Jessica Whitney argues that teachers must value students’ home language “and use it to help students become more effective rhetoricians.” She offers five steps for educators to take.

There is no reason to believe that any nonstandard vernacular is in itself an obstacle to learning. The chief problem is ignorance of language on the part of all concerned.

I am confused. Hesitant. Slightly obsessed. I am a white teacher trying to get a handle on the Black English or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) controversy. What exactly is AAVE? How can I create a classroom environment that genuinely respects the diverse home languages of my students? How can I walk the tightrope of language and power honestly—acknowledging my influential place in the classroom as facilitator of learning and as a physical representation of white America and Standard English? Will I be harming students if I encourage them to incorporate AAVE into their oral and written work?

I am not the only one who is having a hard time determining AAVE’s place in the classroom. Although the history-making Oakland, California, school district decision to recognize AAVE was made nearly eight years ago, educators and leaders are still trying to reconcile themselves to the topic. Everyone has an opinion on the AAVE (or Ebonics) debate that they are eager to share with the media. In fact, Bill Cosby’s statement on the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision has been viewed as anti-AAVE sentiment. He stated, “They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English. I can’t even talk the way these people talk: ‘Why you ain’t?’ ‘Where you is?’ . . . Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads. . . . You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth!” (qtd. in Coates, par. 4).

I am not going to argue with Mr. Cosby. However, his comments do not accurately reflect the AAVE controversy. Mr. Cosby’s remarks, and the public reaction to them, demonstrate that we are as confused about AAVE today as we were eight years ago. Recognition of AAVE in the classroom is not about eradicating education about the English language. It is not about raising a new generation of students incapable of speaking anything other than AAVE. Advocates in the AAVE debate are calling for students to no longer be unfairly penalized for the use of their home language in the classroom. They are also pleading for teachers to build on home language to teach about Standard English (what Geneva Smitherman refers to as the “Language of Wider Communication”) rather than ignoring or belittling it.

Students with linguistic differences sit in our classrooms now, and we need appropriate tools to work with them. I offer five steps that we as educators may take toward respecting and making the most of AAVE in the classroom to best help students.

**Step One: Teacher, Educate Thyself**

Educators must understand AAVE. According to Geneva Smitherman, it is “a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from Africans’
appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust” (19). (Yes, this is a distinctly political definition, one that touches on the important links among race, language, and power. To appreciate the scope of the debate, we must recognize this connection.) The Linguistic Society of America confirms that “distinctive Ebonics pronunciations are all systematic, the result of regular rules and restrictions; they are not random ‘error’— and this is equally true of Ebonics grammar” (Rickford, par. 5).

To better understand AAVE, let’s first examine the facts:

> AAVE is not slang, improper grammar, or broken English (Smitherman 19).
> Ninety percent of African Americans use one or more aspects of AAVE some of the time (Smitherman 19).
> “Studies by researchers at Stanford University show that black children who have been taught using the Ebonics program—which recognizes so-called black English as distinct from standard English—have improved their ability to read and write standard English” (Milloy, par. 3; emphasis in original).
> “[T]he child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead, she or he is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community” (Wheeler and Swords 471).

One of the biggest obstacles that teachers of linguistically diverse students face is ignorance. Our ignorance of specific cultures and languages can, unfortunately, be passed on to students who interpret it as a judgment that one language is better than another. Many of the educators working with African American students are “white, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking women and men who have had little direct experience with cultural, ethnic, linguistic or other kinds of diversity” (Nieto 122). Educating ourselves requires acknowledging the crucial link between language and power and setting aside any preconceived notions about users of different varieties of English: “Perhaps the most significant aspect of teaching non-mainstream children is a teacher’s attitude and behavior toward a child’s oral language” (Sorace 75). Teachers are more likely to view students speaking AAVE as “slower, less able, and less intelligent” than their Standard English–speaking classmates, reducing teacher expectations for the students’ abilities (Wheeler and Swords 472). Unfortunately for students, “[a]s teacher expectations are reduced, so potential child performance is diminished” (472).

Working with a student’s home language, instead of against it, is crucial to ensuring students’ academic success.

**Step Two: Incorporate Multiculturalism into the Classroom**

Multicultural education is based on the ideals of social justice and educational equity, and it is an essential forum for reforming schools to support equality and pluralism. To respect AAVE in the classroom, we must create a learning environment that values diversity in experience, culture, and language.

Multicultural education in practice is incredibly varied. There are enough methods of integrating multiculturalism into the classroom to allow teachers to choose one or more with which they feel comfortable. Kim Brian Lovejoy discusses his success with the following activity: “After introducing some examples of nonmainstream varieties (for example, rap lyrics, advertisements, excerpts from fiction), I invite students to bring in [other nonmainstream] samples of writing... These samples... provide the subject matter for class discussions of language uses, for analyses of written discourse, and for class work on the differences between EAE [Edited American English] and other varieties” (98).

Opponents of multiculturalism argue that it waters down the curriculum and forces out crucial components, facts, and figures: “It constructs, as well, a curriculum which, far from being representatively diverse, is unified around a theme of race and sex and the debunking of Western culture” (Famularo 128). True multiculturalism does just the opposite—it provides students with a more accurate view of Western culture and allows experiences and voices that have been ignored to be heard and appreciated. Every student needs to understand the rampant inequities in our society based on differences in language, gender, and race.

Our school system is failing children from diverse backgrounds; how else can we explain the fact...
that only 56 percent of African American students graduate from high school (Rotherham 136)? Our current methods of teaching African American students are not working—methods that include hypercorrection, avoidance, or punishment of students’ use of their home language in the classroom. We must work with diversity in the classroom more honestly and effectively.

Culturally relevant teaching has a positive effect on students’ academic achievement. According to Geneva Gay, “[c]urriculums infused with multicultural education boost academic success and prepare students for roles as productive citizens” (30) because “multicultural education makes schooling more relevant and effective” for minority students (34). Students are more likely to perform successfully at school when there is a greater correspondence between their cultural backgrounds and school experiences such as “task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability” (34).

Incorporating works that use a variety of styles, voices, and languages demonstrates the validity of these differences and familiarizes students with them (see sidebar for examples). Using such works endorses diversity in literature while allowing students to better appreciate and understand the background from which the author is speaking. According to Elaine Richardson, “Educators may deem English monolingualism as more effective for student learning. Yet restricting languages other than English from the classroom limits access to literacy by limiting students’ ability to construct meaning and knowledge from other discourse, culture, and language communities of which they may be a part” (49–50). Multicultural texts can connect people of diverse backgrounds and can be used as a starting point for deeper examination and discussion of our experiences. Students can draw on class discussions to reflect on appropriate uses of home language and school language, as Lovejoy detailed.

Introduce students to works that incorporate varieties of English so that they have access to the writing of authentic writers that reflects the real world. Adrienne Rich said, “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (qtd. in Bohn and Sleeter 158). It is neither feasible nor fair to present students with a one-sided view of the world.

**Step Three: Create a Learning Environment Rich in Oral Language**

Children acquire language through practicing the skills of speaking and listening, “upon which the other [communication] skills are formed” (Sorace 76). Students proficient in oral language are also more proficient in reading and writing (Vacca and Vacca). Therefore, we must create an English language arts program rich in oral language activities that “promote rich repertoires of communication contexts, provide opportunities for trying out communication behaviors, and supply feedback with which students may evaluate their communicative effectiveness” (Holdzkom et al., qtd. in Sorace 76).

It is not difficult to establish a classroom environment that develops students’ oral language

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**RECOMMENDED WORKS THAT INCORPORATE AAVE**

skills—engaging students in small-group discussions, brainstorming, word games, choral reading and creative dramatics, debates, storytelling, general discussion, and even listening to recordings all create an orally rich environment (Sorace 76). When we read texts aloud to students, we help them put language in context and discern the differences between Standard English and their home language. “Allowing children’s home language to serve legitimate functions within the classroom, allowing their home experiences or street experiences into the classroom ‘could be a starting point for crucial and truly enriching discussions’ of relationships among language, knowledge, culture, identity, politics” (Gil-yard, qtd. in Sorace 76).

An oral-rich classroom provides an appropriate forum for students’ home languages. Students may code-switch as necessary (see Step Four), reinforced by the spontaneous translating that occurs in the classroom. Orellana et al. stress the importance of engaging students in activities that link the literacy activities that occur at home with those in school because they affirm the significance of the students’ home language. Students could work in pairs to make sense of instructions and then review their interpretations with other pairs or the entire class. Students could translate or paraphrase non-Standard English texts for their family, which many of them are doing already, and reflect on their experiences in a journal. The research provided by Orellana et al. effectively demonstrates that “being literate in our modern social world requires the ability to navigate multiple literacies” (32). As educators, we must remember that proficiency in AAVE enhances proficiency in Standard English.

**Step Four: Encourage and Demonstrate Code-Switching in the Classroom**

Mark Twain did it. Toni Morrison does it. Microsoft cocreator Bill Gates, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and rock star/activist Bono continue to do it daily. I did it today, countless middle school and high school students from around the country did it, and you probably did, too. It’s called **code-switching**, the ability to “choose the language variety appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose” (Wheeler and Swords 471; italics in original).

Once we realize that languages come in different styles and that each is governed by a set of rules and patterns, we are able to approach them in a more fair and open-minded way. We are not as inclined to automatically correct students every time they deviate from Standard English (which has been proven to be ineffective as a teaching technique). Instead, we can work with students to build on their repertoire of linguistic skills. A powerful way of doing this is by facilitating discussions with students about different linguistic styles and the situational appropriateness of each one. When teachers work with students to contrast the differences between non-Standard English such as AAVE and Standard English, students are less likely to use features of AAVE in their writing. Rickford’s research proves that “when the teacher helped the students explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard, their success in writing Standard English improved by 59%” (Wheeler 14; italics in original). “Taylor observed that students were often unaware of the detailed differences between African American English and Standard English. Thus, contrasting the two systems helped students ‘limit AAE intrusions into their SE usage’ ” (Taylor, qtd. in Rickford, qtd. in Wheeler 14).

Erin Burns, a middle school English language arts teacher working with minority students in the Bronx, New York, confirms the importance of encouraging code-switching:

I see how it [AAVE] affects their reading and writing, but I also think that if code-switching was taught and practiced earlier on, it [students’ use of their home language] would not have posed a problem. I think that both languages are extremely crucial in their lives and that they need to be fluent in both. I teach this to my students and reinforce it constantly throughout the school year [by encouraging code-switching, incorporating multicultural literature that uses the home language of students, and facilitating discussions about formal versus informal languages, home versus school languages] and for the most part they truly do understand and are able to make the transition.

As professionals, we have an obligation to learn about students’ cultures. Does that add to our workload?
Five Easy Pieces: Steps toward Integrating AAVE into the Classroom

Yes. Will it enable us to understand our students better and enhance our effectiveness as teachers? Yes! Teachers do not need to understand every facet of every culture, but we must be familiar with the basics so that we do not criticize students for making mistakes that are just cultural “errors.” The benefits of allowing students to code-switch are undeniable: allowing students to use “their own culturally acceptable conversational style to talk and write about ideas they read in texts” helps them to “become more content-literate and to improve their literacy skills” (Vacca and Vacca 10).

By encouraging code-switching in the classroom, we help create effective writers and speakers. “Discussions centered on the different kinds of talk used in different situations and then engagement in activities centered on those concepts will assist the child in a growing awareness of language” (Sorace 77). Sorace reminds us that it is not enough to discuss these issues with students; we must provide them with opportunities to use what they have learned. This requires that we give students the resources they need to convey effectively their thoughts and ideas to different audiences. In many situations, including college admissions and job interviews, students will need to understand “the language of the dominant mainstream culture in American society—the ‘culture of power,’ according to Delpit” (Vacca and Vacca 11). Students should understand that cultural contexts influence everything they encounter, and that, “[a]lthough becoming proficient in standard American English may be an important school goal for all students, it should not be viewed as a prerequisite for literate classroom behavior. . . . When it is viewed as a prerequisite, teachers deny students the opportunity to use their own language as a tool for learning” (12).

Teachers must incorporate activities that demonstrate respect for various cultures and languages. Allowing students to reference their home language and culture while working through issues in the classroom ensures that linguistically diverse students are not left behind mainstream peers.

Step Five: Allow Students to Write like Real Writers

Real writers write for an authentic audience, with a specific purpose, and with a keen awareness of themselves as writers. Different audiences react to writing styles in varying ways, which is why we write one way when addressing the editor of a local newspaper, another way when corresponding with a close friend, and yet another way when writing an article for a scholarly journal. We need to teach students how to write for different audiences, to understand that they need to be aware of their mission and the ethos that they are projecting. Allowing students to use AAVE in written and spoken tasks can help us accomplish this. The essence of AAVE is to capture accurately the genuine flavor of discourse and to represent how things are truly expressed and pronounced. Isn’t this also the essence of most writing?

When students are aware of the intended audience, they can critically reflect on their choice of words. They may employ non-Standard English because it sounds more realistic in dialogue. In addition, writers can effectively use varieties of English to convey information about a character’s social status such as having a character speak in non-Standard English to show that he or she does not belong to the establishment. As John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford state, “speakers deploy it [AAVE] to greater or lesser extents to delineate identity, to mark differences of social class, gender, and age, and to express how comfortable they are with their audiences and topics” (128).

Knowing their audience helps students become aware of possible strategies for revising their work. Linda B. Nilson declares, “If fellow students are to provide honest and useful feedback, they should constitute the real audience, at least in the revision stages. This places students in the position of writing truly to communicate” (37).

Students need opportunities to be engaged in authentic tasks, which entails writing for true purposes to real audiences. Opportunities range from writing persuasive letters to real people or organizations to creating an editorial for the local newspaper. For more useful suggestions, read Lovejoy’s “Practical Pedagogy for Composition.”

Safeguarding the Linguistic Freedom to Express Ideas

The suggestions in this article are valid for working with any linguistic diversity in the classroom and are not limited to AAVE. Students flourish in classrooms in which they feel comfortable. By allowing students to express their ideas openly and without fear of being corrected or criticized for grammatical errors, teach-
ers achieve a sense of comfort and mutual respect. On the other hand, "[w]hen students have an opportunity to engage in learning and they are consistently told that what they say or how they express themselves is wrong, with no explanation of the reason that it is not acceptable or [S]tandard English, then students begin to shut down and will at some point, either intellectually or physically, drop out of the process," states Oakland California Schools Superintendent Carolyn Getridge (qtd. in Holman, par. 14).

Literacy is a key component in achieving power and success. People without strong oral and written communication skills are not able to compete with their fully literate peers. It is time for a revolution, one in which teachers respect and value students’ home language and use it to help students become more effective rhetoricians. This is not nearly as daunting as it sounds; the suggestions detailed above lay a solid foundation for such a revolution. The research is on our side.

Note

1. Although I take issue with referring to a specific variety of English as standard and a different variety as non-standard (and, thus, less valuable than the standard), I use these terms because most readers are familiar with them, if not comfortable. In addition, they serve to highlight the political and social ramifications of these designations within the greater AAVE controversy.

Works Cited


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