

Using African American Language in the Classroom to Affirm Language Diversity

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Overview

The purpose of this study was to see how teachers can naturally integrate African American Language (AAL) into their classrooms without creating the cultural barrier that normally follows with AAL. Research shows that correcting AAL speakers can negatively impact their learning abilities (Lee, 31). Students will begin to shut down and not participate during class time. When AAL speakers are corrected, they also lose the confidence to speak in a social setting, which is crucial for language development. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, there are several goals for AAL students. This includes valuing students' cultural-linguistic heritage, maintaining black identity, enhancing their command of Language of Wider Communication, and mastering critical reading, writing, and speaking skills. Many teachers have tried to incorporate the strategy of Code-Switching into the classroom. Still, research shows the Code-Switching approach implies a racist and segregationist response to the language habits of African Americans. However, a new method, Code-Meshing, is seen as being more effective in the classroom. Code-Meshing attempts to embrace the globalized and diverse world we live in by combining local dialects of English with Standard World English on assignments and activities inside the classroom (Lee, 166). The first step to integrate AAL into a classroom is to make the students feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely, the other factors will then naturally follow. Integrating other dialects into a classroom is never easy. However, it is necessary for the success of our students.

Research

Code-meshing, or Ebonics, is a new method teachers are using to integrate AAL into the classroom, replacing an older method, code-switching.

- Code-meshing is the act of combining local, vernacular, world dialects of English with Standard World English in schoolwork and everyday conversation
- Code-meshing embraces cultural differences while code-switching forces students to conform to certain environments and be oppressive.

Findings

The author of "Why 'Correcting' African American Language Speakers Is Counterproductive" explains that there are thirty-seven American dialects that originate based on geography and social groups. This data helps support the argument that everyone speaks a dialect of English, and that "Standard English" is not a one-size-fits-all approach. According to the National Council of Teachers of English the goals for AAL students are to value their linguistic-cultural heritage, maintain black identity, enhance their command of Language of Wider Communication, and master essential reading, writing, and speaking skills (Lee, 25). Research shows that correcting AAL speakers can negatively impact their learning abilities. Students will begin to shut down and not participate during class time. When AAL speakers are corrected, they also lose the confidence to speak in a social setting, which is crucial for language development (Lee, 31).

Applied Learning

Within my research and trying out these theories inside my clinical placement, I was able to produce ways to implement AAL into an Elementary Classroom.

Lesson Plans Idea:

1. Interactive Read-Aloud using an ALL picture book. This will help create an open discussion where students can feel comfortable to step into other cultures.
2. Allow students to write in their home language. This will allow the students to have creativity within their writing, while also having a sense of pride for their home language.
3. Use Code-Meshing to remix a text. This can be done by taking a text and recreating it through the eyes of your own culture. This will allow the students to see themselves in an outdated text or one that may exclude their culture.

Classroom Resources:

1. Diverse text set in your classroom library: Include a range of cultures that all students can see themselves in.
2. Freedom on dialect within casual conversation: Allowing students to use their home dialect during conversation with peers will allow them the chance to embrace their home culture.
3. Decorations that include or celebrate the ALL dialect: This can be in the form of classroom resources like posters and bulletin boards, or within different celebrations throughout the year.

Conclusion

The findings within my research answered my question of, "How can teachers naturally integrate AAL into their classrooms without creating a cultural barrier that naturally follows?" The many different dialects within the English Language impacts classrooms in many ways.

There are four main takeaways from this research study. First, Standard English is not always the "standard" in every culture, AAL is just one of the thirty-seven American Dialects seen across the country. Second, correcting AAL students is counterproductive, it has been shown to only hurt their academic success. Third, code-switching is a technique used in the past and should stay in the past. This technique only segregates the AAL students more from the rest of their classmates. Lastly, as teachers, we still have a long way to go to naturally implement AAL into the classroom without the cultural barrier that usually follows. This process starts with the staff of the school and how the different types of dialects is approached in the classroom.

References

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