to best instructionally serve AAL speaking students. The first issue has been addressed by our national organization in the Resolution on the Students' Right to their Own Language, which was published in 1974 (NCTE, 1974), and is as follows:

> Members of NCTE and its constituent group, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), became concerned in the early 1970s about a tendency in American society to categorize nonstandard dialects as corrupt, inferior, or distorted forms of standard English, rather than as distinct linguistic systems, and the prejudicial labeling of students that resulted from this view. Be it therefore:
>
> Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the students' right to their own language—to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity; that NCTE affirm the responsibility of all teachers of English to assist all students in the development of their ability to speak and write better whatever their dialects;
>
> that NCTE affirm the responsibility of all teachers to provide opportunities for clear and cogent expression of ideas in writing, and to provide the opportunity for students to learn the conventions of what has been called written edited American English; and
>
> that NCTE affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to understand and respect diversity of dialects.
>
> Be it further Resolved, that, to this end, that NCTE make available to other professional organizations this resolution as well as suggestions for ways of dealing with linguistic variety, as expressed in the CCCC background statement on students' right to their own language; and
>
> that NCTE promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multiregional, multiethnic, and multicultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English and come to respect all its dialects.

I have included the resolution here in its entirety because it is a historical document that addresses the very issue of whether or not AAL speaking students should be allowed to use their language in schools. It was written amidst research mentioned above that interpreted AAL in contrasting ways—as a "language handicap" or linguistically legitimate. This resolution clearly communicates NCTE's stance in its understanding of AAL as a "distinct linguistic system," and its affirmation of "students' right to their own language," which is a marker of their personal, familial, and community identity. NCTE further details varying responsibilities for both teachers and the organization itself. It has regarded its own duties to include using the organization's national platform to encourage and accept the wide diversity of American English among other organizations as well as in classrooms. The duties for teachers include having "experiences and training" that foster a respect for language diversity, and to broaden the oral and written language repertoire of all students. With over 40 years since this resolution has been written, how well has this been achieved? This latter responsibility speaks to both the linguistic goal for AAL speaking students, as well as how to achieve such goals. Similar to the Resolutions on the Students' Right to their Own Language, NCTE also published a Statement on Ebonics through the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), which is comprised of over 5,000 university/college scholars. Originally written in 1998 and revised in 2016, the statement provided historical background to the development of Ebonics and political context to prevailing conceptions about the language. In its conclusion, the statement directly addressed the linguistic goal for AAL

speaking students with the following charge (brackets inserted for clarity):

> Teachers, administrators, counselors, supervisors, and curriculum developers must undergo training to provide them [AAL speaking students] with adequate knowledge about Ebonics and help them overcome the prevailing stereotypes about the language and learning potential of African American students (and others) who speak Ebonics. CCCC thus strongly advocates new research and teaching that will build on existing knowledge about Ebonics to help students value their linguistic-cultural heritage, maintain Black identity, enhance their command of the Language of Wider Communication (Mainstream/Standardized English), and master essential reading, writing, and speaking skills.

According to NCTE, the goals for AAL speaking students are to: 1) "help students value their linguistic-cultural heritage," 2) "maintain Black identity," 3) "enhance their command" of LWC, and 4) "master essential reading, writing, and speaking skills." These goals broaden students' linguistic repertoire without erasing who they are and their cultural history. It is important that both of these components are maintained, since it is counterproductive and unlikely to "enhance their command" of LWC if AAL is perceived through a deficit lens.

"Correcting" AAL is Counterproductive to Language Acquisition

Teachers that seek to foster a command of LWC for AAL speakers, as well as mastery in various literacy skills, are essentially asking students to acquire a new language. It is imperative, then, that we have some idea about how people "get" language. Understanding this process can be a huge asset when considering how best to encourage fluency in LWC, in its oral and written forms. In this section, I briefly map out major 20th century theories that have informed what we know about language acquisition. I then use those ideas to explain how correcting AAL in the classroom is counterproductive to broadening students' linguistic repertoire.

Believe it or not, our ideas of how we "get" language ground much of our instruction across content. Using flashcards to memorize science terms, forcing students to orally read a text repetitively, and having students re-write misspelled words from a spelling list again and again are all examples of instruction grounded in a behaviorist theory of language. Behaviorism is often associated with the classic work of Pavlov, in which dogs were trained to salivate at the ring of a bell, and there is an emphasis on repetition with reinforcements to produce desired outcomes. B. F. Skinner (1957) was a psychologist who applied behaviorist ideas toward language, and interpreted "verbal behavior" as something that was learned and produced through reinforcements. Two years later, linguist Noam Chomsky (1959) critiqued Skinner's framework of understanding language through merely stimuli, responses, and reinforcements. Instead, he argued that all humans are born with innate, "deep-seated properties of organization and structure" that are used to convey meaning, and what he coined as "universal grammar" (Chomsky, 1968/2002, p. 42). He reasoned that children are able to participate in and acquire a complex linguistic system long before it is explicitly taught. For example, how often do parents explain to their toddlers why a prepositional phrase must end with an object, or the difference between an adverb and adjective? Yet children begin engaging in this advanced mental ability from a very young age. Other complex systems, such as mathematical conceptions, utilize equally advanced thinking, but require explicit instruction (e.g., it is rare to just "get" algebraic ideas simply by socializing with others who know algebra—an explanation of variables and its meaning are needed). Humans, therefore, do not just speak as a response to stimuli, but use language as a way to express themselves.

Following Chomsky were other researchers who developed ideas about language that frame much of the current research in our field. Social psychologist Roger Brown recorded the interactions of 18 to 36 month aged children and their mothers over several years, and found that the children acquired language as both mother and child constructed what they said as a response to the other (Brown & Bellugi,1964/2001). This was a landmark study in forming a constructivist view of language—one that considers how language is dynamically and fluidly built between those communicating with one another. Linguist Michael Halliday extended on Brown's constructivist notions by focusing on the social nature of language. He understood it to be an interactive, two-way communication, for the purpose of conveying meaning, and came to be known as an interactionist view of language (Halliday, 1980). Finally, sociolinguist Dell Hymes, the father of sociocultural theory of language, built his ideas off of Brown and Halliday's work. Hymes' work was contemporary to Labov and Smitherman during the Civil Rights era, and responded to ideas that considered AAL as a "language handicap." He rejected ideas that speakers of AAL were from "disadvantaged" backgrounds and "linguistically deprived" (Hymes, 1972, p. xx). Based

on the idea that language is socially constructed, Hymes broadened this approach by considering how various social groups (e.g., racial, ethnic, cultural) constructed language in different ways. Additionally, sociocultural theory also considered other aspects, such as audience, tone, setting, and norms of the social group, as critical to language and important for effective communication.

What we learn from all these theories is that language is something that is innate in all of us—no group of people has a capacity for "more" or "better" language than another. This innateness means that we have a natural proclivity towards acquiring language, and that it is a *process* of interacting and socially constructing speech with one another. Since different social groups socialize their children in different ways, it matters who socializes you. For example, my daughter is a multi-ethnic, multilingual Asian American. Her first language is English, but since her paternal Korean grandparents have helped with childcare since birth, she is also fluent in Korean. Her maternal Chinese grandparents have also spoken Chinese to her since birth, so she also understands Chinese. Being born within this family, she is a part of various social groups that have socialized her in three different languages. This, however, is not the case for everyone; who socializes you matters linguistically. Whether or not your language is valued is a political matter that echoes the linguistic and racial hierarchy previously mentioned. Research has shown that correcting AAL speakers diminishes their agency and can be detrimental to student learning (Delpit, 1998). Constructivist, interactionist, and sociocultural theories of language all point to the fact that children must engage in language use (e.g., talk to peers, to teachers, etc.) if we want children to acquire additional language. Correcting AAL speakers can facilitate students to "shut down," and discourage participation in classroom activities. Based on language acquisition theories, this lack of talking/participating make acquisition of LWC unlikely.

Pedagogical Suggestions for Teaching AAL Speakers

As a former teacher, I am painfully aware that the most pressing issue for any proposed theory, suggestion for teaching, or professional development is the practical implications in the classroom. In an era in which standardization and scripted curricula are the norm for both students and teachers, what do all these ideas about language diversity mean in our practices? The final issue I would like to address in this article—how to best instructionally serve AAL speaking students—is also in line with NCTE's resolution that seeks to "enhance their command" of LWC, and also "master essential reading, writing, and speaking skills." Various instructional approaches have been proposed, including "contrastive analysis" (Wheeler & Swords, 2004) and "critical language pedagogy" (Baker-Bell, 2013). Both approaches agree that out rightly correcting speakers of AAL is ineffective and detrimental to learning. Contrastive analysis focuses on getting students to codeswitch, or "choose the language variety appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose" (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 471). The emphasis is on teaching students how to switch their language (AAL to LWC) from "informal" (e.g., outside of school, home, playground) to "formal" (e.g., inside the classroom) settings. What is problematic about this approach is that students will think that they should not use AAL within the classroom, and as mentioned above, when students are not socially engaging/talking while learning, new language will not be acquired. Critiques have also been made that discuss how this approach encourages African American students to "act white," (p. 69) can perpetuate deficit attitudes of AAL, and cause "linguistic confusion" (Young, 2014, p. 70). Other educational language scholars (Alim, 2007; Baker-Bell, 2013; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008) argue for an approach that addresses how language, race, and power are deeply entwined, while also honoring the legitimacy and historicity of AAL. Baker-Bell's (2013) "critical language pedagogy" approach "presents students with a critical understanding of the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of AAL to heighten their consciousness," and to "interrogate dominant notions of language and to become active agents in their own language education" (p. 358). Employing a critical language pedagogy approach meets the goals of both bolstering racial identity while also equipping students with academic literary needs.

Practically speaking, I think there are ways to provide explicit instruction to broaden students' linguistic repertoire once the teacher has laid a foundation honoring AAL and those who speak it. Based on my own teaching background, I focus on applications for an elementary classroom. For examples in secondary classrooms, please refer to Godley and Minnici's (2008) study conducted in 10th grade English classrooms and Baker-Bell's (2013) pilot study conducted in an 11th grade English classroom. Ideas about language, race, and power can be tricky, abstract ideas for early to intermediate elementary-aged students. These ideas, however, can be couched in conversations about what students consider "right" and "wrong" language. I have witnessed AAL speaking students "correcting" each other's language from

a young age, and students may surprise you with their awareness of negative language views that can be socialized early on. These conversations can be prompted with children's literature containing AAL, or audio/video clips featuring the language. Caution, however, is needed when selecting such texts, to ensure that the resources do not perpetuate stereotypical notions of AAL speakers. Teachers can build on conversations about "right" and "wrong" language and ask students who get to decide what is "right" and what is "wrong?" From there, further conversations and/or mini-lessons (e.g. during interactive read-alouds) can focus on how AAL is a real language, with rules, and has been studied by lots of researchers. Other mini-lessons can include 1) the ingenuity of African slaves as they developed a new language, 2) the powerful ways AAL can communicate things that LWC cannot (e.g., consider unique rhetorical discourse styles, such as call and response, signification, and tonal semantics—see Smitherman (1977) for further explanation), 3) how White mainstream popular culture has copied aspects of AAL, and 4) how AAL speakers can actually speak two languages. These conversations all point students to consider how language, race, and power are connected. Throughout this process, it is also important for teachers to identify and speak to other English dialects represented in the classroom. Teachers can identify these dialects through Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward's (2006) edited book, *American Voices*, or through the PBS website: http://www.pbs.org/speak/. Helping students understand that *all* students speak a variation of LWC debunks the idea that people of color speak an "other" language.

Once it has been established that AAL is a real language, and it is honored and accepted for school use in the classroom, teachers can move students to think about language as a form of communication. They can discuss how AAL speakers are linguistically gifted since they are able to speak two languages, but not everyone has those abilities. In an effort to prepare AAL speakers to communicate with people who only speak LWC, teachers can provide explicit instruction and opportunities for students to grow their competence of LWC. This suggestion may sound similar to a contrastive analysis approach, but what I am proposing differs from asking students to codeswitch. For example, allow and honor student writing that contains AAL—from the beginning to the end of the school year. Focus instruction, instead, on fostering what students want to say in their writing and building strategies to develop their voice—lessons that will be useful for all students. As you gain a clearer picture of the various writing patterns and needs of students, you can organize them in fluid guided reading or writing groups during literacy blocks or writing workshop time. You may find that some AAL speakers do not use AAL in their writing, some LWC speakers need additional instruction in various conventions, and some AAL speakers frequently use some aspects of AAL. Guided groups could be temporarily organized for more instruction by these needs. For the AAL speakers who use some aspects of AAL, you may meet with this group a couple times to explicitly identify how phrases in AAL would be translated into LWC. This could be accomplished by using a T-chart with "AAL" and "LWC" as headings to each column. Wheeler and Swords (2004) utilize a T-chart to contrast "formal" and "informal" English, but I consider these terms problematic because students and teachers alike can be led to think that AAL is for "informal" contexts (such as the playground or lunch) and "formal" contexts include the classroom. Remember that students' freedom to use AAL encourages the acquisition of LWC. The students who use AAL in their writing would not be singled out since it would not be a "fixed" group and all students would be meeting in guided groups. Once explicit instruction has been provided, encourage students to write and turn in work that considers audience—both AAL and LWC speakers. In some writing, particularly during the first half of the school year, accept and grade work that includes AAL for an AAL speaking audience, without penalizing the usage of AAL. In other writing, accept and grade work intended for a monolingual LWC speaking audience, without penalizing the usage of AAL. If AAL is used, provide feedback to students through one-on-one or small group conferences, reminding students that for this particular writing assignment, LWC speakers may not understand what they want to say. Allow students opportunities to revise and resubmit writing (a practice consistent with the writing workshop model). As noted earlier, just as instruction should focus on fostering student voice, assessment should also focus on this as well.

The pedagogical suggestions provided in this article can hopefully serve as a starting point that each teacher will need to tailor to his/her particular context. Honoring and incorporating AAL into your classroom will be a journey, but one that must begin with the teacher. As the most valuable instructional resource in the classroom, it is imperative for teachers to know something about AAL, how language works and is acquired, and to begin a process of wrestling with these ideas in their instruction. It is only through this process that all of our students, particularly AAL speakers, are provided the opportunities to be "set up for success."

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