

Acknowledging the Language of African American Students: Instructional Strategies

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After years of failing many African American students, particularly in literacy, the American school system needs to search for instructional methods that could substantially impact the academic achievement of these students. One would think that, after over thirty years of research on African American literacy (Adger, Christian, and Taylor), the home language of African American students would be acknowledged, and these students would be recognized as what LeMoine calls Standard English Language Learners, not only by classroom teachers and instructional leaders, but also by systematic instructional

methodologies and general curriculum policies. One would really think that after the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1997 and beyond, the literacy community would be seriously interested in, or at least curious about, the possibility of an alternative to the traditional English/language arts teaching that inherently attempts to eradicate the African American Language (AAL) that most African American students across the nation bring into classrooms every day.

Still, many African American students will walk into classrooms and be discreetly taught in most cases, and explicitly told in others, that the language of their forefathers, their families, and their communities is bad language, street language, the speech of the ignorant and/or uneducated. They will be “corrected” and told that their “she be” should be “she is” and that two negatives in a sentence equals a positive; therefore, they should not use multiple negation. This unfortunate but frequent scenario will occur in many American classrooms, save for a few in Los Angeles.

Linguistic Affirmation Program

The Linguistic Affirmation Program (LAP) is a comprehensive nonstandard language awareness

program designed to serve the language needs of African American, Mexican American, Hawaiian American, and Native American students who are not proficient in Standard American English (SAE). The program incorporates into the curriculum research-based instructional strategies that facilitate the acquisition of Standard American English in its oral and written forms without devaluing the home language and culture of the students. The primary goal of the program is for students to use Standard American English proficiently, and, in the process, experience increased, enriching literacy opportunities and greater academic achievement. The Linguistic Affirmation Program revolves around six research-based critical instructional approaches. It contends that the combined use of these six approaches in the classroom can act as an instructional difference for Standard English language learners.

According to LAP, the six key instructional approaches are as follows:

1. Build teachers' knowledge, understanding, and positive attitude toward nonstandard languages and the students who use them.
2. Integrate linguistic knowledge about nonstandard language into instruction.

3. Utilize second language acquisition methodologies to support the acquisition of school language and literacy.
4. Employ a balanced approach to literacy acquisition that incorporates phonics and language experience.
5. Design instruction around the learning styles and strengths of Standard English language learners.
6. Infuse the history and culture of Standard English language learners into the instructional curriculum.

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The program’s rationale is that too many minority students are failing in American schools, trapped in classrooms where their language is devalued and teachers’ low expectations and limited understanding about their language and culture negatively impact achievement. Many minority students arrive at school in America speaking a language that differs from the language of instruction. How teachers view this language difference significantly influences the students’ ability to acquire literacy and other academic skills.

LAP provides professional development opportunities that are geared toward increasing teachers’ knowledge of instructional strategies that research has shown contribute to positive student outcomes for African American students. Teachers are provided the opportunity to collaborate in small groups, develop lesson plans, and observe instruction, which utilizes “best practices” in language development and literacy acquisition.

Within the school and throughout the year, the Linguistic Affirmation Program provides various forms of instructional support as well. Structured grade level collaboratives are centered on specific instructional focus areas such as linguistic awareness, second language learning methodology, balanced literacy approach, cultural awareness, and learning styles and strengths. In summarizing LAP, Geneva Smitherman says:

By far the most concentrated and comprehensive classroom practices embracing a philosophy of multilingualism are those in . . . [The Linguistic Affirmation Program]. Since 1991 [The Linguistic Affirmation Program], designed for grades K–8, has used a historical, linguistic, cultural approach, and a philosophy of additive bilingualism to teach language and literacy skills to students whose primary language is Ebonics. (12)

Language and Literacy Background

The question is not whether Ebonics or AAL is a language or not. The answer to that question is not germane to classroom application at all. LAP trains its teachers to first acknowledge that African American students, as well as the other previously mentioned research-identified populations, come to school speaking a language or linguistic form that is dissimilar but no less valuable than the language of instruction, SAE. Dillard estimated that at least 80 percent of all African Americans spoke some aspect of AAL, and Smitherman figured the estimate to be as high as 98 percent.

Nonstandard language forms can be put into four broad linguistic schools of thought. The first is the ethnolinguistic theory or the afrocologist view, which postulates that Ebonics is a direct derivation of the linguistic structure of West African languages. The second theory is that of the transformationalists. Their view is that African Americans speak a dialect of the English language. The third view comes from the creolists, who assert that Black English is a pidgin language that developed at the beginnings of the slave trade (LeMoine). The last group represents the deficit perspective. These theorists saw the use of Ebonics as inferior speech based on cognitive deficiency and articulatory abnormal processes in African Americans.

These four perspectives cover a broad spectrum. The ethnolinguistic view gives AAL the most credence. It credits the West African languages’ structure as the basis for its existence, with an English

vocabulary overlaying that structure. LAP subscribes to this perspective. Robert L. Williams, known as the “Father of Ebonics,” defined Ebonics as

The linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin. Ebonics includes the various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects [sic] and social dialects of these people. (100)

Ebonics refers to the “language family” spoken by Africans throughout the African Diaspora, which historically included enslaved Africans in Jamaica (Jamaican Patois), the Caribbean (Caribbean dialects), South America (Black Spanish), and Europe (Black Portuguese). In other words, wherever the enslaved Africans were taken throughout the world, a form of Ebonics exists. African Americans’ Ebonic form is AAL.

Transformationalists or dialectologists see it somewhat differently. Black English is a dialect. Adger, Christian, and Taylor quote John Rickford, who writes that African slaves learned English from white settlers and that they did so relatively quickly and successfully, retaining little trace of their African linguistic heritage (1). Many of the features of nonstandard English are seen as imports from the dialects spoken by colonial English, Irish, and Scotch-Irish settlers.

Creolists view Ebonics as a Creole language that was derived from the pidgin trade languages. Many of these languages such as Haitian Creole French and Jamaican Creole French are common in the Caribbean islands. Rickford points out that these languages do show African influence, as the Afrocentric theory would predict, but their speakers may have simplified existing patterns in African languages. Dillard said that as early as 1705 enslaved Africans were speaking several varieties of English. He identified three such varieties: West African Pidgin English, Plantation Creole, and Standard English. He contended that the language variety that enslaved Africans spoke was determined by their place of origin, status on the plantation, and length of stay on the plantation.

Lastly, the deficit perspective accounts for Ebonics’ existence because of cognitive and anatomical deficiencies in blacks. Not much needs to be said about this perspective. Ebonics is seen as a result of cognitive feebleness on the part of blacks, or, worse,

insufficient brain mass. According to this view, the type of speech the enslaved Africans spoke was due to their anatomical and physiological deviations. LeMoine laments that this racist view held African tongues as too thick and their lips too full for articulatory proficiency. The deficit perspective differs greatly from all the other perspectives and is in fact linguistically unsound because, in general, Africans are multilingual, speaking no less than two or three languages, and many of these languages contain a very fine, intricate, and complex range of sounds.

The point not to be missed, especially for literacy education, is that all four theories acknowledge that most African Americans speak in a way that is different from Standard English. Only linguists—those who study language as a science—make the finite language distinctions when it comes to specific terms and their definitions. Educationally, these terms connote that, again, black students, as well as other speakers of nonstandard language varieties (Chicano English, Native American Dialects, and Hawaiian Pidgin), come to school “language different or diverse,” not language deficient. To be clear, note the resolution passed by the Linguistic Society of America, a society of scholars engaged in the scientific study of language:

The variety known as “Ebonics, African American Vernacular English” (AAVE), and “Vernacular Black English” and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. . . . The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past 30 years. Characterizations of Ebonics as “slang,” “mutant,” “lazy,” “defective,” “ungrammatical,” or “broken English” are incorrect and demeaning. . . . What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a “language” or “dialect,” but rather that its systematicity be recognized. (“The Real Ebonics Debate” 27)

African American Language Acknowledgment and Classroom Application

Rickford cites ample support that nonstandard language awareness teaching can impact student’s language and literacy learning. He says, “[T]here is experimental evidence both from the United States and Europe that mastering the standard language might be easier if the differences in the student vernacular and Standard English were made explicit

rather than entirely ignored” (87). Taylor compared two groups of students—one being taught traditionally and the other using the nonstandard language awareness approach—and found that the latter group of students showed a 59 percent reduction in their use of African American language in writing. The students in the traditional classroom actually *increased* their use of AAL by 8.5 percent. Simpkins and Simpkins reported that students who used *Bridge* readers, transitional readers, and Standard English readers gained 6.2 months on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. In addition to the experimental research cited by Rickford and others, there is classroom anecdotal evidence that supports this alternative to traditional literacy instruction.

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In 1985, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a book edited by Charlotte Brooks titled *Tapping the Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner*. A variety of instructional methodologies and activities directly addressed the specific use of AAL within Standard English learning. Brooks said, “Properly taught by persons understanding their strengths, varying backgrounds, potential for learning, and who take into account historical, socioeconomic, psychological, and linguistic barriers, Blacks not only can but do learn like any other group” (2). Brooks also points out that Carter G. Woodson, in his apocalyptic *Mis-education of the American Negro*, wrote that teachers were trained “to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise” (8). These teachers were not directed to study the background of the language and its linguistic his-

tory. The approach of practicing nonstandard language awareness teaching has been successfully practiced and documented in Tennessee, Illinois, Georgia, North Carolina, and, of course, California.

Strategies for Success in Los Angeles

Despite mediocre gains in recent years, African American students are found on the low end of achievement scales in disproportionate numbers. In Los Angeles, for instance, African American students scored lower than the bilingual population in reading, language, and writing on the Stanford 9 (eighth grade) in 1997–1998. However, the LAP students have shown successful trends in their writing, based largely on an evaluation by the school district (Maddahian and Sandamela). In that evaluation, the LAP students outperformed a control group on the test, the Language Assessment Measure, designed specifically for African American language speakers. Both groups participated in pre/post tests, and while both groups made gains between the two tests, there was a significant difference between the experimental and control group on the post test, with the LAP students achieving higher scores.

It is believed that key strategies used by the LAP teachers made the difference for these students. These key strategies are based around the six instructional focus areas mentioned previously. Each area comprises several strategies that are critical to SAE acquisition and proficiency for Standard English language learners. Through an implementation study, I discerned particular strategies that the LAP teachers were using in their classrooms.

In the first focus area, Second Language Methodology, the LAP teachers provided students with oral communication models of SAE and negotiated and clarified meaning throughout the lessons consistently. Additionally, most of the teachers used collaborative grouping. One important strategy employed was allowing naturalistic language experiences that permitted students to use their home language as an acknowledgement of their culture and linguistic history. Many teachers know Second Language Methodology as sheltered English instruction. Some teachers simply call it “good teaching.” Regardless of what Second Language Methodology is called, it is seldom used for the purpose of assisting African American students in acquiring Standard American English.

Building on Learning Styles and Strengths is the second focus area. Here, a majority of the teachers were presenting the same material to all the students for equal access to the curriculum. Lessons were not watered down. In many of the classrooms, the environment was arranged in a way that created a spatial context for movement and collaborative learning activities. Some classes used the strategy of incorporating high movement content materials and high movement contexts; the teachers used literature with plots and characters involved in physical movement such as performing arts. The students had ample opportunities to easily move around for role-playing, reader's theater, and performance-related activities during reading.

The third focus area deals with Cultural Awareness. Strategies that signify this area are supporting the student's cultural identity, recognizing the student's history and culture, infusing the student's history and culture into the curriculum on a daily basis, and creating a classroom environment that is encouraging and stimulating for the students. A key strategy for this area is the use of culturally relevant literature—that is, literature that reflects the student's home and cultural life. The teachers used African American literature that included African American language such as works by Virginia Hamilton, Langston Hughes, Julius Lester, Camille Yarborough, and others. These works give the students the opportunity to see the language in the text versus simply hearing it all the time. Then they are able to make comparisons and contrasts with the language they read and the language they speak, as well as with Standard American English.

Thirteen strategies associated with the focus area Balanced Literacy cover a myriad of methodologies. The teachers incorporated strategies that allowed students to read aloud, providing them with opportunities for free voluntary reading and silent sustained reading. They also read to students on a daily basis. A focus on writing was incorporated as well, particularly the writing process. Most interestingly, the one strategy that the teachers struggled with was using the similarities and differences of the nonstandard language and SAE to support phonetic analysis. This strategy requires that teachers know the particular African American language phonological sounds that might cause concern for the students in acquiring SAE sounds. The teachers are then asked to accommodate these sound differentiations during their phonics instruction.

It is important to note that Linguistic Awareness is the most crucial focus area, as it embodies one of the main tenets of LAP. The strategy of demonstrating knowledge of nonstandard languages, their system of rules, sounds, and meanings was used by some of the teachers. These teachers also conveyed their knowledge of the students' history and culture. The two well implemented strategies in Linguistic Awareness were introducing the students to SAE vocabulary and providing regular opportunities to use SAE in authentic situations. However, very few teachers used the necessary types of culturally relevant literature as a springboard to other strategies such as analyzing linguistic differences between SAE and the home language and providing opportunities for students to differentiate the linguistic features of nonstandard language forms from those of standard language.

Classroom Learning Environment represents the last focus area. All of the LAP teachers used classroom libraries that included culturally conscious literature, magazines, and newspapers reflecting the students' home life and interests. Many of the classrooms provided the students with a print rich environment. The use of listening centers with cultural folklore, storytelling, and books on tape provided the models of the language of school and the use of cultural centers that featured African and African American cultural artifacts and games.

The combined use of all six of these focus areas in the classroom creates a situation that can impact academic achievement for African American students as Standard English language learners. Use of one or two strategies in isolation or practiced infrequently will not make the difference for these students. The LAP teachers demonstrated that use of all six focus areas in a consistent, quality manner could bring about improvements in writing.

Concluding Thoughts

How does the teaching that occurs in the Linguistic Affirmation Program become systematic? In the classroom, this generally means that the teacher views the language of most African American students as rule-governed and the acquisition of that language as natural, complex, and meaningful. Specifically this means, as cited in Brooks, teachers structure instructional, meaningful conversations for students, respond with modeled language, and learn to have conversations (talking with, not to children).

It means an increased understanding of language and how it develops and changes, establishing a respect for AAL as a linguistic system that reflects a culture, and demonstrating to students the belief that they are capable of handling two or more linguistic entities (73).

Professional development has to be centered on the instructional focus areas, especially Linguistic Awareness. Staff developers need to focus on increasing teachers' knowledge and awareness about nonstandard language varieties and the characteristic linguistic features of AAL. Administrators are encouraged to support teachers in ways that allow them to have confidence about using the nonstandard language awareness approach. In this case, public perception looms large. Administrators as instructional leaders are important to the process.

Lastly, for policymakers, programs like LAP need to be given an opportunity to work within classrooms and schools. This really speaks more to the lack of achievement of African American students within the system than it does to this approach. It is time that other methods of instruction for this failing system be seriously considered.

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