


5-2014

# Don't You Be Telling Me How Tah Talk: Education, Ebonics, and Code-switching

LaQuita N. Gresham

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Don't You Be Telling Me How Tah Talk: Education, Ebonics, and Code-switching

by

LaQuita C. Gresham

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Bachelor of Art  
in the Department of English

May 2014



Approved by

---

Constance Bailey, M.A., Thesis Adviser  
Instructor of English

---

Eric Tribunella, Ph.D., Chair  
Department of English

---

David R. Davies, Ph.D., Dean  
Honors College

## **Abstract**

Ebonics, currently referred to as African-American English (AAE), is a highly-controversial topic inside and outside of the classroom. Many educators, scholars, and legislators debate how teachers should approach students who speak AAE and how they can fill the gap between African-American English and Standard English in a way that disbands the dialectal prejudices that may exist. This thesis focuses on code-switching as a pedagogical tool to help teachers instruct Black students in mastering Standard English on a proficient level, particularly Black students who speak AAE. This study explores current problems and practices in the way that English teachers approach AAE while attempting to provide a solution to this problem.

This study includes various scholarly articles, information from Education Departments from Michigan, California, and Mississippi, and books from AAE scholars, such as Dr. William Labov, Geneva Smitherman, John Baugh, and Dr. Robert Williams.

Key Words: Ebonics, African-American English, Code-Switching, Standard English,  
Education

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Ms. Constance Bailey, for all of the time and effort that she put into this project with me. I would also like to thank Dr. Holt for taking the time to guide me through this process and giving me the encouragement that I needed to continue on.

I'd like to send a special thanks to my husband, Daniel Gresham, and friends, Melanie McLeod and Alice Moss, for putting up with my long rants and allowing me to hash out my ideas without complaint.

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## **Don't You Be Telling Me How Tah Talk: Education, Ebonics, and Code-switching**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A common assumption is that if someone has a formal education then he or she does not use slang, speak Ebonics, or speak other nonstandard dialects of English, because a formal education frequently indicates a proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing. People who communicate in ways that fall outside of the standard parameters are often seen as uneducated and are typically at an academic and professional disadvantage. This viewpoint is rooted in what Dr. Rebecca Wheeler and Rebecca Swords refer to as dialect prejudice (14). Dialectal prejudice affects the way those who speak in a nonstandard dialect are perceived by people who communicate using the standard. Language influences every avenue of life, including business exchanges, career mobility, socioeconomic advancement, and—more specifically—the classroom and education.

Many of the problems surrounding this issue of dialect prejudice are rooted in the diversity of America's school system, which results in very complicated debates on how our educational diversity should be handled (Johnson 1). The public school system is filled with American students who come from different economic backgrounds, who represent diverse cultures, and who speak different dialects. The question is: How can educators and teachers abandon nonstandard dialect intolerance in order to embrace the diversity that their student— including Black students—have to offer?

Black students often reject the idea of changing their speech because they believe that it will strip them of their personal identities. Over forty years ago, Dorothy Mills recommended that "teachers recognize Black English as a nonstandard style of speech,

learn the difference between the dialect and the standard, and teach the children the standard speech style without trying to denigrate the dialect" (10). The ultimate goal would have been to help students master Standard English; however, as a linguist and not a teacher, Mills did not provide a solution or strategies on how to address this problem.

Teachers can build a bridge between this gap of fear and the necessity of mastering Standard English by using different and more-current pedagogical methods that directly address this issue. Would Black students be more willing to learn and practice Standard English if teachers used more positive speech about various dialects and encouraged students to master the necessary skills of Standard English? What pedagogical tools are available to guide teachers in this endeavor? Could English teachers possibly incorporate the concept of code-switching into their instruction style in order to teach Black students Standard English while also encouraging cultural pride? Could teaching students to code-switch be a more profitable technique that would result in more Black students becoming proficient in Standard English, in contrast to using the traditional method that either condemns Ebonics or treats it as a separate language? This project explores code-switching as a potential way for teachers to address the need for Black students to achieve proficiency in Standard American English.

### **1.1 Key Terms**

Dr. Robert Williams, a professor emeritus of Psychology at Washington University, created the term Ebonics (a combination of “ebony” and “phonics”) to refer to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Baillou 1). According to Charles Baillou, a writer for the New York Amsterdam News, Robert Williams “coined the term

Ebonics in 1973 ‘because [Williams] was sick and tired of White folks writing the [learning] deficiencies of African-Americans’” (Baillou 1). Williams believes that Ebonics is the true and real language of Black Americans because the primary purpose of a language is to communicate, think critically and analytically, and to solve problems (Baillou 1).

Although many Black children speak Ebonics, the terms African-American English (AAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) will be used throughout this research paper since they are currently the most widely-accepted term among linguists (Redd and Webb 3). African-American English is a term that linguists and educators can use to describe the conflict between English teachers teaching Standard American English (SAE) and their Black students using AAE pertaining to in-class language problems. As English teachers experience in-class frustrations with students who speak AAE, they can face the complications associated with the differences between Standard American English and AAE. Code-switching is a term that can be used to potentially provide a solution to these issues.

The ability to switch from a “home” dialect, slang, or Ebonics to Standard American English, depending on the occasion, to "code-switch," can occur in spoken or written form. Code-switching can also be defined as “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction. It also happens between two dialects of the same language, as in Standard American English and Black American English” (Flowers 222). Examples of code-switching between SAE and AAE are listed below (Redd and Webb 32).

**Table 1: AAE vs. SAE**

AAE	SAE
She seen him yesterday.	She saw him yesterday.
He be here tomorrow.	He will be here tomorrow.
We gon win.	We are going to win.
He finna go.	He's about to go.
He be steady talkin.	He keeps talking on and on.
He bin finish.	He has already finished.
They is some crazy folk. You was right.	They are some crazy folks. You were right.

The switch between AAE and SAE represents an adjustment between dialects.

Dialects are "a variety of language[s] used by a specific group of people and distinguished from other varieties by its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation" (Godley & Escher1). The use of AAE is often referred to as talking Black. It is a dialect that is distinct by "black sound, speech rhythms, voice inflections, and tonal patterns," dialects require distinctive grammatical differences, and it seems that the most obvious difference between AAE and SAE is the use of the verb "be" (Smitherman, *Talkin* 19 and 25). This variance appears to be one of the biggest frustrations for English teachers when it pertains to teaching Black students who speak and write in AAE.

## **1.2 Current Pedagogical Practices and Problems in the Classroom**

As English teachers attempt to teach their students SAE, they are seeing how nonstandard forms of English, such as AAE and text-speak, are affecting students being

able to speak and write in SAE. Text-speak is a writing style that attempts to convey a message with as few words as possible (Ross 4). According to Kate Ross, an instructional coach for language arts teachers, texting and instant messages are hurting students' abilities to produce quality writing because they (texting and instant messaging) are causing students to make numerous syntax, subject-verb agreement, and spelling mistakes in assignments (4). She believes that this problem manifests itself in emails for teachers, classroom written and verbal assignments, and in state writing exams (Ross 4). The solution for text-speak and other communication problems caused by social media such as Twitter, along with teacher problems with AAE, has yet to be figured out; however, educators have the responsibility to prepare students for the real world and educate them on formal writing skills.

English teachers have a very important role in teaching Standard American English in classrooms. It can be hard for teachers to accept or embrace students' home or community language because their profession is rooted in teaching SAE. The belief is that "English is Standard English" and "that Standard English is Right with a capital R, and that anything else is improper, bad, incorrect, and fractured" (Wheeler and Swords 5). Dr. Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords believe that teachers have long been using the approach of correcting bad grammar and improper language, despite the fact that it has not been productive (4). This is why code-switching could prove to be a more positive tactic to combat the issues of AAE and other nonstandard written and spoken forms of English that are affecting students' in-class performances.

## Chapter 2: AAE & Education

### 2.1 Historical Background

The African-American English debate has caused issues within the classroom for many years. Many people have questioned what exactly African-American English is and “what are the implications for black-white interaction and teaching black children” (Smitherman, *Talkin* 2). Geneva Smitherman, Director of the African American Language and Literacy Program at Michigan State University, described “Black dialect [as] an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America” (2). African-American English is “Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture” (2). It is a language that Blacks created for themselves in order to survive in a foreign land (Smitherman, *Talkin* 3). Slavery forced Blacks out of their land and into a completely new world surrounded by Whites, western culture, and a foreign language. Slave English—or Black English—became a “language mixture, adapted to the conditions of slavery and discrimination, a combination of language and style interwoven with and inextricable from Afro-American culture” (Smitherman, *Talkin* 3). Tracking the development of AAE is difficult because there are no direct speech samples of early Black American English (Smitherman, *Talkin* 5). As a result, scholars are forced to rely on indirect representations of black talk that are found in literature, diaries, and journals (Smitherman, *Talkin* 5).

Black slaves were compelled to develop or create their form of English because they were denied the right to a formal education (Smitherman, *Talkin* 5). The slaves who

were viewed as speaking exceptional English were typically those who had been born and raised in America (Smitherman, *Talkin* 13). They learned English and infused it with their own West African language and patterns in a form of pidgin or synthesized language. Perhaps as a nod to these early roots of language, modern AAE uses similar slave speech patterns, especially with the use of the verb "to be" (Smitherman, *Talkin* 6).

Africans were denied education privileges from the very beginnings of slavery in America by a predominately White society. Slaves were property. Oftentimes, their owners only cared about their muscles and reproductive abilities; they wanted them for work and breeding. Because of this, many masters did not see the value in educating slaves; in fact, most slave owners viewed education for slaves as detrimental to their place in society. The less knowledge a slave possessed, the more his or her owner could control him or her. Ignorance was a major tool in controlling slaves; slave owners used laws to propagate this restraint, and South Carolina was the first to adopt "compulsory ignorance law[s] in America in 1740":

And whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences: Be it enacted, that all and every person or persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever [sic], hereafter taught to write, every such persons or persons shall, for each offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money (qtd in Erickson 207).



Any slave who was caught attempting to learn to read and write would be penalized, as would any person who tried to educate a slave. It did not take long before many states followed suit with their own laws preventing the education of Black slaves; this system stayed in place until after the Civil War (Erickson 207).

After the Civil War, Blacks could receive education, but their education was met with great resistance. Many Blacks “built their own schools, aided by a few abolitionists,” but “the whites burned Black schools as fast as they could be built” (Erickson 208). There was still much prejudice and racism in America, despite the end of slavery. Slavery may have ended, but racial tension in the south was on the rise, culminating in segregated schools. Moreover, laws like “Separate but Equal” only added to the differences and—oftentimes—quality between Black-and-White schools. *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, which overturned the ruling in the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (Separate but Equal), helped end educational segregation and paved the way for equal education for Black and White students. The end of segregation and the integration of schools helped improve education for Blacks, but—in some ways— it created dialect barriers, language prejudices, and left many teachers with the burden of filling in the gaps. Those dialect barriers were ones that resulted in teachers having a difficult time understanding their students. An example of this dialect barrier is illustrated below:

Scene: First-grade classroom, Detroit

Teacher: Where is Mary?

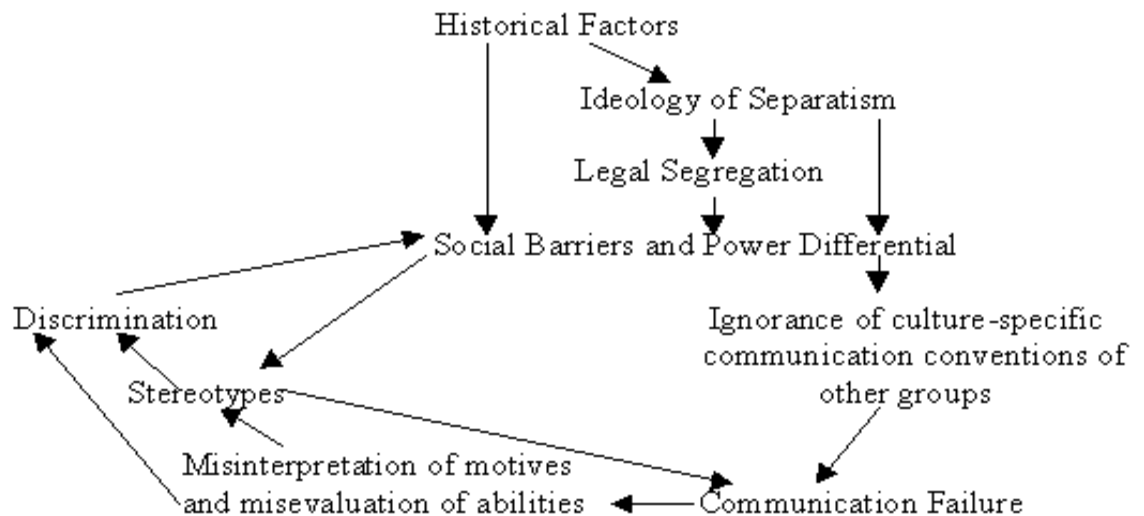
[Black] Student: She not here.

Teacher (exasperatedly): She is *never* here!

[Black] Student: Yeah, she be here.

Teacher: Where? You just said she wasn't here (Smitherman, *That Talk* 25).

As the Black student attempted to answer the teacher's question, the message was misinterpreted, which led to a communication failure. The student originally stated that Mary "not here," but that led to the teacher "correcting" the student by saying that Mary "is never here"; the student then responded by saying that the student "be here," which confused the teacher yet again. The Black student was not stating that Mary *never* comes to class, but the student was trying to say that Mary was not present on that particular day. The teacher never understood the student's remark but instead completely retranslated the meaning. This example reflects a cycle that has been continually repeated since the integration of Black and White children in schools. Historical factors, such as slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, created racial ideologies that led to segregation; in turn, segregation generated social barriers that further constructed stereotypes, discrimination, cultural ignorance, and communication failures.

**Figure 1: Education Cycle**

(Cristani)

## 2.2 African-American English

African-American English has been met with resistance by scholars and educators including Leon Todd, the Director on the Board for Milwaukee Public Schools. Todd believes that AAE is defective speech and a handicap for children because it encourages a “dysfunctional ghetto family” (2). In a sense, it prevents Blacks from advancing in society because it only cements stereotypes. He also asserts that Black vernacular is a language disability and prevents Black children from being prepared for careers. Todd comments on Black children who live in ghetto neighborhoods and pick up the language patterns of “poverty, rap music, hip-hop culture, [and] a dysfunctional ghetto family” (2). For Todd, African-American English only holds Black students back from being successful in the professional and academic world. This lack of success keeps Black

students in ghetto neighborhoods and prevents them from entering into a higher class. Many Black educators have witnessed the possible socioeconomic disadvantages of speaking AAE in a predominantly white society (Winsoboro and Solomon 1). There is "evidence [that] clearly suggests that speakers of Black English are presented with more obstacles to success than are speakers of Standard English" (Winsoboro and Solomon 1). It is for these reasons that some researchers argue that AAE should be completely abandoned in every situation, especially in the classroom.

Scholars, such as Hugh B. Price, recognize African-American English as a dialect within Standard American English and as something that is an issue and an obstacle to many Black students, but they do not see the need for teachers to incorporate knowledge of AAE into their teaching styles. For example, he argues, "We recognize and applaud the [Oakland] school board's attempt to help the youngsters in its care prepare themselves for the larger society. But using Black English as a 'teaching tool' will in fact only retard that process" (qtd in Browne 2). Price viewed Oakland's effort to reach their Black students who speak AAE as a commendable endeavor, but he did not agree with the way that they went about it. He believed "the mastery of Standard English almost uniformly is a prerequisite to upward mobility because those who shape our society historically have exercised a tight control over entry to prestigious and remunerative positions" (Winsoboro and Solomon 2). These scholars maintain that in order for teachers to equip Black students for a progressive and successful life and career in society, then those teachers should only focus on teaching their students SAE; teachers should not take the time to

understand or adjust to AAE, but instead should focus all their time and energy on teaching SAE.

Many Black children who choose to communicate in their home dialect or Black vernaculars do so out of the need to survive or adapt to the situation that fits their needs while encouraging cultural pride. Charles Green asserts that some Black students who use African-American English use it as a mode of survival (2). This mode of survival can be a positive or negative. Black students need to be able to fit into the larger frame of society, and the larger frame of society often requires conformity to standards in dress, speech, etc. However, that student should not be required to lose their identity in order to advance in society.

Black students may use AAE as a mode of survival but also see it as a way to achieve a sense of acceptance by their peers and a comfort with their environments and thus, see no real need to abandon their language for the standard form. Many Black students may not be exposed to the concept of code-switching but have probably witnessed or personally experienced it in action. John Baugh gives a personal account in his book, *Beyond Ebonics*, about the time when he came to the realization that he needed to transition between African-American English and Standard American English. His parents were both educated college professors, and they did not like or promote the use of any English outside of the standard. Baugh was eventually faced with the question as to whether or not he should only speak and write in SAE and completely abandon any use of AAE and thus risk possibly being ridiculed and rejected by his black peers. The other side of that question was if whether or not he was willing to experience domestic

consequences from his parents by rebelling against the SAE that they were trying to promote. For him, the solution to his problem was to find a compromise; that compromise consisted of him conversing in a nonstandard speech around his friends while using SAE at home and in church. He described himself as a "linguistic chameleon" (Baugh 6). Baugh understood that his ability to become a linguistic chameleon was crucial to his survival among his peers and in the educational world. In essence, he mastered the ability to code-switch. He could adapt and change his speech patterns/vernacular depending on his current situation or environment. This challenge is what Black children are faced with in today's classrooms and communities. Alternatively, for Baugh, his Standard American English was also viewed as White speech among his circle of friends, so, he made a decision to code-switch; this situation is the same scenario in which many Black students find themselves.

Even in the midst of Black children learning Standard American English, they witness their elders' code-switching as well. Baugh recalls his mother, who pressed and encouraged him to speak SAE at all times, code-switching between dialects whenever it was convenient for her situation.

I routinely observed that my mother would speak differently to various people on the telephone. She would normally answer any incoming call with a neutral "Hello," and then her speech would shift; if she responded formally - typically to a white person - her diction would become more standard, and if she talked to a black person, her speech would sound more natural and relaxed. Again, these were some of my earliest memories of

lingual observations, and I lacked the experience, knowledge, or understanding to comprehend fully the significance of her linguistic modifications (Baugh 4 and 5).

Baugh was unable to comprehend the significance of the code-switching that he had witnessed his mother do, but he was still able to recognize the change and the situations in which the modifications had taken place. Teachers could model examples, such as the one that Baugh recounts, to show students how code-switching is used and to help students relate to times that they have witnessed this strategy in action.

### **2.3 Dialects and African-American English**

Although the varieties of dialects are a problem for teachers in the classroom, dialects do not meet the criteria of a separate language. According to Ellis Cose, author of *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World*, the key to helping Black children be successful in and outside of the classroom is not found in convincing them that they speak a foreign language; instead, it is discovered in guiding them in the understanding that they can master any material that is placed in front of them (Leo 1). This ideology is in opposition to the misconception that the Oakland School Board wanted to declare African-American English as a separate language (Hall 2). The school appeared to be so focused on the differences in the language (what they called Black English) between their Black and White students that they called them two different languages. Many legislators, reporters, and educators were under the impression that the Oakland School district wanted to create separate classes for students speaking Ebonics and those who spoke Standard American English instead of just teaching their Black

students to master SAE. The misinterpretations of Oakland's decision also lead to the assumption that their school district was not trying to use AAE as a way to teach their students to master the Standard but instead were attempting to convince their Black students that they spoke an entirely different language. However, Oakland's real plan was the exact opposite of what the media presented it as; their plan involved three steps. The first step was to bring African-American children up to the SAE proficiency level so that they (Black students) could achieve on the same academic level as other children who came to school speaking in SAE. Second, Oakland felt that teachers needed to know that the AAE dialect differed from the standard so that they could better teach SAE. Lastly, Oakland planned to avoid insulting Black families and their children by not using any type of negative language that ridiculed the dialect. Instead, they wanted to encourage students to reach a higher degree of academic excellence in SAE (Mills 10).

African-American English is not a separate language, but it can cause communication barriers. Furthermore, AAE is sometimes categorized as a type of defective speech and a handicap for Black children. The negative side of people – particularly educators – stereotyping AAE as deficient speech is that it forces many Black students into remedial courses; this problem represents a result of dialectal prejudice in that the nonstandard dialect is considered to reflect a lower educational status (Williams qtd Balliou 1). Earl Hutchinson argues that this only hurts these students in the end because, “the notion that blacks cannot learn like whites [becomes] a vicious [cycle] that put[s] many black students at educational risk” (Hutchinson 36). This educational risk can create a hindrance in Black students learning as they should and also make it harder



for teachers to reach their students and bring them up to proficiency level in various subjects.

#### **2.4 African-American English, Teachers, and the Classroom**

Black students are not the only ones who speak a different dialect in the classroom and in home environments. Because AAE is sometimes considered improper English, many people do not respect or recognize it as its own form of communication. In contrast, even when students use SAE, they still use varieties of English and when educators deny the existence of dialectal varieties then they deny or reject the culture that sustains that dialect (Baxter and Holland 146). Pandey stated that she had been speaking English her whole life, still she continued to have problems understanding Americans because of the various dialects within the English language (Pandey 2).

Because of the linguistic diversity in America, teachers and educators have to take into account the various cultural and dialectal differences. Schools have to teach Standard American English reading and writing skills, but they need to teach those skills in ways that take into account distinctive dialect usages and patterns; teachers who recognize and appreciate the differences among their students allow them to not feel stigmatized for the way they speak. Recognizing distinct speech patterns can help teachers build their children's proficiency levels in Standard American English because it helps them to see where the students are and where they need to be. When teachers are not so quick to judge and criticize their students, they can move past discriminatory practices and build on teaching their students from that point. The various dialects that are often used in class are a clear guide as to where students are at in their mastery of Standard American

English. However, teachers and educators should be slow to make assumptions. Those assumptions can create a block between their interactions with their students and be an obstacle to the learning environment, because—oftentimes—people are often more alike than they are different. Those similarities tend to also relate in language.

All people are similar in that everyone is bi-dialectal. Jacqueline Brice-Finch, a professor of English at James Madison University, believes that “no matter what our background or family history, we all speak a vernacular that reflects a culture, region, or multicultural influence” (1). This viewpoint could aid teachers in bridging the communication gap with their students. Students also need to realize and know that SAE is what is considered the societal norm. Students need to be educated enough to communicate in formal situations, the workplace, classroom, business environments, and to know the difference between communicating for different purposes.

## Chapter 3: Code-Switching Implementation

### 3.1 Past Practices

There has been much discussion on the problems that teachers face when attempting to teach their students who speak AAE, and this discussion promoted the creation a program to help accommodate these needs. According to William Labov, a linguistic professor at the University of Pennsylvania, "AAE is the most studied dialect than any other form of English" (1). However, he believes that this knowledge has resulted in very little progression in the need to improve reading and the mastery of Standard American English for Black students. The most promising solution to this problem surfaced in the 1970's in a program known as "The Bridge Program" or *Bridge*.

*Bridge* was created by two Black psychologists and a prominent educator from Chicago (Labov 7). *Bridge* is a "series of graded readings and cassette recordings that made use of the traditional folklore of African-American culture, moving in three stages from the vernacular to [S]tandard English" (Labov 7). The tape begins with a young Black man who is attempting to serve as an intermediary between the point of view of other Black children and the culture of the classroom. This young man would start out by addressing the students:

What's happenin', brothers and sisters? I want to tell you about this here program called *Bridge*, a cross-cultural reading program. Now I *know* what you thinkin'. This is just another one of them jive reading programs, and that I won't be need no readin' program. But dig it. This here reading

program is really kinda different. It was done by a brother and two sisters, soul folk, you know. And they put sump'm extra in it, they put a little taste o' soul. Matter of fact, a lot of soul. No jive, that's what they put in it, a little bit of soul, something you can relate to. And check this out, quiet as it's kept, you do need this here readin' program. If you be sittin' in this class, you don't be readin' any too cool. Now don't be lookin' around! I'm talking about you, here, right over there in the corner now, unless you the teacher, I'm talkin' 'bout you (Labov 8).

The purpose of this introduction was to directly attack the problem of various social conflicts, which was identified as a large obstacle to reading, and also to target the problem of various structural differences between both dialects (AAE and SAE). Many educators believe that if Black students' reading levels and comprehension are improved, then students' proficiency levels in Standard American English are also improved. The program was further designed to "give the maximum assistance to speakers of AAVE [AAE], Hispanic-influenced English, and other non-standard dialects, without penalizing children whose home language is close to [Standard English] (Labov 12).

This program was tested in five areas in the United States and appeared to be quite successful. Fourteen teachers and twenty-seven classes, ranging from 7th-12th grade, which totaled to 504 students—"all but 10 of them black" (Labov 9). Twenty-one of the classes who used the *Bridge* program "showed a significantly larger gain in reading than the 6 control classes: an average gain of 6.2 months for 4 months of instruction as compared to 1.6 months for the control group (Simpkins and Simpkins qtd in Labov 9).

Despite the success of this program, it was discontinued based on the objections of parents and teachers who did not want to promote the use of AAE in the classroom; educators and parents were unwilling to accept any dialect form being taught in the classroom setting that fell outside of the Standard. This resulted in the program not being further promoted or developed; however, the program is now being additionally expanded by Gary Simpkins (Labov 9).

*Bridge* had several strengths and weaknesses. However, the strengths of this program are mostly found in the wide range of students that it reaches due to its general aims; the program reaches students in a way that combines cultural and linguistic awareness without condemning or insulting a particular group of people. The authors of this program are scholars who are extremely familiar with AAE; therefore, they were able to create this curriculum with sensitivity and in a non-offensive way while adapting it to the needs of the classroom. They sought to meet the needs of students and teachers in a way that would accommodate everyone's instructional needs (Labov 10).

The weaknesses of this program are largely rooted in the way that society, educators, and parents view the program. In spite of the program's strengths and successes, the presentation of the program was met with great opposition due to it not being able to discredit the belief that *Bridge* would only be reinforcing "bad English" to students. Another weakness of the program is that the language, vocabulary, and slang quickly became dated due to the change of times. All of these problems, coupled with the way that *Bridge* was viewed in academic settings, resulted in the various weaknesses of the program (Labov 11).

Despite the weaknesses of the *Bridge* program, it seems as if it is a powerful way of simultaneously attacking the cultural and linguistic conflicts between [AAE] and [Standard English] (Labov 12). This type of program also appears to be the most helpful in schools that have close to 100% Black enrollment, but its development method is not really applicable to schools that have a mixed population (Labov 12).

### **3.2 Current Practices Found within Frameworks**

Most frameworks do not include any sort of pedagogical tools or approaches for teaching Standard American English, nor do they contain any information for how to approach teaching students who speak AAE. Nevertheless, many objectives do stress the importance of teaching and mastering SAE. Examples of these objectives are below.

Students combine the rhetorical strategies of narration exposition persuasion, and description to produce texts of at least 1,500 words each. Student writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and the research, organizational, and drafting strategies outlined in Writing Standard 1.0 (California Department of Education 70).

All students will demonstrate the ability to write clear and grammatically correct sentences, paragraphs, and compositions (Michigan Department of Education 9).

These objectives require teachers to expect students to write and communicate in Standard American English, but they do not offer any sort of suggestions for how to do this or how to adjust to students who have not yet mastered these skills.

Even though most state education objectives do not provide varied pedagogical options for how teachers can teach their students who speak AAE, there are some objectives that appear to give teachers the freedom to incorporate different strategies. For example, Michigan states that students need to "use an understanding of how language patterns and vocabularies transmit culture and affect meaning in formal and informal situation" (Michigan Content Standard and Draft Benchmarks 12). They also expect students to "explore and explain how the same words can have different usages and meanings in different contexts, cultures, and communities" (Michigan Content Standard and Draft Benchmarks 12). Both of these standards mention the different language patterns found in other cultures—specifically those that pertain to formal and informal situations—but they do not say how teachers can accomplish these tasks.

### **3.3 Positives and Negatives of Code-Switching in the Classrooms**

Nargis Chowdhury, an assistant professor in the Department of English at Stamford University, studied the effects of code-switching in the classroom but from the perspective of the switch between two separate languages; however, the results of the study are relevant and can be applied to classrooms in America and the switch between various dialects. Chowdhury's study surveyed 20 English language teachers and 37 undergrad students from different universities, and the findings identified "the reasons for teachers' code-switching like ease of communication, explanation, maintaining discipline in the classroom, translation of the unknown terms. On the other hand, although many teachers consider that they should not switch codes in the classroom, students possess a positive attitude towards it" (Chowdhury 40).

Various language teachers and policy makers who support code-switching within the classroom believe that it "assists in the continuity of speech; it serves as a tool for transference of meaning and serves communicative purpose" (Chowdhury 42). Other reasons for support of classroom code-switching include class size and maintaining discipline, students' background and mixed ability classes, ease of communication, explanation and translation of unknown terms, expression of solidarity, explanation of grammar and vocabulary, and rapport building. The ease of communication allows for teachers to more effectively explain new and seemingly difficult concepts in a way that saves time and aids students in understanding the material. The expression of solidarity is used in a way to build interpersonal relationships; this often means that teachers consciously code-switches for the purpose of allowing students to feel more relaxed and friendly (Chowdhury 46-51).

Nevertheless, the main reason of support for code-switching in the classroom is that it benefits the students' academic learning while assisting teachers in building positive student-teacher relations. Code-switching allows for teachers to reinforce different concepts and objectives in a way that students can understand and relate to; in some ways, it makes it easier for students to gain the knowledge that they need to succeed in their course work. The success in their course works aids students in being successful in their professions.

Scholars who oppose code-switching being used in the classroom for language learning believe that it "obstructs the learning environment" and "hinders students' language learning" (Chowdhury 42 & 53). They argue that continual code-switching



benefits no one because it only causes students to create the bad habit of code-switching on a regular basis; that bad habit can hinder the targeted fluency and prevent skills from being achieved. Also, it could also affect the teacher's fluency. Either way, teacher who switch codes should do so carefully and in a controlled and target oriented environment (Chowdhury 53). Those who are against code-switching see it as a tool that only delays students being able to achieve proficiency in the target language or standard.

Some arguments that teachers have used as to why they do not encourage classroom code-switching are given below:

1. Because students' habit of switching codes in class room may go beyond the line and hamper the intrinsic relation between the language and the subject.
2. The more students engage in using English, the better. Encouraging students to code switch may not push them to try harder in speaking English, Similarly, if the teacher switches codes too frequently, s/he may not be able to inspire students by example.
3. Code switching is likely to lead to greater dependency and reliance on L1 by both teachers and students. Some teachers might tend to abuse such liberty offered by a widespread acceptance of code switching as norm rather than exception.

4. The students should go through the trouble to express their ideas in the target language, which will make them work hard. Moreover, there is no scope for switching codes in exam scripts (Chowhury 53 & 54).

The main argument that teachers have against code-switching is that it creates negative habits that are hard to break. The more time that students engage in using the target (or standard) language the better off they will be in achieving proficiency. Teachers who model code-switching frequently are not displaying a good example to their students because it creates a dependency on the language or dialect that is not the standard or target language. Another reason why code-switching should be used is because it is healthy for students to struggle with expressing their ideas in the target language so that they will improve their skills.

The results of the survey showed that the teachers did not support or oppose the concept and practice of code-switching in the classroom because many of the teachers were able to see the "usefulness" and "fruitful effect of code switching," but they still held to the belief that code-switching should be controlled so that students could gradually gain proficiency in SAE (Chowhury 54). Code-switching "has the power to facilitate greater understanding and to involve and cohere the entire classroom population in the lesson. The teachers, however, need to remember that English is the medium of instruction and code switching should be kept to an effective minimum" (Chowhury 57).

### 3.4 Examples of Code-Switching in the Classroom

Numerous educated American writers expressed themselves through using nonstandard English. Writers including Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Octavia Butler used AAE and various black dialects to their advantage in order to express themselves. In fact, it can be argued that some of their writings would have been weakened had they used Standard American English.

Although these writers wrote using different dialects, no one considers them uneducated, in need of special education, or deficient in their communication or writing skills. This same belief can be embraced in the classroom. If educators consider that these successful writers embraced code-switching (whether those Black writers realize it or not) as a way to affirm their cultural pride.

Black students can be given the opportunity and liberty to express themselves in different avenues, such as poetry and creative writing. However, while they need to be expected to turn in research papers and formal assignments using Standard American English, they should be given the freedom to integrate AAE into certain assignments and speak in whatever dialect fits what they are trying to express. If a Black student decides that his or her poem or story will be more powerful and authentic if it is in African-American English or displays Black vernacular, he or she should be allowed to do so. These sorts of creative writing assignments should be graded with the understanding that students will not miss points for not abiding by standard grammar rules, but will instead be graded on how well they communicate the idea or concept they are trying to convey. These assignments would also help to cement the concept of code-switching into the

students' minds because they would be familiar with using SAE for formal assignments, but they would also be able to recognize the setting that allowed for the freedom to speak or write in whatever way is deemed comfortable or necessary. This type of practice would allow them to comprehend the importance and need for adapting to situations and assignments based on needs, criteria, and standards. Some teachers have attempted to integrate this concept into their classroom by allowing students to utilize nonstandard practices in poetry writing assignments (Hill 123). Examples of these creative writing moments can be seen in figure 2 and 3 below (Hill 124). These types of writing opportunities allowed both students to “build on [their] cultural and linguistic strengths (Hill 124).

**Figure 2: Kiki's Poem**

**Figure 1 Kiki's Poem in Nonstandard Conventions**

The same with what she's been  
Through.  
Is her heart still to mine,  
I want to cry sometimes.  
I miss you  
Leaving Elementary that's when she left me  
We were close friends also cousins did everything for one  
Another  
Now she's gone and I'm lost without her here  
Now  
But I now I got to live and make it somehow  
Now I'm sitting here thinking about her  
And,  
The days we used to share  
It's driving me crazy I don't know what to do  
And,  
I want her here  
I want to let her know that it's killing  
Me  
I know I got to move on and realize that she is gone.

The interpretation of Kiki's poem reflects the importance of Kiki being able to express herself in an area that she considered one of her strengths—displaying her culture. Kiki's "use of 'I got' illustrates the deletion of the word have, a grammatical feature of AAE; her description of being friends and cousins has a rhythmic quality that displays her social world and fondness for rap music" (Hill 124). If this assignment had required Kiki to use SAE, Kiki's voice would have been lost.

Monet's poem (figure 3) also has a strong sense of her personal voice. Because she was able to represent the way her relatives speak, it allowed her to give a more accurate depiction of her family (Hill 124). The poems in figures two and three show that if these students were unable to write their poems in the dialect (AAE) that suited them and their stories, their voices would have been diminished and their stories inaccurately told. However, their teacher allowed them to step outside of standard conventions in order for them express themselves freely while being understood by their class audience and teacher.

Figure 3: Monet's Poem

## Figure 2 Monet's Poem in Nonstandard Conventions

We heard my uncle close his car door.  
 "When I say, 'Hey Jerry' And get him  
 down in the basement and ask,  
 'How'd you do at the casino last night?'  
 Everybody jump out and yell, 'Surprise!!!'  
 My Auntie, Kental  
 whispers to us.  
 Knock, knock, my uncle comes down stairs  
 my uncle says, "Where the kids at."  
 She says "They busy." He said,  
 "What is a two year old and a month  
 old 'busy' doing.  
 She says, "Whatever, but how did you  
 do at the casino?"  
 Uncle tried to say good  
 but we ran out about as fast as an Alka-Seltzer  
 when it drops into water

Although examples—like figure 2 and figure 3—show how students benefit from being able to use their home dialect, not all teachers have positive attitudes towards different linguistic practices and Black English; this contributes to the relationships that these teachers have with their students. Moreover, the attitude that a teacher has toward a student can make or break the relationship. If a teacher, whether he or she is black or white, assumes that a child who speaks “African-American English [is] slower, less able, and less intelligent than the child who speaks Standard English,” then it can prevent the teacher from connecting and understanding their student (Wheeler and Swords 14). This mindset is referred to as dialect prejudice (Wheeler and Swords 14). If the teacher already set a low standard or expectation on a student due to his or her speech patterns, it can easily result in students that do not perform as well as they would or could. It is the teacher's job to try to build as good of a moral with their students as possible. A pleasant teacher-student relationship will only allow for a more positive learning environment in the classroom.

Code-switching is a pedagogical tool that can be used by teachers to teach SAE to their students who speak AAE and use other nonstandard forms of English. However, this tool does not have to be limited to only being used as a way to teach SAE. Teachers could incorporate this tool into many different aspects of their instruction. Another way that teachers could utilize the pedagogical tool of code-switching is by incorporating current technology and media practices into the classroom. Students are very familiar with technology, text-speak, social media, email, etc. Teachers could use these technological practices to their advantage. For example, in a recent student teaching



experience, I created an assignment titled "The Social Media Activity." In this assignment, students were given the options to choose to use either Facebook or Twitter to update their status or tweet from a character's perspective. They had to write either three statuses or three tweets using a minimum of one hashtag. I modeled an example and updated a Facebook status from the nameless man's (main character) perspective.

Example: "We've been traveling all day. I'm cold and hungry, and this man has the nerve to eat a biscuit in front of me and not offer me a piece?! #ItJustGotReal #Selfish #IWontProtectHimSinceHeWontFeedMe" This activity allowed for students to learn the objective of character point of view while also allowing them to use informal writing practices in conjunction with media outlets that they were familiar with using.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In spite of creative and engaging assignments like those referenced earlier that encourage students to embrace their own language practices rather than SAE, an obstacle in teaching code-switching is the same that the program *Bridge* encountered: dialectal prejudices still exist in America. Racial and language discrimination have long been a historic problem. Attitudes toward language affect the perception or acceptance of any solution. Awareness of challenges and an open-mind to trying new pedagogical methods, like code-switching, could lead to the acceptance of dialect diversity and aid teachers in getting Black students up to proficiency standards in English. This could also help America get one step closer to bringing the vision of teaching students Standard American English, without denigrating the dialect, to a reality.

Code-switching is a pedagogical tool that can be used to encourage cultural pride while teaching students to master Standard American English. This process could encourage Black children in a way that does not stigmatize their speech while allowing them to gain the necessary tools to succeed in the professional realm and society—a predominately White society. Because of this reality, teachers should evaluate the option of using AAE as a bridge to teach SAE. As with all students in the American education system, Black children are expected to read, write, and communicate in Standard American English, but teaching them the ability to code-switch would help them recognize situations when this is necessary and when it is not. As an example, students are encouraged to embrace their culture and use their home dialect among their families; however, they know that in a professional setting, such as a job interview, they should

utilize Standard American English. The goal is not to strip students of their identities but to encourage them to master the necessary tools for success while maintaining a personal self.

If school districts were to embrace code-switching, they could then incorporate different language workshops and training seminars (similar to what Oakland tried to do) in order to meet the needs of their Black students and place them in the proficiency/mastery level of SAE. However, there are still many issues that need to be resolved and worked out between the conflicting need for teachers to help their students grow in their skills of Standard American English while reaching them at the levels that they are at in their own proficiency journey. This research could be expanded on through the provision of more models and examples of the implementation and affects of code-switching in the classroom. Further research could also be done on how to assess students' growth in mastering SAE after they have been exposed to code-switching. There is more research to be done; however, code-switching could be a step in the right direction.

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