Acknowledging the Language of African American Students:

Instructional Strategies

By

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In general, when Black American students enter classrooms they are taught, implicitly and explicitly, that the language they use is:

- grammatically incorrect
- “street language”
- ignorant
- uneducated

How many African American students does this affect?
- 80-98 % of all African Americans spoke some aspect of AAL (African American Language)
Traditional English/Language Arts classrooms try to diminish and completely **eliminate** the use of AAL in the classroom.

- Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1997
What has been done to acknowledge AAL and Black students’ culture and language?

- LAP (Linguistic Affirmation Program)
  Designed to serve the language needs of many groups such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, Hawaiian Americans and Native Americans
LAP’s Goal:

“…incorporate [s] 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.”

(Hollie, 1)
The LAP has six key instructional strategies:

1. Build teachers knowledge, understanding, and positive attitude toward nonstandard languages and the students who use them.

2. Integrate knowledge about nonstandard language into instruction.

3. Utilize second language acquisition methodologies to support the acquisition of school language and literacy.
Strategies continued:

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.
The Ethnolinguistic Theory:

• Credits AAL as a structure of West African languages as a basis for its existence, with an English vocabulary as an overlaying structure.
How does prejudice affect AAL speaking students?

- Results from racism as a justification of slavery
- It is seen as a result of cognitive feebleness, or worse, insufficient brain mass
- The speech of the enslaved Africans was due to their having “too full lips” for articulation
Actually-

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.
Evidence for Acknowledging AAL as meaningful in the classroom:

Two groups of students were compared

- one being taught traditionally
- the other using the nonstandard language awareness approach
The Results:

- The students taught using the nonstandard language awareness approach showed a **59% decrease** in the use of AAL.

- Students taught traditionally **increased** their use of AAL by 8.5%.
Are low test scores for Black student the result of the student or the teacher?

- According to Charlotte Brooks, author of *Tapping the Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner*

  
  “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.”
Other Strategies for Success:

- Incorporating and validating students’ history and culture by using African American literature such as Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Julius Lester, Maya Angelou and others.

- Comparisons and contrasts are then able to be made between the language they read and speak, as well as with Standard American English.
In Conclusion:

- Programs like LAP need to be given a chance to work.

- Teachers need to be open to examining *their own* biases and prejudices before they are able to accommodate *all* students.

- It really is not difficult to make modifications to classroom practices if the *teacher* is committed to acknowledging Black students’ culture and language as important and valid in the classroom.