

Bidialectal African American Adolescents' Beliefs About Spoken Language Expectations in English Classrooms

African American high school students who speak multiple dialects offer insight into how English language arts teachers can understand and respond productively to code-switching.

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Most literacy scholars, educators, and policymakers agree that learning formal spoken and written Standard English (SE) is essential to academic and professional success in mainstream U.S. society. Using formal SE is essential not because SE is better or more grammatical than other dialects of English, but rather because people in powerful academic and professional positions expect others to communicate in formal SE and often form negative opinions of people who do not (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Cross, DeVaney, & Jones, 2001).

Concurrently, scholars and policymakers alike have argued that although literacy instruction should include attention to SE, it must also acknowledge and respect all dialects of English (Baugh, 2007; Common Core Standards, 2010; Delpit, 1988; National Council of Teachers of English, 1974). Several studies have documented that many African American parents hold similar views that their children need to learn spoken and written SE and that schools are responsible for teaching SE in ways that respect students' home and community dialects (Ogbu, 1999; Taylor, 1975).

In response, literacy research has documented successful instructional strategies for building on students' knowledge of dialects other than SE—such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the variety of English spoken in many African American communities—to improve students' academic writing (Fogel & Ehri, 2000; Hill, 2009; Lee, 2006). However, literacy research has offered few recommendations for productive instructional strategies and expectations for spoken language that would support the academic literacy learning of *bidialectal* students, that is, students who speak more than one dialect of English.

This article aims to contribute to the development of instructional strategies for spoken language that would support the literacy learning of bidialectal African American adolescents by considering the perspectives of adolescents themselves.

Standard English and African American Vernacular English in English Classrooms

Our study is framed by research and theory in sociolinguistics, the study of the social context of language use. Sociolinguists define *dialect* as a variety

of language used by a specific group of people and distinguished from other varieties by its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Even though people often confuse *dialect* with *slang*, we draw from linguistic theory, which uses *slang* to refer specifically to new vocabulary often developed and used by youth (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007).

Sociolinguists have demonstrated that all dialects of English are equally valid and grammatical (Adger et al., 2007) and that AAVE is a logical and rule-governed variety of English that diverges from SE in specific ways, including grammatical, phonological, and stylistic features (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999). Some researchers have suggested that bidialectal speakers have an advantage over speakers of only one dialect because they understand, from a young age, how language varies according to social context (Goodman & Buck, 1973).

Although we recognize that all speakers vary their language for different situations, we use the term *bidialectal* in this article to draw on the sociolinguistic theories of dialects explained earlier in this article and to emphasize that the students in our study spoke SE as well as AAVE.

Current research has suggested that the racial “achievement gap” in literacy learning is more likely caused by teachers’ lack of acceptance of AAVE than by bidialectal students’ confusion over the features of SE (Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007; Goodman & Buck, 1973). Several studies have documented that teachers erroneously believe that speaking AAVE is ungrammatical, lazy, and unintelligent (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Bowie & Bond, 1994).

Furthermore, in both overt and subtle ways, educators often tell bidialectal students that their use of nonstandard dialects in class is wrong or assume that bidialectal students are less academically capable (Cross et al., 2001; Godley et al., 2007). When bidialectal students perceive that dialects such as AAVE are unacceptable in classrooms, that perception can lead to a decline in academic motivation and reduced literacy learning (Dickar, 2004).

Speaking AAVE in English language arts (ELA) classes can allow bidialectal students to focus on generating ideas during class discussions in the language variety that is most comfortable without fear of having their language “corrected” or focusing

on perfect SE. Engagement in rich, student-centered discussions, conducted in either SE or AAVE, has been shown to have positive effects on students’ academic reasoning and literacy (Horowitz, 2007; Lee, 2006; Reznitskaya et al., 2001). Additionally, speaking AAVE allows students to draw upon the stylistic features of AAVE that are valued in ELA, such as evocative language and descriptive metaphors (Smitherman, 1994).

Existing research, then, presents a predicament for literacy educators: How can we teach about and clarify expectations for spoken language in ELA classes in ways that concurrently (a) develop bidialectal African American students’ mastery of formal spoken SE, (b) respect and build upon students’ knowledge of other dialects, and (c) encourage students’ participation in classroom talk? In this article, we document the perspectives of bidialectal African American high school students on this issue.

Methods and Data Sources

Context, Participants, and Data Collection

Our data were collected during a three-year partnership with the English department of an urban high school aimed at developing inquiry-based language and grammar instruction. The school was chosen for the partnership based on the interest and strong reputation of the ELA teachers. The school was located in an isolated, predominantly African American neighborhood in a Midwestern U.S. city that had experienced a steady decrease in population and manufacturing jobs.

The student body of the school was 99% African American; 100% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged. The school’s graduation rate was 69%, and the majority of 11th graders (69%) scored below proficient on the state assessments in reading. Three years of observations, field notes, and writing samples helped us determine that most students were bidialectal.

This article focuses on the opinions of the 10th-grade students. Their teacher, Ms. Lang (all teacher

Researchers have suggested that bidialectal speakers have an advantage over speakers of one dialect.

and student names are pseudonyms), specifically asked us to help her learn more about her students' perspectives on speaking different dialects in ELA classes. Thus, Ms. Lang and Amanda collaboratively designed an in-class writing task to elicit students' perspectives on this topic.

The task took place at the end of a three-day curricular unit on language variation and dialects that was also codesigned by Ms. Lang and Amanda. The unit included a discussion of the students' personal experiences with language variation; a viewing and discussion of *American Tongues* (Alvarez & Kolker, 1987), a documentary film about dialects and language prejudices in the U.S.; and a final discussion about language variation, race, and identity. For a detailed description of a similar unit, see Godley and Minnicci (2008).

We gathered students' opinions through an in-class writing task so that Ms. Lang could use class time to simultaneously learn more about students' views on spoken language use and address the mandated curriculum. The format of the essay mirrored the tasks given on the state writing assessment. Students were given approximately 25 minutes to write. The essay prompt read as follows:

Imagine that the English teachers at [this] high school are making guidelines for how students should speak in class. They are trying to decide whether to require that students speak formal Standard English at all times during class or if students can speak informal English (what students sometimes call "slang") in class. Based on what you learned from our discussions about language and the film *American Tongues*, what kind of language and dialect(s) do you think students should speak in their English classes? Write an essay to persuade the teachers to either allow students to speak informally in class or to require that students practice speaking Standard English in class.

Although our ideas align with sociolinguists who argue that dialects and slang reference different kinds of language variation, we included the terms *slang* and *informal English* in the prompt since these were the terms that students and Ms. Lang had used interchangeably with *Black English* and AAVE throughout the unit on language variation. For instance, when students were discussing whether there was such thing as "talking white," Carson said, "Like they [whites] use more

Standard English like. We choose to use more slang because we all get it. They have to use more Standard English because they don't get it. We have our own style. Black power, baby."

We interpret this excerpt from class discussion, and others like it, as evidence that students used *slang* to refer to various dimensions of AAVE, including racial identity, vocabulary, grammar, and style. Other researchers of bidialectal African American students have found that their participants used slang in similar ways (Dickar, 2004; Ogbu, 1999; Paris, 2009). Thus, like other researchers, we interpreted students' references to slang and *informal English* as references to AAVE and students' references to *proper English* and *formal English* as references to SE even though we viewed slang and AAVE as distinct.

Fifty-one responses written by African American students were collected and analyzed. Because Ms. Lang was the English teacher for all 10th-grade students, we were concerned that students' views might be influenced by her racial identity, spoken language, and opinions about appropriate spoken language.

Two factors suggested that students' responses were not strongly influenced by Ms. Lang. First, students' opinions were quite varied, demonstrating no single viewpoint. Second, Ms. Lang's own language choices and conversations with students about appropriate spoken language in the classroom did not suggest a singular position on the issue.

At the time of our study, Ms. Lang was in her 50s and had been teaching English for over 15 years. She had grown up as one of the only African Americans in a middle class, suburban town. In professional development meetings, Ms. Lang shared that she had often been told that her speech sounded "white" and that this comment bothered her. However, Ms. Lang repeatedly expressed dismay that her students used grammatical features of AAVE when speaking and a conviction that she needed to teach her students to use SE.

Ms. Lang conveyed to her students that speaking SE in professional contexts was important, but she accepted students' speaking AAVE during class. During our three years of observing her class, we never saw Ms. Lang tell students that their use of AAVE was wrong, and we only witnessed her

implying that students should change AAVE grammar to SE on a handful of occasions. Our observations of and interactions with other teachers in the school suggested that they conveyed a similar perspective to students: They often privately criticized students' use of AAVE to other teachers, but they usually did not publicly call attention to it.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis was driven by the following research question: What dialects do bidialectal African American adolescents think should be spoken in their ELA classes and why? The students' responses were jointly analyzed by the authors, both self-identified as white and speakers of SE but not AAVE.

In the first stage of coding, we categorized each student's essay for its overarching stance on which dialect(s) students should speak in class: SE, AAVE, or both. Although the essay prompt asked students about dialect use in class, many students compared classrooms to nonacademic settings, so our second stage of coding addressed students' views of which dialects should be used in other settings, such as social and professional settings. Our third stage of coding compared the reasons students gave for their views of appropriate spoken language in each setting.

Four major themes emerged: (1) the fear of external judgment, (2) the desire for clear communication, (3) the maintenance of individual and group identity, and (4) the demonstration of respect. The authors collaboratively, rather than individually, completed all stages of coding and data analysis.

Findings

Students' Perspectives on Appropriate Spoken Language in English Classes

Of the 51 students in our study, 23 students (45%) argued that only AAVE should be spoken in class; 18 students (35%) felt that it was appropriate to speak both SE and AAVE in class; and 10 students (20%) argued that only SE should be spoken in class. This range of perspectives is similar to Dickar's (2004) findings in her study of bidialectal African American students' views on using AAVE and SE in school.

The students in our study who argued for speaking AAVE some or all of the time in class most

often justified their position by noting that students were more proficient and "comfortable" speaking in AAVE, and thus speaking in AAVE would allow for better communication and classroom environment. For example, Richard wrote,

I believe we should be allowed to speak the way we normally talk. Then if we talk one way in our other six periods then in English talk proper that's too much of an adjustment. Now we may talk different with a speaker or a guest but on a regular bases wouldn't feel right. So why should we have to go through that. Slang is our language that we speak if you don't think it is right thats your problem. (All excerpts from student essays are presented verbatim.)

Richard's response demonstrates his sense that speaking AAVE is the "normal" way that he and his peers speak, and thus switching to SE for classroom talk would take conscious effort and would feel uncomfortable. Richard does not see a purpose in asking students to speak SE in ELA classes when AAVE is the preferred language variety among students. Additionally, Richard argues that speaking AAVE is an important expression of peer-group identity that he is willing to defend.

Eighteen students (35%) felt that it was appropriate to speak both SE and AAVE in class, but that it would be appropriate at different times. Many students believed that the teacher should have distinct expectations for spoken dialects and registers during different activities. Brendon wrote, "I think sometimes it is appropriate to use slang in class—group project, having a free day, or writing about things."

Brendon and other students seemed to recognize the kinds of activities in which speaking AAVE would lead to greater literacy learning, such as facilitating communication in group work and providing an appropriate mode for brainstorming in writing journals. On the other hand, these students expressed a pragmatic view of speaking SE, suggesting that it should be expected in ELA classes when students were "practicing" for future discourse contexts.

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Ten students (20%) argued that only SE should be spoken in class. Most of these students also justified this position with practical arguments, describing their English class as a place to learn SE for future academic or professional endeavors. Malia described this view: “I think standard English should be spoken in English class because it will teach you how to talk when you go out into the world instead of talking in slang all the time.”

Malia and other students seemed aware of the isolation of their communities and of the different language expectations outside of their communities. However, these students also seemed to equate the “real world” with dominant culture and mainstream society.

We ran a multinomial logistic regression to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between students’ beliefs about language, academic achievement, and gender. The regression analysis showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between students with high academic achievement (semester grade of 85% or greater) and the view that only SE should be spoken in class ($p = 0.047$) when gender was held constant. In other words, students who received a semester grade of B or better were more likely to believe that students should only speak SE in their English classes.

This finding suggests that higher achieving students viewed speaking SE as necessary for academic success and as more compatible with their individual and peer-group identities than lower achieving students, as Fordham (1999) found. We found no statistically significant relationship between gender and students’ responses.

Students’ Views on Appropriate Spoken Language in School, Home, and Work Settings

Although students were asked to write about expectations for spoken language in their English classes, many students wrote about social, familial, and professional settings. In their writing, the students—whether they argued for speaking SE, AAVE, or both in English classes—demonstrated a strong awareness of code-switching.

Thirty-two students (63%) discussed the need for or use of code-switching in various settings. Thirty students (59%) stated the need for or benefit

of speaking SE in settings other than the classroom. Martin wrote, “As long as I know how to speak slang and standard English I should be ok.” These findings demonstrated students’ awareness of their own code-switching and societal expectations for code-switching, as well as the value students placed on both SE and AAVE.

The nonschool settings that students most often wrote about were work or social settings. Twenty-four students (47%) discussed interviews or on-the-job work settings. All of these essays, including those that argued for speaking AAVE in class, stated the need for speaking SE or avoiding “slang” in work settings.

Ryan noted, “Sometimes you can’t talk your slang because what if you are getting a job and you are talking your slang, you might not get the job.” Jasmine wrote, “You should try to speak standard English because if you get a good job and you have to talk to people you can’t be talking slang or you’ll get fired.” These essays demonstrated an interesting trend: The students argued that SE was necessary to be hired or to keep a job, but not necessarily to complete on-the-job work successfully.

Students’ arguments in favor of using SE in work settings seemed to be driven more by a perception of negative judgments of AAVE by mainstream society than by reasons such as clear communication or professional effectiveness. In fact, 71% of students who discussed professional settings focused on job interviews rather than on-the-job work.

Few students commented on the injustice or racism implicit in employers’ judgment of job candidates who spoke AAVE. In one of the few essays that explicitly mentioned race and implicitly addressed racism, Andrew wrote, “I say that [SE should be spoken in job interviews] because a white man is not gonna want a ghetto black male or female working for his company.”

Andrew’s argument demonstrates a keen awareness of how AAVE is negatively perceived by many white people. His use of “ghetto” reflects stereotypes of African Americans as poor, urban, and living in crime-ridden areas. However, students’ essays did not critique those stereotypes or the inequitable hiring practices that they cause, suggesting that students may have focused on the practical language expectations of job interviews instead of trying to

change them because the students lived in a low-income community where jobs were scarce.

Eleven students (22%) discussed spoken language and dialect use in social settings. Of the students who discussed social settings, 10 (91%) argued that AAVE or slang was appropriate; one student argued that SE was more appropriate for “elders” such as grandparents. Typical responses included “Speaking formal is OK when you are in school or business time but it is not good when your with your friends” and “If students should use slang, they should speak it at home or with friends.”

In these statements, students emphasized that SE would be inappropriate in social and home settings. The essays demonstrated the inherent link between speaking AAVE and identifying with African American peers and families. Even the essays that argued for speaking SE in classrooms expressed a firm belief that AAVE was the only appropriate language variety for speaking with friends and family.

Students' Criteria for Appropriate Spoken Language in Various Settings

In all settings, students seemed to make decisions about which dialect of English to speak based on four criteria: (1) fear of external judgment, (2) desire for clear communication, (3) demonstration of respect for others, and (4) sense of individual and group identity. The theme of external judgment was the most frequently mentioned, especially in discussions about professional settings. This criterion was always used to argue for speaking SE, never AAVE.

Thirteen students (25%) noted that they chose not to use AAVE in various professional and public settings because of their fear of being judged by others as “ignorant” or “illiterate.” Conversely, students noted that if they spoke SE in such settings, strangers would judge them as “intelligent” and “polite.”

Students did not seem to believe these language prejudices or ideologies, but rather described them as matters of fact. For example, John wrote, “If you were to come in and use slang, the interviewer would think you are quote on quote “GHETTO.” It don’t go by how good your resume is. It goes by how you carry yours.”

John recognizes the racial and socioeconomic prejudice inherent in interviewers’ perceptions that

people who speak AAVE are “ghetto” even if their resumes demonstrate that they are well-qualified for the job. John’s critique demonstrates his keen awareness of the language prejudices held by many people who identify as SE speakers.

Like John’s example, most of students’ examples of external judgment were set in job interviews. As in Dickar’s study (2004), students argued overwhelmingly that only SE should be used during job interviews in order to avoid negative judgment. Though in many cases students were voicing their perceptions of interviewers’ stereotypes, we expected more students to counter these stereotypes with critical perspectives.

However, no student overtly critiqued why job interviewers would negatively judge them based on their use of AAVE, and only a few students, such as John and Andrew, implied that negative views of AAVE were rooted in racial and socioeconomic stereotypes. Additionally, no student mentioned the need or desire to maintain a sense of identity through dialect choices in work settings.

We hypothesize that because many of the students came from economically disadvantaged households, they felt pressured to accept any employment and thus perceived that they did not have the socioeconomic power to fight these linguistic prejudices. The lack of critical perspectives in students’ essays suggests that critical understandings of language, prejudice, and discrimination needed to be more strongly emphasized in the three-day dialect unit we designed and in the official ELA curriculum.

Significantly, none of the students mentioned fear of judgment from *teachers* if students used AAVE in classes, even though research demonstrates that many teachers harshly judge students who speak AAVE. In other words, students seemed unaware that many teachers—nationwide and at their school—held negative views of AAVE.

Because most teachers at their school did not share their views about AAVE with students, students were oblivious to such judgments, though they were

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very aware of the potential negative judgments of employers. Thus, the students viewed job interviews and English classes as very different sociolinguistic settings, though many teachers did not.

Eleven students (22%) noted that their dialect choices in class were driven by a desire for clear communication, though some argued that SE allowed for clearer communication while others argued that AAVE did.

Most students, however, focused on using AAVE to understand each other. Tim questioned why SE would be spoken at all: "Some may argue that students should speak standard English in class, but why? All they are doing is communicating with other students. That most likely speak the same way that they do." Overall, students' responses suggested that they viewed communication with peers, not just with teachers, as essential to learning in English classes.

Ten students (20%) discussed identity when explaining their dialect choices. Six students discussed general connections between their language choices and identities, and four students discussed maintaining a sense of identity in their English classes specifically. Martin wrote, "If a teacher would tell me that I could not speak slang in the class room I would feel she/he is trying to change me." Like Martin, several students drew strong connections between their dialect choices and individual identity.

Noticeably, few students wrote about maintaining group identities, such as race-based identities, through language choices. Two students discussed the desire to speak the language their families taught them, and only one student, Asia, made an explicit reference to maintaining African American community and culture through AAVE:

Slang is a part of our culture, everyone can imitate it, but we initialized it. We started something that has influenced fashion, way of life, African Americans, how we are perceived. It belongs to us. It's a part of us...And if we don't have anything, we do have our cultural background, and the way we speak.

Asia views AAVE as an essential, embodied part of African American culture and identity that she is fiercely proud of. She also suggests that "everyone" or mainstream society tries to imitate African American culture because of its richness. By noting, "And if

we don't have anything, we do have our cultural background, and the way we speak," Asia implies that African Americans have fewer privileges than other racial groups, but gain greatly from their culture and language.

We had expected more responses like Asia's, especially given that the dialect variation curriculum and in-class discussions had explicitly focused on connections between cultural and racial identities and dialects. However, more students in our study argued that speaking AAVE was an essential aspect of individual rights and identities.

These findings suggest that speaking AAVE may index more specific identities, such as peer group, youth, and individual identities, rather than simply an overarching African American identity. Findings also suggest that the three-day unit did not allow enough time for students to share important critical perspectives on language, identity, and power/discrimination.

Finally, six students (12%) discussed demonstrating respect as a criterion on which to base spoken language choices. The students described different settings, but all wrote about using SE to demonstrate respect to elders. This pattern seems to reinforce our theory that students viewed AAVE as a marker of youth identities. Dwayne explained, "I think when your in a place such as school and you are talking 2 an adult you should talk proper it shows a lot of respect. Only reason for you to talk slang is when your talking to someone who does the same."

We surmise that students equated SE with respect because they viewed it as more formal than AAVE and did not distinguish between different registers of AAVE. In the following section, we suggest ways that literacy teachers might help students distinguish between registers and other dimensions of dialects to support their academic literacy learning.

Learning From Bidialectal Students

Our findings suggest significant differences between the perspectives of the students in our study and existing research on teachers' views of language and dialect use in classrooms (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Bowie & Bond, 1994). A majority of students in our study (80%) viewed AAVE as an appropriate dialect

to use in English classes, at least some of the time, despite previous research that has shown that many teachers do not.

Furthermore, students' responses suggested that they viewed English classes as very different sociolinguistic spaces than professional settings; although students believed SE was appropriate for professional settings, most did not think students should be expected to always use SE in ELA classrooms. Instead, students viewed their English classes as places to practice SE without being judged and emphasized a classroom culture of comfort and mutual respect.

It is possible that the students in our study were more apt to believe that AAVE was appropriate for their ELA classes because ELA teachers and other teachers at the school usually portrayed acceptance of students' use of AAVE. Our findings also suggest points of convergence between teachers' and bidialectal students' views of language choices, such as the need to code-switch between dialects and the appropriateness of speaking SE in professional contexts.

By asking students to explain their answers to the essay prompt, we were able to gain valuable insight into how students interpreted the sociolinguistic setting of their English classrooms. The students' explanations revealed that even students who argued that only AAVE should be spoken in their English classes were quite knowledgeable about their own code-switching and spoken language expectations in various settings.

Conversely, because students used the term *slang* to refer to several dimensions of the language variety that they spoke with friends and family, we were unable to tease apart their beliefs about AAVE grammar, AAVE style, formal and informal registers, and widespread slang used by all youth. Teaching students about these dimensions of dialects and interviewing students could help educators and researchers gain greater clarity on students' beliefs about bidialectalism and style shifting.

Although numerous suggestions exist for building on bidialectal African American students' knowledge of AAVE in order to improve their academic writing (Fogel & Ehri, 2000; Hill, 2009; Lee, 2006), literacy scholarship has not provided educators with much guidance on instructional strategies for spoken

language in the classroom. The results of our study suggest a few productive instructional approaches.

First, teachers would benefit from developing an understanding of bidialectal students' perspectives on code-switching and rationales for language choices. For instance, when one of his students critiqued another student's oral presentation for using AAVE, Fecho (2004) led a discussion about the affordances and limitations of using AAVE or SE in formal speeches. This led to an inquiry-based project about language, code-switching, and race that allowed both Fecho and his students to explore new perspectives.

We recommend that ELA curricula include opportunities for teachers and students to hear each other's perspectives on language and dialect choices and to discuss points of convergence and divergence.

Second, conversations in which the complexity of code-switching is acknowledged and multiple points of view are represented would likely be more productive for bidialectal students than insisting that they speak SE in class. Such conversations should be grounded in authentic examples of language use or scenarios, and discuss differences between dialects, slang, and formal and informal registers. One way to do this would be by discussing video clips of formal and informal registers of AAVE and SE spoken by youth and adults from various regions of the U.S. (Brown, 2009).

Third, the students in our study overwhelmingly believed that English classes should be places where bidialectal students could *practice* SE without fear of judgment. Too often ELA teachers evaluate students on their use of formal spoken SE without providing guidelines or instructions for when and how to use it.

However, the teacher in Hill's (2009) study explicitly instructed his students to write in AAVE or SE for different assignments and provided instruction for those features of SE that students had not mastered. These learning activities required students to develop their code-switching for different audiences and purposes.

Students viewed their English classes as places to practice SE without being judged.

Take Action!

1. At the beginning of the year, discuss code-switching with your students. Ask students to share how they vary their language for different situations and share your experiences, too. Students could role-play debating with a friend and the principal about the same issue, such as homework, then discuss why their language differed in each situation. From this, create explicit, shared expectations for spoken (and written) language use in the classroom.

2. Do not expect bidialectal students to speak SE at all times. Doing so will likely reduce students' participation and negatively affect their academic work. Conversations about literature and academic writing will be more productive if students are speaking in the language variety that is most comfortable for them because they will focus on generating ideas rather than specific linguistic forms.

3. Provide appropriate opportunities for students to practice speaking formal SE, such as individual presentations. Explain why you are asking students to practice SE, and create a nonjudgmental atmosphere for the activity.

4. Use authentic examples of language use to spark discussions about the complexity of language. National Public Radio's Storycorps website (www.storycorps.org/listen/) and the North Carolina Language and Life Project (www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/ncllp/index.php) are good resources.

5. Acknowledge that linguistic prejudices exist in our society. Ask students to think critically about widespread language expectations, such as the expectation that people speak SE in a job interview.

6. Use discussions about literature to explore issues of language variation and prejudice. Novels such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* include moments in which characters are judged based on the way they speak; such moments can illuminate major themes in the novel.

We urge educators to develop similar learning environments for spoken language instruction and practice. Creating a nonthreatening climate could begin with a dialect awareness curriculum, such as the one that Ms. Lang implemented, to encourage conversations about the personal, interpersonal, and political nature of language choices (Adger et al., 2007; Godley & Minnici, 2008).

Fourth, because of the differences between teachers' and students' perspectives on appropriate language in the classroom, we believe that teachers' spoken language expectations must be made transparent to students (Delpit, 1988; Hill, 2009). It is unfair to hold students to expectations for spoken language that are never explicitly shared in the classroom.

We would suggest that literacy educators create and communicate task-specific expectations for spoken language, weighing opportunities for students to practice speaking formal SE with opportunities for students to communicate their ideas in spontaneous, comfortable ways. Lee's (2006) study, for instance, demonstrated the depth of students' literary analysis and engagement when using AAVE in an inquiry-based discussion. However, other literary activities, such as formal oral debates, may have different language expectations than informal inquiry discussions. Students need to know the spoken language expectations for each task and the reasons behind those expectations.

For further reading on addressing dialect diversity in the secondary English classroom, we would suggest that teachers read Adger et al. (2007), Brown (2009), Fecho (2004), Godley and Minnici (2008), Charity-Hudley and Mallinson (2010), and Redd and Webb (2005).

We believe that these strategies could help establish a sociolinguistic climate of caring, respect, and high expectations, characteristics of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, in literacy classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such a climate would give students a place to acknowledge and consider various dialects of English while learning about and practicing formal spoken SE.

Notes

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More to Explore

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "What Did They Say? Dialect in *The Color Purple*" by Chantrise D. Sims

IRA Book

- *Change Is Gonna Come: Transforming Literacy Education for African American Students* by Patricia A. Edwards, Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, and Jennifer D. Turner

IRA Journal Article

- "Myth Education: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching Against Linguistic Prejudice" by Leah A. Zuidema, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, May 2005