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Teaching Standard American English Using the Language of African American Vernacular English

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Like most Americans, I am bidialectal; I speak more than one form of the English dialect. Growing up in my home we spoke Standard English (SAE), but at the inner city school I attended in Oakland, California, I spoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Because I spoke both dialects fluently and routinely, it was easy for me to code switch from one to the other whenever it was socially appropriate for me to do so.

For students who use the same non-SAE dialect at home and at school, adapting to use of SAE is more challenging. As Linda Christensen explains in an article on correcting student writing:

Sometimes the “errors” are part of a student’s home language. In that case, the “correction” process needs to make it clear that the student isn’t “wrong,” but that each language has its own way of making plurals or using verb tenses. Students need to explicitly learn the differences between their home language and Standard English (8)

In my classroom, I am very direct about the social and political uses of different dialects and the grammatical and phonetic differences between SAE and other linguistic forms. I address the ugly realities of the “language of power” with my students and together we explore their personal experiences with stereotyping based on dialect.

Once I have presented both the problem – language-based stereotypes – and my solution – development of code-switching ability and respect for bidialectal forms of speech and writing – I begin to work with my class on building specific

linguistic knowledge. I use guides to help students build a deeper understanding of all American dialects. I design writing assignments that allow students the opportunity to use different dialects; I use mini-lessons to review grammatical rules that depend on the context of the assignment. Rather than marking every inconsistency on an SAE writing assignment, I provide sample sentences in SAE and the dialect used so students can observe standard sentence structure and make changes according to their own observations rather than my prescriptions. In this way, I foster a classroom climate of mutual respect and continuing learning.

Lessons Using AAVE

1. Vocabulary Development

Building vocabulary is key to developing awareness of language and enhancing written and verbal self-expression. In accordance with a strategy presented on page 60 of NCTE’s *Grammar Alive* guidebook, I teach Latin roots and prefixes using familiar words that the students identify to underscore meaning. I also teach strategies used by advanced readers to decode words they do not recognize using context and knowledge of European languages (including Latin).

I accomplish both goals using a single vocabulary game:

- Select several roots or prefixes to target for the week.
- Take two Post-It notes; on one, write the target root/prefix of a word and on the other, write the rest of the word. Do this with enough words so that each student will have one Post-It note.
- Mix up the Post-Its and give one to each student (tell them to hide their word part until the game starts).
- Students must properly pair their words *without talking* and post the proposed word on the board.
- After all the Post-Its are paired, we talk about the words posted and

decide which are actual words and which are invented (since students are not familiar with all of the words, they sometimes make incorrect pairings). I circle “suspicious” words and ask the class if anyone would like to rearrange the stickies to make more reasonable words. We work on the words until each is correctly paired, and then they tell me which words they can define. I give them a context for the leftover words and we deconstruct the root/prefix meaning. This way, they are able to discern word meanings for themselves, the same way advanced readers do.

Finally, students make lists of target roots or prefixes and try to define them based on word association (I help them think of good words). Spanish speakers are particularly good at this step, since Spanish is 75% Latin! We use that list as the focus for the rest of that week’s vocabulary activities.

2. Code Switch Creative Writing

To teach students about voice, stylistic choices and the value of different dialects in different contexts, I use a revised version of the code-switching activity in *Grammar Alive* (40). In that activity, students address the same thing to numerous different audiences. In my version:

- Students in groups of three each use an assigned perspective and dialect to craft an interior monologue describing a common event. For example, a sailor from Texas, a New York City judge and a Baptist preacher are trapped on an elevator together.
- Students divide up the roles, discuss any additional action as well as

dialectal grammar rules and then write their own monologues.

- Students share pieces within their groups and with the whole class.
- Stereotypes that surface are discussed and evaluated by the class as a whole.

3. Mimic Published AAVE Dialogue

I distribute two copies of a dialogue from Mary Monroe’s *God Don’t Like Ugly*, (2007) one including narrative and the other straight dialogue.

Version One

“Stop shaking so hard. People get murdered all the time, girl.”

“Yeah, but not in my own house. Rhoda, I don’t know if I can go through with this... not tell anybody what you did.”

“But you can’t tell anybody, now can you? He was old. Real old. He was going to die soon anyway, I bet.”

“Well what do we do now? We have to call somebody.”

“We aren’t goin’ to do anythin’. Your mama’s goin’ to come home and see us sittin’ here crying like babies over Martin Luther King, then she’ll go hunt up Buttwright and find him dead in bed.”

“She’ll ask us what happened. The police will come. They’ll do an autopsy —”

“Let them do all the autopsies that want. Just like I told you, he just stopped breathin’. That’s what they’ll say.”

Version Two

“Stop shaking so hard. People get murdered all the time, girl,” Rhoda said firmly, rubbing the side of my arm.

“Yeah, but not in my own house.”

We watched TV in silence for another ten minutes.

I could not focus on anything but Mr. Buttwright. “Rhoda, I don’t know if I can go through with this ... not tell anybody what you did.” I heard a

car door slam, and I jumped off the couch and stood in front of her.

Rhoda stood up with her face close to mine. I moved away so we wouldn't have to touch.

"But you can't tell anybody, now can you? He was old. Real old. He was going to die soon anyway, I bet." The way Rhoda stumbled over her words, I think she was trying to convince herself more than she was trying to convince me.

"Well what do we do now? We have to call somebody." I could not stop shaking no matter how hard I tried.

"We aren't goin' to do anythin'. Your mama's goin' to come home and see us sittin' here crying like babies over Martin Luther King, then she'll go hunt up Buttwright and find him dead in bed."

"She'll ask us what happened. The police will come. They'll do an autopsy—"

"Let them do all the autopsies that want. Just like I told you, he just stopped breathin'. That's what they'll say."

Students take roles and read the dialogue from the "dialogue only" copy. Then we look at the copy with narrative and the students perform their reading again, this time informed by the author's notes. We discuss the value that narrative adds to dialogue.

I then prompt students to circle all of the punctuation used in the dialogue and underline any sentences written using AAVE. Based on their observations, we make a list of guidelines to punctuation and code switching in dialogue. I then invite students to write their own 16-line dialogues according to these rules.

4. Mimic Professional Poetry

I present my students with the following poem, written by Derrick Gilbert:

"All That and a Bag of Words"

Derrick Gilbert (A.K.A. D-Knowledge)

Have you ever notices that black folk have a way of talkin'

Words that mean one thang

And turnin' 'em 'round so that they mean anotha

Like when a brotha's talkin' 'bout a beautiful sistah

An' he says this sistah is phat

But not fat like overweight or obese

'Cuz this sistah's fresh

An' not fresh like she's got attitude

Or fresh like she's inexperienced

'Cuz this girl's tight

But not tight like uptight or stiff

'Cuz this girl's dope

And not dope like the stuff some of us smoke

'Cuz this girl's fine

But not fine like "just awright" or fine like "that'll do"

'Cuz this woman's proper

And not proper like formal or genteel

'Cuz this woman's a freak

But not like some Freddy Krueger-type freak

'Cuz this honey's the shh

And not like the stinky shh

'Cuz this honey's fly

But not like the buzz, buzz flyin' fly that hangs

around the hummin' shh

'Cuz this sistah's the bomb

And not a bomb

But the bomb

'Cuz this sistah's all of that

But not all that like all of the above

'Cuz this sistah's above all that

That's above all

And that's not all

'Cuz she's live, and she's got flavor, and she's top-

notch, and she's hype

And this sistah's just all that and a bag of words

But not just any ol' bag or words

But a bag of our words, with our meanings

That's what she is

She's all that and a bad of words

With our meanings

That's all

I define the terms *allusion*, *code switching*, *rhyme*, and *meter* as they apply to this piece.

Students work independently or in pairs to identify the rhyme scheme, meter and allusions used. They

circle lines written in SAE and place a star next to lines using AAVE.

Next, each student crafts his or her own poem using Gilbert's "formula" as a model. After completing the poem, students are prompted to respond in writing to the following questions:

- Why did you choose to code-switch where you did?
- What allusions did you make and why?
- Did rhyme and meter help or hinder you in getting out the message of your poem? Why do you think people like effective use of rhyme and meter (demonstrated in most rap music)?

I ask students to partner and share their poems. Then I ask if anyone heard a good poem they would like the whole class to hear (this gives affirmation to young poets). After each student shares, I ask why they made their code switching and allusion choices. Once several students have contributed to the reading, we discuss rhyme and meter as a whole class. I often take this opportunity to introduce the subject of rap as poetry and bring in some positive rap music for the class to discuss and analyze. (Positive rap artists include: Jurassic 5, Del the Funky Homosapien, Blackalicious and Queen Latifah – these artists also compose radical, combative and controversial music, so listen to their music and read the lyrics carefully before presenting.)

5. Compare and Contrast AAVE and SAE in Published Writing

I draw interior monologues from Dorothy Parker's "A Telephone Call" and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. Students in the class present dramatic readings:

WILLOW SPRINGS. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending on which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning

storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightening in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightening to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into a slave, the stars into swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge. And somehow, some way it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days.

– Gloria Naylor, from *Mama Day*, pg 3

This is the last time I'll look at the clock. I will not look at it again. It's ten minutes past seven. He said he would telephone at five o'clock. "I'll call you at five, darling." I think he said "darling." I'm almost sure he said it there. I know he called me "darling" twice, the other time was when he said good-bye. "Good-bye, darling." He was busy, and he can't say much at the office, but I know he called me "darling" twice. He couldn't have minded my calling him up. I know you s shouldn't keep telephoning them—I know they don't like that. When you do that, they know you are thinking about them and wanting them, and it makes them hate you. But I hadn't talked to him in three days—not in three days. And all I did was ask him how he was: it was just the way anybody might have called him up. He couldn't have minded that. He couldn't have thought I was bothering him. "No, of course you're not," he said. And he said he'd telephone me. He didn't have to say that. I didn't ask him to, truly I didn't. I'm sure I didn't. I don't think he would say he'd telephone me, and then just never do it. Please don't let him do that, God. Please don't.

— Dorothy Parker, from “A Telephone Call”, *Dorothy Parker Stories*, pg 82

I divide the class into six groups and assign each group to reflect on one of the following themes:

- How is gender shown by the two texts? Cite quotes.
- How is setting established? Cite quotes.
- Each author uses nontraditional punctuation methods. What techniques do they use? How does punctuation change the tone or meaning of the text? Cite examples.
- Where do you see evidence of SAE or AAVE? Why did the author choose this dialect?
- What does the voice of the narrator tell you about her state-of-mind? Cite examples.
- Where do you see evidence of culture in the writing (food, clothing, beliefs, values, traditions, family structure, gender roles, etc.)?

Each group gets a standard sized sheet of butcher paper and some markers to use in recording discussion notes in a way that is meaningful to the rest of the class. After small group discussion, each group presents their findings to the class. Once the presentations are complete, I solicit student opinions of the writing, asking “Which piece was most effective and why?” Afterward, I let them choose one writing sample to mimic in a piece of creative writing.

These lessons encourage students to develop a more enhanced understanding of dialect and language use in general. While I use AAVE rules and writing samples in my class, I also consider other essential curriculum outcomes such as reading comprehension, writing with purpose for an audience, and development of oral, written and visual methods of expression (*Michigan Curriculum Framework*, “English Language Arts Content Standards”, 16-18).

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