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Maura Jones Moyle  
*Marquette University*, maura.moyle@marquette.edu

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Language Variation: What’s an Educator to Do?

Maura Moyle
Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

You are an educator and the students in your classroom come from diverse backgrounds. You notice many of your students use forms of English that are “nonstandard,” even though they are native English speakers. For example, a student says, “He big!” instead of “He is big!” Another says “mouf” for mouth, and “aks” for ask.

As an educator, what do you do? Correct your students’ language? Ignore the differences and hope students learn Standard English through exposure alone?

A student talking about his mother says, “She be workin’ at the hospital.” You also notice that these nonstandard forms of English appear in students’ oral and written language. As an educator, what do you do? Correct your students’ language? Ignore the differences and hope students learn Standard English through exposure alone?

English Dialects and School Success
The students in the examples above are using language that is consistent with some African American English (AAE) — a variation of the English language. Every English speaker uses a variety, or a dialect of
English. I grew up in a white, middle-class family in Minnesota, and I speak with a Midwestern English dialect. Have you seen the movie *Fargo*? From a scientific perspective, no language, or dialect, is superior to another. Just as botanists do not place flowers into a hierarchy of beauty, linguists do not judge dialects. They are all fascinating manifestations of languages developed by social communities. All dialects are rule governed and fully functional linguistic systems that are scientifically equal. Unfortunately, our society does not view dialects from a scientific perspective. Instead, society judges dialects, and sometimes quite harshly. I wish I had a dollar for every time I’ve been teased for my Minnesotan accent.

I hope you are convinced that all dialects deserve respect and validation. At the same time, textbooks and standardized tests are based on Standard English (SE). Students are expected to speak and write SE in school and when they enter the job market. What if students never fully learn Standard English — also known as Mainstream English, Academic Classroom English, etc.? Aren’t these students at a disadvantage? How will they succeed in school and business? These questions represent valid concerns. A large body of research has found that students who do not fully acquire SE score lower on literacy assessments. Lower literacy achievement has huge consequences. We know how important literacy is to students’ academic achievement and future economic success.

A Conundrum

As educators we are presented with a conundrum. We need to respect and affirm our students’ home dialects, yet we also need to teach students to become competent in SE for academic and occupational success. This is a culturally sensitive issue that can be controversial. What’s an educator to do? We know that an “eradicationist” approach, where educators attempt to make students replace one dialect with another (e.g., replace AAE with SE) has been deemed ineffective and unethical. Dialects serve a social solidarity function. Our students need to speak their home dialects — or languages — to be functional and accepted members of their social communities. Research has shown that a “correctionist” approach to teaching SE, such as using lots of red ink on students’ written assignments and continually correcting their oral language, only leads students to feel demoralized and less engaged in the educational process. On the other hand, research has shown that we can’t ignore the issue and leave students to their own devices. Dr. Holly Craig has researched the language and literacy outcomes of students who speak AAE for decades. Craig and her colleagues have found that up to a third of AAE-speaking students will not become competent in SE through exposure alone, and these students will exhibit significantly lower literacy achievement.

(For a summary of the research, see Holly Craig’s recently published book, *African American English and the Achievement Gap: The Role of Dialectal Code-Switching*.)

Teaching Code-Switching Through Contrastive Analysis

What’s the solution? Until society catches up with science and values all variations of English equally in academic and business settings, educators need to explicitly teach SE in order to provide students with increased access to educational and economic opportunities. The general consensus among prominent researchers who study language variation is to promote “code-switching,” or students’ ability to shift between their home dialects and SE as needed, depending on the situation. Two research-based code-switching curricula are *ToggleTalk*, by Holly Craig, and *Code-Switching Lessons*, by Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords.
The development of *ToggleTalk* was funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is designed for AAE-speaking children in kindergarten and first grade. *Code-Switching Lessons* is intended for AAE-speaking students in grades two through six and focuses on students’ written language. Both curricula utilize an instructional method called Contrastive Analysis, which systematically and explicitly compares and contrasts AAE and SE linguistic features. For example, when focusing on third-person singular, teachers present lessons where students become aware that when using “home” or “informal” language, they might say, “Everyday she walk to school.” When using “school” or “formal” talk, students would say, “Everyday she walks to school.” Code-switching curricula develop students’ ability to recognize language differences and becoming aware of situations where home language would be appropriate — e.g., when talking with friends on the playground — or when school language would be appropriate — e.g., when writing a book report. Practicing SE is another important component of these approaches, such as when translating sentences from one dialect to another.

**Code-Switching Leads to Higher Literacy Achievement**

Code-switching curricula honor and affirm students’ home dialects while simultaneously promoting acquisition of SE. Code-switching curricula have additional benefits, such as increasing students’ metalinguistic awareness — i.e., ability to think and talk about language — and analytical thinking skills — e.g., compare and contrast. In addition to promoting code-switching skills, effective implementation of these curricula leads to higher literacy achievement in students. For example, Rachel Swords, a co-author of *Code-Switching Lessons*, worked in a school where African American students, who were predominantly AAE speakers, exhibited significantly lower standardized test scores for reading compared to their white peers. After one year of implementing Code-Switching Lessons, the achievement gap was completely closed for African American students in her classroom. Holly Craig found that after implementing *ToggleTalk* for eight weeks in kindergarten and first grade classrooms of AAE speakers, the students exhibited a significant increase in their ability to codeswitch between AAE and SE, and significantly increased their scores on a standardized assessment of decoding.

**The Need for Professional Development**

I hope that if you are a teacher of students who speak non mainstream forms of English, your curiosity in code-switching curricula has been piqued. When implemented effectively, they work! However, experts emphasize that teachers utilizing these programs benefit greatly from participating in professional development. Addressing dialectal differences requires a high degree of cultural sensitivity and a solid foundational knowledge of linguistics. In the research mentioned above, participating teachers received training in Contrastive Analysis and the features of AAE. In addition, effective teachers received on-going coaching and maintained high fidelity to the procedures of the curriculum they were implementing. If you approach your school administrators about adopting a code-switching curriculum, advocate for the inclusion of teacher professional development and coaching to ensure the best results for your students.

The English language, with all of its variations, is beautiful and complex. We must honor the dialects students bring to the classroom, while also giving students the opportunity to develop the language skills they need for academic and occupational success through the use of culturally sensitive, constructive approaches. It is (yet another) challenge for educators, and well worth it.

_Maura Jones Moyle, Ph.D., CCC-SLP is an Associate Professor in Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her primary research interests are language and literacy development._
of young children who speak African American English, and culturally-linguistic fair methods of assessing children’s language skills.