

A Sociolinguistic Approach to Teaching Standard English

This paper considers the effects of a sociolinguistic approach to composition instruction. Quantitative and qualitative data are drawn from a larger study that provided six urban elementary teachers with sociolinguistic training and asked them to implement a ten-week elementary language arts curriculum designed for speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The curriculum integrated sociolinguistic research with contemporary language arts pedagogy, using multicultural children's literature to teach about regional and social language variation, and incorporating dialect-based grammar instruction into the writing process. Previous evaluations of this curriculum demonstrated that the intervention had a significant impact on teachers' language-related attitudes and practices. In this paper, I focus on findings related to the teaching and learning of Standard English.

The results indicate that using dialect awareness and contrastive analysis to teach Standard English to AAVE speakers is more effective than traditional methods of grammar instruction that ignore or devalue the vernacular. Students in the Sociolinguistic Approach classes scored significantly higher than comparison groups on a measure of Standard English proficiency, and also showed the greatest decrease in their use of morphosyntactic features of AAVE in spontaneous writing. This study thus adds to the small but growing body of literature that empirically demonstrates the effectiveness of linguistically-informed instructional techniques, and fills an important gap in the literature by evaluating them in the context of the elementary classroom.

These quantitative findings are enriched by qualitative data drawn from classroom observations and interviews with students. Teaching Standard English in the context of dialect awareness lessons allowed AAVE-speaking children to engage in critical discussions of language variation, potentially providing a means of "linguistic self defense" (Hilliard 1983) against negative beliefs about African American language. For instance, one nine-year-old eloquently and defiantly announced that she would oppose anyone who discriminated against her own way of talking: "I would be mad, because that's not their body. That's not their voice. That's not their language!"

The implementation of linguistically-informed strategies in real classrooms vivifies and validates the wisdom of previous scholarly recommendations regarding the response to sociolinguistic diversity in the writing classroom (e.g. Farr and Daniels 1986; Rickford 1999; Wolfram 1999). By taking the difficult step of translating theory into practice, this research extends the long and respected sociolinguistic tradition of supporting greater educational achievement for speakers of AAVE and other vernaculars—one of the most important interdisciplinary applications of research on language variation.

References

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