



African American Vernacular English and Inclusive Literacy Education

Amah Nsentip, MA Student

Adult, Professional, & Community Education, Texas State University

Obstacles for African American Vernacular English

The pursuit of literacy is a critical element in both personal and societal progress. Yet, there is a relatively unexplored challenge within adult literacy that affects speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This unique dialect of English is culturally significant and imbued with communal identity. However, AAVE can create obstacles for learners seeking to meet the norms of Standard American English (SAE) literacy. Thus, it is important to acknowledge and address this issue to ensure equitable access to literacy education for all individuals.

AAVE, often labelled as Ebonics, is deeply rooted in the history of African Americans. According to Green (2002), “AAVE is a linguistic system with its own phonology, syntax, and semantics” (p.10). Its origins lie in the unique linguistic traditions of African languages mixed with the influences of English, shaped significantly during the Atlantic slave trade era. Over the centuries, AAVE has evolved alongside the African American experience, giving voice to its unique cultural narratives and lived realities.

Although AAVE is primarily used within African American communities, its influence and reach extend beyond. It is not only a way of speaking but a crucial component of African

American identity, symbolizing their shared historical experience and resilience. Nevertheless, the relationship between AAVE and SAE becomes a subject of concern when we consider adult literacy.

SAE, which is institutionalized and generally perceived as the 'standard' form of English, differs significantly from AAVE in various linguistic aspects such as phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary. Consequently, adult learners who are primarily AAVE speakers may encounter difficulties transitioning to SAE, the version predominantly taught in literacy programs. This discrepancy can lead to reduced comprehension, struggles in written communication, and overall decreased engagement with literacy.

Addressing the Issue

Gay (2010) asserts that the challenge is "not in perceiving AAVE as a language deficiency, but in acknowledging it as a distinct dialect warranting unique pedagogical strategies" (p. 46). Adult literacy programs need to embrace the linguistic diversity of their learners and apply culturally responsive teaching practices which involves a change in perspective. We must avoid viewing AAVE as a deficient form of English or an obstacle to literacy. Instead, we should acknowledge it as a distinct linguistic system. This step is crucial to eliminate the longstanding prejudices associated with AAVE, which often negatively affect the self-esteem and motivation of its speakers, especially adult learners in literacy programs.

Next, a shift in the literacy instruction paradigm is required. Traditional adult literacy programs, which generally focus on SAE, often do not cater to the unique needs of AAVE speakers. They tend to present the engagements with literacy as a universal model, which overlooks the linguistic diversity of learners. Instead, literacy education should recognize the diversity of English and the legitimacy of its various dialects, including AAVE.

A promising solution to address this issue is the incorporation of a bidialectal approach in adult literacy programs. This approach respects the cultural and linguistic identity of AAVE speakers, teaching them how to alternate effectively between AAVE and SAE based on the communicative context known as code-switching. This flexibility empowers learners to continue using their native dialect within their own communities, while also being proficient in SAE for professional and academic situations.

The implementation of a bidialectal approach should not place the burden of adjustment solely on the learners. It is equally important that the societal attitudes and institutional practices that marginalize AAVE and its speakers also evolve. Societal recognition of AAVE as a valid form of English can play a crucial role in encouraging speakers to engage in literacy education without the fear of losing their cultural identity.

Literacy education should move beyond the narrow goal of SAE acquisition and aim to foster critical language awareness among learners. This involves understanding the social, political, and cultural dimensions of language and its role in maintaining or challenging power dynamics. By developing critical language awareness, adult learners can understand the value of their dialect, resist linguistic prejudice, and assert their linguistic rights.

Strategies for Implementation

As suggested by Wheeler and Swords (2006), "teach the rules of SAE and how they differ from AAVE, utilizing contrastive analysis to highlight these variations" (p.472). It is crucial for educators to have a thorough understanding and appreciation of AAVE. This includes recognizing its unique grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as the cultural significance it holds for many African American communities. By valuing and incorporating AAVE in the

classroom, educators can create a more inclusive and empowering learning environment for all students.

It is necessary to have a fresh, nuanced, and caring perspective on literacy instruction, particularly in adult literacy programs, to address the needs of learners. These programs only prioritize SAE instruction, which may not be the most effective approach for AAVE speakers. It is crucial to recognize the complexity of the English language and acknowledge the value and validity of different dialects in literacy education. In particular, AAVE should be acknowledged as a legitimate dialect of English, and literacy instruction should be tailored to cater to the unique needs of its speakers.

Conclusion

To properly incorporate a bidialectal approach into their teaching, educators must have a deep understanding and respect for African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This dialect is a significant aspect of African American culture and history, and its recognition and acceptance in the classroom can greatly benefit students' academic and personal growth. By valuing AAVE and incorporating it into lessons, educators can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

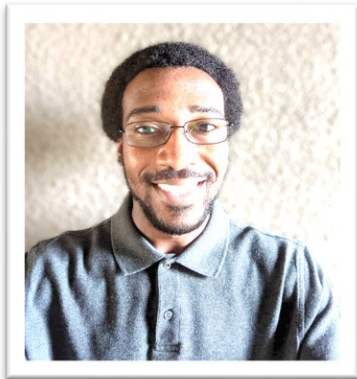
Reflection Questions for Practitioners.

1. How can we ensure the bidialectal approach respects and values the cultural significance of AAVE, rather than merely treating it as a steppingstone to SAE?
2. How can we foster an inclusive learning environment where speakers of all English dialects feel respected and valued?
3. What are the benefits of a bidialectal approach in promoting adult literacy development?

REFERENCES

- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Green, L. (2002). *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wheeler, R. S., & Swords, R. (2006). Codeswitching: Tools of language and culture transform the dialectally diverse classroom. *Language Arts*, 83(6), 470-480.
-

BIOGRAPHY



AMAH NSENTIP, born in Dallas, Texas, embodies a rich cultural legacy. As the child of an African American mother and a Nigerian father, he navigated intricate cultural and linguistic identities from an early age. This personal journey ignited an interest in language and literacy, leading him to a master's program in Adult, Professional, and Community, Education. Today, he seeks to contribute to an inclusive educational framework that values the diversity of American dialects.