The Effects of Explicit Code-Switching Instruction on Student Writing Performance for Students Who Speak Non-Standard Forms of English

Jeffrey R. Allen
jra07532@sjfc.edu

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation


Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/315 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
The Effects of Explicit Code-Switching Instruction on Student Writing Performance for Students Who Speak Non-Standard Forms of English

Abstract
This research project began by asking how explicit code-switching instruction would impact the writing performance of non-standard English speaking students. Participants included twelve sixth grade students and twelve teachers. The data collected was teacher interviews, anecdotal notes, writing samples, teacher questionnaires, student work samples, and audio recorded code-switching practice sessions. Findings revealed that students were not able to translate their knowledge of and proficiency with oral code-switching and dialect variance to written code-switching. In addition, James Prep’s implementation of code-switching pedagogy is not adequate. The data implied that without valuing the home languages of students and building a culture of natural style shifting, it is difficult to create a culture fit for code-switching and critical conversations about language.

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Literacy Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Joellen Maples

Subject Categories
Education

This thesis is available at Fisher Digital Publications: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/315
The Effects of Explicit Code-Switching Instruction on Student Writing Performance for Students Who Speak Non-Standard Forms of English

By

Jeffrey R. Allen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

Dr. Joellen Maples

School of Arts and Sciences
St. John Fisher College

December 2015
Abstract

This research project began by asking how explicit code-switching instruction would impact the writing performance of non-standard English speaking students. Participants included twelve sixth grade students and twelve teachers. The data collected was teacher interviews, anecdotal notes, writing samples, teacher questionnaires, student work samples, and audio recorded code-switching practice sessions. Findings revealed that students were not able to translate their knowledge of and proficiency with oral code-switching and dialect variance to written code-switching. In addition, James Prep’s implementation of code-switching pedagogy is not adequate. The data implied that without valuing the home languages of students and building a culture of natural style shifting, it is difficult to create a culture fit for code-switching and critical conversations about language.
The Effects of Explicit Code-Switching Instruction on Student Writing Performance

The study of English language variation in the United States has been a recent topic of interest within the fields of linguistics, psychology, education, and more. More recently, the use of African American English (AAE) and its impact on the literacy acquisition of students throughout America has become an incredibly intriguing and significant area of study for linguists and educators alike. AAE is a distinct and rule-governed variety of speech (Redd & Webb, 2005), and many, in fact most, of the young African American students attending public schools across the country speak this variation of Mainstream American English (MAE). AAE and MAE can differ with respect to phonology, morphosyntax, and pragmatics (Edwards et al., 2014). In recent years, code-switching has become a major focus for preparing students who speak AAE, and other non-MAE variants, for life in a society where Standard English is the privileged dialect and seemingly nothing else is “culturally” acceptable. Research has indicated an inverse relationship between use of AAE features and literacy test scores (Craig, Kolenic, & Hensel, 2014). Due to this inverse relationship, code-switching to gain access to privileged dialect, has become a solution for students who speak non-MAE dialects. It has become increasingly important for modern-day educators to continuously explore how variation in spoken language influences how children develop essential literacy skills (Redd & Webb, 2005; Patton-Terry & Connor, 2010).

Historically, minority citizens of America have been continually discriminated against for their language variance and cultural discourse. As educators of all students, it is imperative the linguistic identity of all students be embraced and celebrated, while at the same time ensuring the acquisition of secondary discourses and language variance which will best serve their interests professionally and socially in today’s demanding society. Standard English is arguably no longer
considered a commonly used variance of English. It is widely accepted that all individuals speak a specific dialect of Standard English. The purpose of this action research topic is to examine the language variance of 6th grade students at a Middle School in Upstate, New York, and measure the impact of explicit code-switching instruction on the writing performance of these students. Initially, the writing samples of this selection of students will be analyzed for elements of non-standard English forms, including typical signs of African American English and other urban dialects. After three mini-lessons in which the students will receive explicit instruction on code-switching – including a brief mini-lesson on dialect variance, a contrastive analysis lesson, instruction on the purpose and mechanics of code-switching, and a brief practice session on oral code-switching – the students will submit an additional writing sample to be analyzed once again for non-standard forms of English language.

This research topic is extremely important for all children living in low socio-economic urban environments. Most of the children living within these communities employ non-standard English language forms, some of which convey a certain stereotype which follows these individuals throughout their entire lives, due to our society’s unfair reality that the only acceptable language is MAE, spoken primarily by members of government, media, and academia. Learning to effectively code-switch, refrain from using their natural, primary discourse in certain social situations and shifting to more mainstream language forms, has the ability to encourage conforming to specific societal norms when it comes to speaking and interacting professionally in professionally demanding situations, while also promoting the use of one’s primary discourse whenever deemed appropriate, also according to societal norms.

The topic was chosen to examine the specific academic area of writing, due to recent research shedding light onto the writing scores of students who speak African American English,
Urban Vernacular English, and other non-standard forms. According to Johnson and VanBrackle (2012), some educators generally have biases against errors that contain AAE features, and that most raters view AAE errors as “carelessness” and that raters are “annoyed by them” (p. 46). Often students are able to master code-switching in oral expressive language situations, but seemingly struggle to rid non-standard forms of English throughout their writing, thus causing their writing scores and performance to not truly reflect their abilities as a whole, due to inherent biases among raters and scorers.

The goal of this action research was to examine how explicit code-switching instruction impacted students ability to code-switch from their native dialect to MAE in their writing. An additional goal of the study was to explore how the teachers at James Prep felt about code-switching, and how it impacts their opinions on and relationships with the students they teach, who predominately speak a non-standard form of English. The theoretical framework which drove this action research is Culturally Responsive Teaching. Culturally Responsive Teaching is an instructional pedagogy that distinguishes the significance of incorporating students' cultural references and identity in all facets of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The literature which was reviewed in an effort to gain insight into the area of code-switching and non-Standard English forms, showed how AAE and other non-MAE English forms impact student literacy performance in the classroom. Also, the literature showed various ways to teach code-switching to students who employ non-MAE regularly, including critical language pedagogy and contrastive analysis. What was found as a result of data analysis was that students failed to translate knowledge of MAE and non-MAE, their near mastery of contrastive analysis tasks, to their code-switching abilities. Simply understanding Standard and non-Standard English language forms was not enough to naturally improve code-switching abilities in writing, even
after explicit instruction in what code-switching is and why it is important in today’s society.

Implications from this action research study are quite far-reaching. Our current schooling system does not appropriately utilize critical language pedagogy, nor does it allow for effective Culturally Responsive Teaching. Therefore, students’ native dialects are not welcomed in the classroom, nor are their cultural identities valued and celebrated. The lack of Culturally Responsive Teaching across our nation’s schools leads to a lack of mutual respect between the cultural normed dialect of MAE and native non-MAE dialects, in the eyes of students who employ non-Standard English forms. While teachers are able to engage their students in culturally responsive learning and promote critical language pedagogy within their classrooms, it is the larger scale of changing school systems which shows the most promise in improving the code-switching abilities of young urban students across the country.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework which will help drive this action research is Culturally Responsive Teaching. Culturally Responsive Teaching is an instructional pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references and identity in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The goal is to empower students to feel comfortable and honored with who they are, while introducing them to new and different ideologies. According to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995), Culturally Responsive Teaching is “a pedagogy that crosses disciplines and cultures to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity. It accommodates the dynamic mix of race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion, and family that contributes to every student's cultural identity” (p. 1). By welcoming a student’s cultural identity – as well as their gender, class, religion, and family dynamic – students feel comfortable among their peers, and are more willing to take educational risks and learn new and exciting concepts.
Simply put, when the cultural identity of students is celebrated and acknowledged, more learning occurs.

While code-switching seemingly disengages students from their home culture and language, effective code-switching pedagogy incorporates culturally responsive learning opportunities within its beliefs of teaching students to conform to societal language norms. Culture is incredibly essential to one’s literacy acquisition. It plays a large role not only in communicating and obtaining information, but also in influencing the cognitive processes of groups and individuals (Ladson-Billings, 1994). With this knowledge of cultural importance, code-switching instruction needs to be implemented with care, with the awareness of its tendency to strip away one’s home language. In doing so, professional educators can include culturally responsive practices within their daily activities, while also expecting students to conform to various societal norms, whether just or unjust, in terms of language and communicative expectations. Balancing code-switching pedagogy with the culturally responsive teaching theoretical framework, is the ideal formula for diverse student learning.

**Research Question**

How does explicit code-switching instruction impact the writing performance of students who speak African American English, Urban Vernacular English, and other non-Mainstream forms of English?

**Literature Review**

In an effort to facilitate a productive and effective action research study, one must first deeply analyze and synthesize all previous research about the particular topic. Without a thorough understanding of the methods, goals, features, findings, and effective practices of previous studies, one cannot fully craft unique and compelling action research about a similar
topic. What clearly emerged from thorough analysis of the literature surrounding this topic is how there is a large need for additional research on this topic of interest. Scholars such as Craig Godley, and Terry, have completed a breadth of research and analysis into the areas of African American English and dialect shifting, but much more work is needed to better service children with marginalized dialects in urban schools. Knowledge of this need will fuel the desire to examine the concepts surrounding this critical topic, and to find additional understandings through further research.

In this literature review, three themes will emerge as main topics of discussion surrounding marginalized dialects and code-switching. The first theme will contain a discussion of African American English including its many distinct features, the origins of African American English – and its antithesis, Mainstream American English – as well as the societal and academic impact of African American English on those who use it. The second theme will examine the concept of code-switching, particularly its impact on student literacy achievement, as noted by various research studies. The third theme will begin to discuss research on how code-switching and various dialect switching pedagogy and instruction has been implemented in schools across America, and ideal ways to explicitly teach and involve code-switching ideologies in curricula. All three themes combine to provide one with an increased knowledge base of recent academic research involving dialect variation and code-switching, and its use among and continued impact on student speakers of marginalized dialects of English.

**African American English, a Stigmatized Dialect**

Language use in America varies greatly from coast to coast. According to Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998), American English is spoken in an assortment of dialects associated with
various racial and ethnic groups, geographical locations, and income strata. Some of these dialects are labeled African American English, Southern White English, Ebonics, Creole English, Black English, Latino English, White English, Appalachian English, and much more. Linguistically speaking, dialects are characterized by their systematic differences in the various components of language including phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics (Mitri & Terry, 2013). For the purpose of this literature review, the main focus will be on African American English, as well as its direct opposite, Mainstream American English.

The dialect commonly labeled African American English (AAE) will be the focus of this thematic segment. Many professional fields have benefitted from the study of AAE and its users. According to Craig et al. (2014), “a range of practitioners including speech-language pathologists, general education and special education teachers, and school psychologists are benefiting from new understandings of this major cultural-linguistic system” (p. 143). The implications of understanding AAE and its features and tendencies seem important for multiple fields. As identified by Redd and Webb (2005), AAE has been widely accepted and used to identify the dialect of English employed by African Americans, and members of other racial and ethnic groups that share similar socioeconomic contexts and communities. Other members include users of AAE who are not African American, but have assimilated with African Americans and live within the same region or area as many AAE users. It has been estimated by multiple linguists that AAE “is spoken by 80 to 90 percent of African Americans, at least among friends and relatives” (p. 3). Since nearly all African Americans employ AAE as their native dialect, it can be assumed that the home language and primary discourse of African American children is AAE. According to Pearson et al. (2009), the vast majority of African Americans begin formal schooling speaking AAE as their primary dialect. As a teacher of diverse students,
primarily students of color from urban environments, it is incredibly important that one is familiar with AAE and can help celebrate its use among students, rather than treat their home language as a disability. Similarly, Vetter (2013) argues that more than 20 million African Americans in the United States use AAE as their primary dialect variation and “treat (AAE) as a symbol of African American identity” (p. 175). Teachers also tend to view student speakers of AAE in a negative light, judging their intelligence and academic success solely on their type or style of speech. Redd and Webb (2005) state:

Language, like ethnicity and social class, is a status predictor in the classroom, raising or lowering teachers’ expectations and students’ self-esteem. Therefore, what a teacher calls African American students’ speech – and related features in their writing – is of no small significance. (p. 3)

This idea of AAE symbolizing great importance and identity to young minority students will come into play in the third thematic segment of this literature review. Fisher and Lapp (2013) contend “students who do not speak academic English well enough to succeed at school often hold this negative image of themselves as scholars” (p. 635). The importance of understanding the dialect and primary discourse of the majority of students in urban classrooms across the country simply cannot be understated.

Mainstream American English (MAE) – also commonly referred to as Standard American English (SAE), Standard English, privileged dialect, formal English, and academic English – is quite simply the antithesis of AAE and other various non-standard dialects of English. MAE is a collection of socially preferred dialects from various geographic regions of the US and is typically represented in Standard English orthography and used in various formal
social contexts such as in the workplace, at schools, and places of business (Mitri & Terry, 2013). For example, when attending a job interview, one would be expected to use a familiar form of MAE, rather than utilize their specific variation of English, due to (potentially unfair) societal norms about public speech and first impressions. Redd and Webb (2005) characterize MAE similar to Mitri and Terry (2013) by stating “Standard English…is the variety of English privileged in U.S. academic, government, and professional circles as well as the mainstream media” (p. 4). Generally speaking, MAE is the chosen language of the elite, and thus is the expected language of American society as a whole. Redd and Webb (2005) also go on to mention how the term Standard English is quite misleading since there is no true universal standard for speaking English in the United States. Over time, MAE has been created by elite circles, and it is now expected that everyone conform to its use. What is most interesting is how all non-MAE dialects are “just as rule-governed and systematic as MAE,” but they are often “socially stigmatized” (p. 556, Mitri & Terry, 2013). Most non-MAE users find this to be most unsettling. While their language is consistent across its users and rules govern its use, it is still views as wrong and improper across mainstream American society. It has been widely accepted by both educators and linguists that AAE speaking students have more difficulty acquiring literacy skills due to the significant language differences between AAE and MAE (Redd & Webb, 2005; Patton-Terry & Connor, 2010; Fisher & Lapp, 2013), and the expectation that AAE speaking students conform to MAE. For young users of AAE, the struggle to establish language norms and conflicting dialect experiences appear at an early age. Distinct features of AAE can be developed by as early as age four, separating students of color from their MAE speaking peers at a very early age (Pearson et al., 2009). Considering the vast number of students who are speaking AAE, and other stigmatized dialects of MAE, when they begin school, it is seemingly
fair to state that educators cannot afford to ignore AAE speech from students any longer. And what is perhaps most alarming, is the academic achievement of students who speak AAE, and the alarming lack of focus on the literacy instruction of these students.

In order to comprehend the potential impact of AAE on the literacy acquisition of children who use it as their primary choice of discourse, one must first understand what makes AAE a unique and distinct dialect, and specifically what makes it markedly different from MAE. Scholars have documented the many distinct features of AAE, most of which can be seen across multiple studies, and are commonly agreed upon amongst researchers. According to Redd and Webb (2005), “linguists agree that AAE is a distinct and rule-governed variety of speech” (p. 19). Just like MAE, AAE has consistent rules, which its users must abide by in order to effectively use the language in communication with outs. In agreement with Redd and Webb, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) note the basic core of AAE features that cross geographical boundaries, yet also comment on how the “uniqueness of AAE lies in its distinctive combination of features” (p. 174-175). There are so many distinctive features of AAE, even child-produced AAE has numerous features which aid its separation from MAE. Craig et al. (2009) claim “child AAE can be characterized by at least 40 different features that differ systematically from morphological and phonological forms in other varieties of English” (p. 840).

One distinct feature of AAE described by Redd and Webb (2005) is the stressing of the first syllable of a word, instead of the second syllable. An example of this feature of AAE is the common pronunciation of PO-llice, or FOOT-ball. Another common AAE feature outlined by Redd and Webb is the changing of vowel e sounds to sound like i, for instance making pen sound like “pin.” This is an incredibly common feature of AAE, and travels across geographical regions, supporting previous claims of AAE’s rule-governed nature. Both Craig et al. (2003) and
Redd and Webb describe the AAE feature of *ing* dropping and replacing with “n”, in which AAE speakers drop the ending *ing* and instead just pronounce “n”. An example of this feature would be saying “walkin” instead of fully pronouncing “walking”. One final feature of AAE which is described by both Craig et al. and Redd and Webb, is the reducing of words or combining of words, to create a simpler, quicker sentence to pronounce. For example, instead of saying “all right”, AAE speaking individuals will say “aight”. AAE is comprised of numerous grammar features that do not agree with MAE dialectal principles. In regards to AAE grammar rules, Redd and Webb note that “AAE relies less on word endings to convey grammatical information, boasts a more complex verb system, and accesses a wider range of sentence patterns” in comparison to MAE (p. 28). AAE, while negatively stigmatized by many dominant language ideologies across America, can be viewed in many ways as an advantageous dialect. According to Schachter and Craig (2013), “particular AAE features facilitated plot development, and the use of more elaborate features positively predicted higher narrative development scores,” when AAE speaking students were asked to perform a wordless picture book task (p. 227). In their worldless picture book oral narrative study, Schacter and Craig were able to prove that AAE has incredible value for narrative story telling. Also, Schacter and Craig’s study opens an opportunity for compliance with the Culturally Responsive Teaching, by allowing teachers to utilize the advantages of AAE during class plays, performances, reader’s theater, and much more. It is incredibly important to note that both Craig et al. (2003) and Redd and Webb (2005) agree that although AAE is “streamlined”, it retains a highly complex verb system. They also agree that the grammatical features are not errors; they simply conform to an alternate set of rules than MAE. In agreement, Wheeler (2008) states “students using vernacular language are
not making errors, but instead are speaking or writing correctly following the language patterns of their community” (p. 55).

While AAE has been recognized, by scholars and some educators, as a distinct, rule-governed dialect of English, it can be attributed to lack of literacy preparedness and success among its primary users. According to Craig et al. (2003), across the nation, the frequency of reading below basic and normal levels is much greater for African American students than for White students – 63% compared to 27% – which can seemingly be connected to use of AAE as opposed to MAE, which is most commonly employed by, socially privileged, white students. This trend has been observed for quite some time. Connor and Craig (2006) agree with this claim by stating “there is a well-documented and long-standing disparity between the reading levels of African American children and their European American peers” (p. 771). The achievement gap, coined by many scholars, has been present in American education for many years, and linguistic diversity may have a large impact on such disparity. They also continue to state “this Black-White achievement gap is observable across a broad range of measures of school success, including grade point average, enrollments in special education versus gifted programs, suspension rates, high school graduation rates, college enrollments, and so on” (p. 771-772). Many scholars have presented facts and data which have alerted society to the gap between White and Black students, while also pointing out the many factors which could contribute to such disparity. Several factors may contribute to the poor academic achievement of African American students (Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004), but the vast discrepancy between their home and school dialects quite possibly could be the biggest determinate. Black students are not failing due to cognitive inadequacies, instead, as proposed by many scholars, they are failing due to linguistic differences being imposed upon them by society at large. According to
Fisher and Lapp (2013), AAE speaking students are “failing not because of a lack of intelligence or language but because of their lack of understanding and use of the conventions of academic English,” or MAE (p. 634). MAE does not match their native dialect, and AAE speaking students are struggling due to this simple fact. Additionally, research has indicated an inverse relationship between use of AAE features and literacy test scores (Craig et al., 2014). Many other recent research studies have corroborated these claims of lower literacy achievement being obtained by African American students and speakers of AAE. For example, Edwards et al. (2014) found that children with higher levels of AAE dialect density were less accurate on a task which assessed their receptive and expressive vocabulary, as well as their receptive syntax. More important than just this correlation, Edwards et al. created a study to analyze young AAE-speaking children’s understanding and awareness of MAE. In a study of 83 four to eight year old AAE-speaking children, they found that the lower their lexical comprehension and awareness of MAE, the higher the student’s dialect density was. Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that the higher a student’s dialect density, the more difficult it will be for AAE-speaking students to acquire important MAE-related literacy skills. In addition to Edwards et al. and Craig et al., Apel and Thomas-Tate (2009) found that African American students scored lower than their Caucasian counterparts on morphological awareness tasks, by administering two morphological awareness tasks, and completed measures of word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, phonemic awareness, and receptive vocabulary. Their study shows how AAE affects multiple aspects of literacy performance. In general, Apel and Thomas-Tate were able to claim “African American children are at risk for poor literacy outcomes” (p. 312), by assessing 30 AAE-speaking African American children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Similar studies have been produced, exploring the spelling performance of students who speak AAE. When
examining the orthographic performance of second grade students, Patton-Terry and Connor (2010) discovered that students who spoke AAE were significantly less accurate at spelling word parts specific to both AAE and MAE. They also found that African American students made far more AAE errors in their spelling than their Caucasian peers, and specifically accredited the increase in error to their use of AAE and the differences between dialect-sensitive AAE words/phonemes, and dialect-sensitive MAE words/phonemes. Implications for this trend in spelling errors go beyond just second grade students and their ability to spell and write MAE in an academic setting. As AAE speaking students grow older, their errors continue to affect their writing. A study by Johnson and VanBrackle (2012) uncovers a disconcerting truth about African American student writers and their AAE features being viewed as errors. With increased pressure on students to perform on state tests and to display their literacy knowledge through writing tasks, AAE features displayed in student writing may have a more direct impact on performance than ever before. According to Johnson and VanBrackle:

AAE features that appear frequently in writing: verbal –s absence (He walk to school every day), plural –s absence (They walk down the street with the radio in their hand), consonant cluster simplification (He miss the bus yesterday), and is and are absence (She so calm). (p. 37)

These features of AAE, which are commonly committed in African American student writing, are considered errors when assessment raters use holistic grading rubrics, in the case of Johnson and VanBrackle’s (2012) study. While many believe they are not errors and are instead just features of their native dialect showing up in their academic writing, teachers and exam raters who are not culturally responsive see AAE features in writing as errors. What is most concerning, is they found that educators generally have biases against errors that contain AAE
features, and that most raters view AAE features in writing as “carelessness” and that raters are “annoyed by them” (p. 46). The notion of AAE features in writing being errors, can carry over to oral reading accuracy ratings, and beyond that can potentially become special education placements and services. This concept of AAE variation bias feeds into the notion established by Fisher and Lapp (2013), and many other educational leaders across America, that African American students’ personal image of deficit stems from a lifetime of viewing their culture and language as negative, as a result of experiencing unfair biases and treatment their whole academic careers. It has also been suggested that AAE has been denigrated and has been used in ELA classrooms as a model for what not to do, and without conscious thought, some educators harbor stereotypes about AAE language and culture which directly affects their rating and scoring of written (and spoken) literacy assessments (Johnson & VanBrackle, 2012). It is this notion unconsciously carried by educators across America that fuels the feeling of deficit and inadequacy in AAE-speaking children’s educational identity. On the other hand, Johnson and VanBrackle also suggest that some educators may be actively trying to prepare their students for life in the “real-world” in which use of MAE is required, and AAE use will be less tolerated by potential employers and audiences. While it may seem unjust to disengage students from their native dialect and enact conformity to a language style which is not their own, there is no other way to prepare diverse students for today’s society. Hill (2009) suggests code switching pedagogy as a means to improving AAE students’ academic writing performance for the purpose of assessments and other future professional endeavors. In her study of Mr. Lehrer’s seventh grade classroom, she was able to confirm that by explicitly establishing distinctions between home and school literacies in the ELA classroom, students can begin to use their primary discourse to complete informal and personal writing tasks which accurately reflect a student’s
tone, language, and culture, while also gaining the ability to utilize appropriate school literacies to create formal writing pieces including assessment writing, critical literacy praxis, both fiction and non-fiction writing, as well as formal letters and emails.

Children who speak AAE have been proven, even at a very young age, to be commencing the process of code-switching as a natural way to combat the difficult nature of learning to read MAE, while learning to communicate with a stigmatized dialect as their primary choice of discourse. Connor and Craig (2006) proved AAE-speaking children’s ability to naturally dialect shift at an early age to be true with their study of 63 African American preschool students. By assessing their vocabulary, language, and emergent literacy skills in both the fall and spring during a single school year, Connor and Craig were able to claim that African American speakers of AAE were able to employ systematically different uses of AAE across various contexts during assessment. This notion of early-age dialect switching shows the potential of AAE users to implement pragmatic and metalinguistic awareness during various contexts of language use. As confirmed by Terry et al. (2010), dialect switching provides an incredibly complex cognitive load for AAE speaking students, and “mismatches between home and school dialects” (p. 2470) have the potential to negatively impact the literacy acquisition of young AAE speaking students. Without proper support and involvement from their teachers, students who use AAE as their primary means of language will continue to find traditional academic literacy tasks difficult, confusing, troublesome, and culturally unidentifiable.

The alarming proof that AAE speaking students are seemingly at a natural disadvantage, due to societal language and dialect norms, makes it easy to argue for the promotion and inclusion of AAE dialect awareness among professional educators. Fisher and Lapp (2013) contend how educators need to “understand the discontinuity (AAE speakers) experience
between their home and school languages” (p. 634). It is clear that the Black-White achievement gap, in terms of various literacy achievement areas and other forms of measured school success, is incredibly prevalent in schools across America. Craig et al. (2009) agree, stating “unfortunately, national averages for African American students reveal chronic academic underachievement compared with their mainstream peers” (p. 839). When national averages show such disparity between the performance of White and Black students, change is more than necessary. To emphasize the importance of academia’s need to focus on reducing and eliminating the Black-White achievement gap, Connor and Craig (2006) stated, “reducing the achievement gap would do more to reduce racial inequality than any other single strategy” (p. 772).

**Code-Switching and its Impact on Student Literacy Achievement**

Code-switching – also commonly referred to as dialect switching, dialect adapting, and style shifting – has recently received much scholarly attention inside and outside of school and communities across America. Research has recently proven the effectiveness of code-switching in positively impacting the literacy development and achievement of students who speak African American English and other marginalized and non-standard variants of English (Craig et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2009; Terry et al., 2010). Dialect shifting has become a very popular topic among teachers of linguistically diverse students. This act of dialect adapting, or code switching, has been proven to provide African American students and other AAE speaking students with an advantage, in terms of classroom learning in general, as well as the acquisition of vital literacy skills, over their peers who do not make this important adaptation (Craig et al., 2009). Dialect shifting provides an advantage that diverse students cannot overlook. Craig et al. (2014), attributes the academic and literacy failures of AAE speaking students not to the dialect of AAE
itself, but to one’s failure to use MAE for schooling literacy purposes. This thematic segment of the literature review will analyze studies which have proven the effectiveness of code-switching for AAE speaking students of various ages, and discuss code-switching specifically in its relation to academic and nonacademic digital literacy practices.

There is one hypothesis which seemingly drives most scholarly research about code-switching, whether it is explicitly stated or not, and that is the dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis (Craig et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2014). The dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis has driven most research about code-switching since its inception. This hypothesis has proposed that “AAE speaking students who learn to use (MAE) in literacy tasks will outperform their peers who do not make this linguistic adaptation” (p. 839, Craig et al., 2009). Craig has been the lead researcher in the use of this hypothesis. Three research studies have successfully proven this hypothesis to be true through their evaluations of AAE speaking children and their dialect shifting (Craig et al., 2009; Craig et al. 2014; Terry et al., 2010).

Past research has reported that greater production of AAE forms, and greater density of AAE dialect features, during various discourse contexts is related to measures of letter-word recognition, decoding, reading comprehension skills, accuracy and reading rates, state and national reading assessments, phonological awareness, spelling, and oral speech production accuracy among AAE speaking children (Connor & Craig, 2006; Craig et al., 2003; Patton-Terry & Connor, 2010; Terry et al., 2010). This knowledge of AAE feature production and dialect density has informed the research of many, in the field of dialect shifting. In Terry et al.’s (2010) study, a negative linear relationship was found for the phonological awareness of AAE speaking students shifting from AAE to MAE. As their dialect variation (DVAR) rates increased, the phonological awareness scores of the participants decreased. DVAR was assessed by analyzing
student responses to questions about pictures for MAE and non-MAE features. The process allowed Terry et al. to classify students as “speaking with strong, some, or no variation from MAE” (p. 131). Initial student tendency to use AAE features was evaluated prior to the assessment, thus causing the ability to assess their DVAR during the diagnostic evaluation. Craig et al. (2009) evaluated “the contribution made by dialect shifting to reading achievement test scores of AAE speaking students” (p. 839). The results of this study were incredibly valuable to the dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis. Similar to Terry et al. (2010), Craig et al. (2009) was able to assess dialect shifting away from AAE toward MAE by comparing AAE production rates during oral and written narratives. Students with less evidence of dialect shifting produced lower reading achievement scores.

Craig et al. (2009) state that their findings fully support their dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis; students who were able to effectively code-switch, produced better results on their literacy tasks, in comparison to their AAE speaking peers who did not effectively complete the shift in dialect style. This study was one of the first which proved the effectiveness of code-switching out right. In a more recent study, Craig et al. (2014) were able to support the dialect shifting–reading hypothesis, in a much more comprehensive study. By building upon their previous studies, they were able to provide more data and results to support the dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis. Craig et al. evaluated a style shifting coefficient (SSC), three times a year for three years. The participants in the study were AAE speaking kindergarten students who enrolled in the program at the beginning of kindergarten, and committed to the three year research plan. Over the course of three years, student use of AAE and MAE as well as their shift in dialect across multiple contexts was measured using the SSC. Craig et al. was able to conclude that both metalinguistic skills and reading achievement could be predicted using the
SSC, and confirmation of the dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis was achieved due to the reading achievement scores of the AAE speaking students with high SSCs. Implications for these results are massive. Not only do the studies of Terry et al (2010), Craig et al. (2009), and Craig et al. (2014) confirm the effectiveness of code-switching for students who employ AAE as their primary dialect and choice of language, but it also sheds light on the topic of metacognition and the impact of metalinguistic tendencies of students in need of dialect shifting.

As technology becomes increasingly more common among literacy and academic practices, the need to understand code-switching from a digital literacy perspective becomes furthermore important. According to Amicucci (2014), “the writing and language use students exercise in digital contexts differs from the academic writing they are expected to produce in school” (p. 483). This concept applies directly to student use of AAE and expected use of MAE in academic contexts. In both contexts, code-switching can be utilized to mitigate the transition between language and dialect forms. Amicucci also comments that engaging students in digital literacies practice in academic contexts can provide students “with contexts for situated writing practice and opportunities to exercise and recognize code-switching abilities” and opportunities (p. 483). Amicucci’s notion of utilizing home languages and digital literacies, aligns with the Culturally Responsive Teaching theoretical framework. Resembling Amicucci, Halim and Maros (2013) found that code-switching is already being effectively employed by Malay-English bilingual Facebook users, in an effort to improve their interactions online with others, in asynchronous computer-mediated communications. Halim and Maros found that Facebook has helped to create a “new type of code-switching” context, and that “code-switching does not only take place in verbal communications, but also in written (and online) interaction” (p. 127). Bidialectal, and bilingual, students have to code-switch in their online interactions, which can
help build style shifting abilities, thus making it easier to implement dialect shifting skills in the classroom. In their study, Halim and Maros were able to determine that five Malay-English bilingual users were able to effective utilize code-switching in their Facebook posts by analyzing the responses received by others, and the quality and purpose of the posts themselves. These skills apply directly to oral and written code-switching practices in more academic settings. They were able to determine that the five bilingual Facebook users were able to effectively code-switch to serve purposes of “quotation, specification, reiteration, message qualification, clarification, emphasis, checking, indicating emotions, availability, principle of economy, and free-switching functions” (p. 126). All of these code-switching purposes found by Halim and Maros connect directly to AAE speakers and their need/use of dialect shifting to match societal norms of MAE use.

As this thematic segment is brought to a close, it is now not a matter of if code-switching is an effective way to bridge the gap between AAE and MAE, or why code-switching is an effective way of helping African American students, and other speakers of AAE, furthermore acquire academic language and literacy skills. After analysis and discussion of much scholarly work on the topics of AAE and dialect shifting, it is now the question of how to effectively implement code-switching instruction and pedagogy in urban schools that matters most. According to Godley and Minnici (2008), it is a matter of “helping students gain access to standard dialects at the same time they gain the tools needed to critique the power structures that undergird them” (p. 319-320). Unjust societal norms drive the need for dialect shifting. What drives this research most, is the need to close and eliminate the Black-White achievement gap (Connor & Craig, 2006), and while methods of including code-switching instruction in the classroom and within professional development sessions can seem complex, it is becoming
increasingly more accessible to educators as scholarly research and practitioners continue to develop more concepts and methods.

**Effective Implementation of Code-Switching Instruction and Pedagogy**

Due to the rise in the desire of professional educators and teacher-educators to learn more about dialect shifting, and the effect code-switching has on student achievement, many studies have been completed in an effort to identify the most effective ways to promote and teach style switching amongst student speakers of African American English. Not only is it logical to explicitly teach students all about code-switching in a variety of research-based methods, but the education of teachers on dialect switching is incredibly important as well.

Research has proven the effectiveness of many different methods for improving student dialect variance across various contexts. Some scholars recommend explicit language instruction through the facilitation of contrastive analysis and other similar methods (Fisher & Lapp, 2013; Godley et al., 2006; Wheeler, 2008; Wheeler, 2010), while others promote a more broad approach by utilizing critical language pedagogy and other related tactics as a means of promoting style shifting in a more natural and easily-acquired approach (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013). To some, it might seem logical to approach code-switching instruction by infusing the two methodologies. Nonetheless, an analysis of both means is necessary to understand past effective practices and to design optimal research.

Critical language pedagogy is defined by Godley and Minnici (2008) as “instruction approaches that guide students to critical examinations of the ideologies surrounding language and dialects, the power relations such ideologies uphold, and ways to change these ideologies” p. 320). The goal of critical language pedagogy is to help students improve their understanding of
the grammatical patterns of privileged dialects, MAE, at the same time that they explore why those dialects hold their societal power. Hill (2009) believes in the importance of tapping into students’ cultural and linguistic resources and utilizing culturally relevant teaching, in an effort to teach students how to style shift. Culturally Responsive Teaching has a large role to play in code-switching instruction. Hill contends that a large part of code-switching and critical language pedagogy is requiring that “teachers make a transition from the paradigm of correction to helping students use language patterns for appropriate settings” (p. 121). In order to make this switch from correction to promotion, teachers must be aware of AAE features and exemplify the core beliefs of critical language pedagogy. Some of the core ideologies of critical language pedagogy include developing an understanding of, and respect for, diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects (Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009); critiquing dominant language ideologies (Godley & Minnici, 2008); basing curriculum and practices on students’ cultures and backgrounds (Vetter, 2013); and analyzing student past experiences with language variation and experiences with dialect adapting (Godley & Escher, 2012). By building a solid knowledge base of dialect and language variation, and appreciating the culture and language identity of students through curricula, one can begin to build the capacity for code-switching in their students.

Hill (2009) suggests code switching pedagogy as a means to improving AAE students’ academic writing performance for the purpose of assessments and other future professional endeavors. In her study of Mr. Lehrer’s seventh grade classroom, she was able to confirm that by explicitly establishing distinctions between home and school literacies in the ELA classroom, students can begin to use their primary discourse to complete informal and personal writing tasks which accurately reflect a student’s tone, language, and culture, while also gaining the ability to utilize appropriate school literacies to create formal writing pieces including assessment writing,
critical literacy praxis, both fiction and non-fiction writing, as well as formal letters and emails. Hill believes that explicit grammar instruction has yielded minimal results in the past, but cites evidence in her study to suggest the use of triangulation, in which students compare “home language features with academic and professional English” in various ways including sentence framing and juxtaposing grammatical differences side-by-side (p. 121). Students in Hill’s study were able to display their personal tone and convey their cultural identity through poetry writing and use of a personal writer’s notebook, while maintaining the ability to write formally on essays and papers. While students play a large role in dialect shifting and the effectiveness of Culturally Responsive Teaching, the actions of teachers are incredible important as well. Vetter’s (2013) study examined how a white teacher responded to AAE speech of African American students in her classroom and discussed her implementation of various ideologies consistent with critical language pedagogy. Although the participating teacher was not fluent in AAE, she was able to leverage her knowledge and awareness of the dialect in multiple ways which positively benefitted the code-switching abilities of her students, including “opening opportunities for students to use AAE in ways that contributed to the community, not dismissing or ridiculing the use of AAE, and maintaining a classroom of respect when AAE was used in ways that disrespected the community” (p. 173). By creating this unique and critical environment in her classroom, the participating teacher was able to position students as participants of a language community and began to develop effective style shifting skills in her students. In Godley and Escher’s (2012) study, it was observed that by generating a nonthreatening environment and implementing dialect awareness curriculum, both principles of critical language pedagogy, professional instructors can begin to encourage conversations about the personal, interpersonal, and political nature of language choices. Enacting this climate around dialect variation and
language choice, can seamlessly allow the entrance of critical language pedagogy and code-switching discussions into both elementary and adolescent classrooms. Godley and Escher also suggest, as a result of their study, that teachers alter English Language Arts (ELA) curricula to include substantial opportunities for teachers and students to hear each other’s perspectives on language, specifically dialect choices, and to discuss points of convergence and divergence. Their study included the facilitation of a dialect and language variation unit of study for three high school English classes. They collected data from student responses before and after the unit, to determine student beliefs surrounding spoken language expectations in English classrooms and informal discourse settings. The goal was to begin to promote dialect shifting and the effective use of language within differing contexts, for students who spoke AAE and had expressed resistance to switching to forms of MAE throughout literacy tasks during their English courses in the past. While some African American students found the use of MAE to be inappropriate in social and home settings, they began to see its use in appropriate contexts to be necessary and (almost) required for complete social adaptation in modern America. This understanding of being capable of code-switching can lead to better results in school, and therefore better educational and professional opportunities as they grow into adults. While views that critical language pedagogy and other closely related methods have lead the discussion on developing code-switching skills among students of all ages (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013), there are other, more explicit, means to providing AAE speaking students with instruction on dialect shifting.

Fisher and Lapp (2013) argue their support of dialect shifting skills by emphasizing the importance of state and national exams, and the power they have over the futures of students. Pressures to perform on these exams have increased the need for dialect shifting, and have
opened the door to emphasizing and teaching code-switching in diverse classrooms. They describe “the discontinuity (AAE speakers) experience between their home and school languages” (p. 639) as the reason why many African American students fail to match the literacy achievement scores of their other, MAE speaking peers. Most importantly, standardized test scores is what drives their research for dialect shifting instructional techniques. In their study, they utilized a contrastive analysis approach, something that is traditionally used to teach foreign languages. Their version of contrastive analysis involved comparing the phonological and syntactic features of their home registers with those of MAE. By integrating contrastive analysis instruction into the already established ELA curriculum, they were able to assist high school students in developing dialect switching capacity through teacher modeling, structured group work, and independent studies. Their results found that their contrastive analysis instruction successfully builds upon home literacy practices and language, while offering “a view to students that language is needed for every encounter of their lives,” and that “school and work are just two of these encounters” (p. 637). Students self-reflected as being newly discovered proponents of code-switching, and began showing natural dialect shifting behaviors in various contexts throughout their high school endeavors. Wheeler (2008) crafted a very comparable study using contrastive analysis and other similar methods of language juxtaposition and comparison. The goal of their contrastive analysis instruction was to build on the students’ existing grammar knowledge, by juxtaposing patterns of MAE with their non-MAE dialect and exploring the differences through guided practice and group discussion, similar to Fisher and Lapp (2013). A secondary goal was to promote the use of metacognition, as it plays a large role in code-switching decisions. Students were constructing the ability and awareness to “actively code-switch – to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative
purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language style for that setting” (p. 57, Wheeler, 2008), while building cognitive flexibility. The results of their study were fascinating. In an urban elementary classroom, students experienced a 30-point gap in literacy-related standardized test scores between African American and White 3rd grade students, before implementing Wheeler’s contrastive analysis instruction. After implementation, the same class of students was able to successfully close the achievement gap, and found very similar results between African American and White students on a literacy-related standardized test. Wheeler argues that her study provides an example for how to “positively transform the teaching and learning of language arts in dialectally diverse classrooms” (p. 57). The blueprint provided by Wheeler can be utilized by all teachers, of all grade levels and ages. Fisher and Lapp (2013) agree that contrastive analysis seems to have a significant role to play in students’ development of MAE proficiency, and dialect shifting.

As many believe, teachers have the most direct influence on student achievement. That is why Wheeler (2010) and Godley et al. (2006) believe teachers must be prepared to teach dialectally diverse classrooms and have the ability to foster linguistic habits of mind within their students. Simply put, it is the responsibility of urban classroom teachers to help student speakers of AAE build dialect shifting abilities as they begin to acquire language and throughout their entire academic careers. Wheeler (2010) suggests that dominant language ideology blinds teachers. Dominant language ideology includes the belief that MAE is the only dialect allowed for use in the classroom, and that AAE and other stigmatized dialects are wrong or improper (Dominant language ideology also includes the notion that English is the only acceptable language in America, and Spanish language learners, and others, need to conform to our use of English). Educators who are unaware of the linguistic value and status of AAE are blind to the
fact that AAE holds significant value to African American students, and as a result teachers “cannot anchor pedagogy in what students know; the teacher cannot help but engage in an ill-directed intervention” (p. 958). Anchoring instruction and pedagogy in what students know is a part of Culturally Responsive Teaching, and including code-switching in curricular decisions can become a part of what students know; it can become a part of how they communicate and succeed in our (unjust) society. This ill-directed intervention has been documented in multiple studies as incredibly detrimental to AAE speaking students and their literacy progress as a whole (Godley et al., 2006; Godley & Escher, 2012; Hill, 2009; Wheeler, 2010). Teachers should not interrupt “a student during oral reading to correct ‘missing’ word endings or ‘improper’ grammar” (p. 30, Godley et al., 2006). Nor should they insist on only using MAE in the classroom. Instead, teachers should receive professional development which instructs them how to “challenge existing beliefs about dialect diversity and to provide literacy instruction that meets the needs of students who speak stigmatized dialects” (p. 30). By using these principles and other elements of Culturally Responsive Teaching, linguistically diverse students can finally begin to receive fair and just access to education and opportunities beyond their academic careers. Godley et al. suggests teacher education as the most important method for developing more appropriate responses to dialect diversity, because the dominant pedagogical responses to marginalized dialects, particularly AAE, are substantially damaging and counterproductive to the literacy development of students. In agreement with Johnson and VanBrackle (2012), Godley et al. (2006) believe that teachers are more likely to give lower evaluations to work presented orally by African American students, and that White teachers negatively evaluate the “intelligence, social characteristics, and academic potential of children who speak in a recognizably African American style” (p. 31). It is not acceptable for teachers to allow this to happen any longer.
While Godley et al. suggest that it can be difficult to gain the political, public, and institutional support that is essential to effective programs of professional development, Wheeler (2010) believes approaching individual teachers with simple techniques and methods, such as various contrastive analysis lessons and units as previously mentioned, can be extremely beneficial to altering dominant language ideology and commencing programs which start to build effective code-switching instruction. Wheeler created the core graphic organizer, the code-switching chart, and simple ways to increase the specificity of grammatical explanations, all of which take steps towards individual teachers “building a linguistically informed language arts classroom” (p. 954). Once teachers begin to see results in their classrooms, the potential for large-scale professional development can grow dramatically, and once professional development sessions with pre-service and in-service teachers about dialect variation and code-switching becomes the norm, true change can then arise.

**Conclusion**

The study of English language variation in the United States has been a recent topic of interest within the fields of linguistics, psychology, education, and more. More recently, the use of African American English (AAE) and its impact on the literacy acquisition of students throughout America has become an incredibly intriguing and significant area of study for linguists and educators alike. African American students across the country are becoming increasingly more aware of the difference between their home language and the variation of language they are being asked to produce throughout their academic experiences. Students are being asked to make dialect adaptations quite early in their literacy development, according to Craig, et al. (2014), sometimes without instructors building a foundation and understanding for why and how this adaptation may be needed. While it is important to provide the foundations for
effective code-switching habits, some children learn how to dialect shift at an early age, and provide educators with an opportunity to build on various skills and processes. Students who speak a nonstandard dialect of MAE have been proven to demonstrate a gradual shift in dialect use to reflect the language of the majority culture, and this natural shift can begin by the time children read seven or eight years old (Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). It has been argued by many educational leaders and through scholarly research that actively promoting code-switching in urban classrooms can help improve AAE-speaking children’s literacy development and acquisition. Thompson, Craig, and Washington (2004) claim African American children who communicate effectively in both MAE and AAE will likely find themselves better able to match the language demands of the classroom.

Code switching and explicit language variation instruction seemingly have a positive impact on the lives of children who employ AAE as their primary discourse and choice of communication. While some scholars maintain their stance on code-switching pedagogy and its influence on the literacy development of African American students, others have provided evidence against the use of style shifting. In the United States today, teachers need to understand not only what AAE is, but also what role it may play in students’ mastery and acquisition of MAE principles and bi-dialectal literacy (Redd & Webb, 2005; Terry et al., 2010). Many current professional educators have recently begun to subscribe to a progressive theory known as critical language pedagogy, and believe in its potential ability to change the literacy education of AAE-speaking children. Critical language pedagogy is a critical literacy concept that is employed using a language variation lens, and presented to students as an opportunity to create and be a part of incredible social change. Critical language pedagogy, while similar to many proposed units of study implemented with the intention of developing code-switching skills and
awareness, is different than traditional methods of language variation instruction due to its social justice nature, and call to students to personally enact change through their use of varied language techniques and beliefs. Perhaps critical language pedagogy can be utilized in an effort to build AAE and MAE awareness and assuage the literacy development of AAE-speaking children, while simultaneously improving AAE student writing and spelling throughout the process. The bottom line is unpretentious; the literacy education of AAE-speaking African American students needs to improve if we are to close the achievement gap between white and black students in America. Without changing instructional methods and attempting to implement new ideas and pedagogies surrounding language variation and its purpose within literacy education, unfortunately the improvement of literacy education for AAE-speaking children across the United States will not ensue, something that our nation cannot currently afford to experience.

Method

Context

The research conducted for this study took place at James Prep Middle School, a charter school in Upstate, New York. 12 students form varying ethnic backgrounds were selected at random, from a sixth grade class of 32 students. These 12 students were active participants in the study. In addition to the 12 students, 12 teachers participated in a focus group discussion, and were asked to complete a questionnaire. Three of the twelve total teacher participants were also asked to complete an interview, which was audio recorded. Selection of these teachers was based on the content area they teach as well as availability for the meeting time. The availability and willingness of the teachers at James Prep dictated who was ultimately selected to participate in the focus group. The goal was to provide an ideally diverse group of teachers for the focus
group; diverse meaning ethnic background, gender, religion, class, region one grew up in, race, and even political ideology. According to the New York State Report Card (2013-2014), James Prep Middle School has a student population total of 337, with 162 male and 175 female, and 83% considered economically disadvantaged, although 100% of the student population receives free breakfast and lunch. At James Prep, 92% of the students are Black or African American, 6% are Hispanic or Latino, and 2% are White. The research for this study was conducted in the school’s resource room, a central location used for special education pull-out groups, reading intervention groups, behavioral crisis situations, and various tutoring arrangements. This location was selected to mirror the regular, authentic tutoring process for most students at James Prep. Since this space is also used primarily for smaller group purposes, it was ideal for the tutoring sessions. It was also selected as the primary location for this research study because it was available during the desired time block and it could easily house the total number of participants.

Participants

The student participants in this study were 12 middle school-aged students who are in sixth grade at James Prep, none of which receive special education services or have an individualized education plan (IEP). It was decided to exclude students with IEPs from this study due to additional language barriers for students with various disabilities, including English Language Learning students. Eliminating this potential outlying variable, potentially, produced more reliable and valid results about code-switching. There was not an even split of male and female students; the participant group included 11 females and 1 male student. Since it is a societal norm that all students speak a particular dialect or variant of English, or non-MAE style, the degree to which the students spoke AAE or other non-MAE forms was not assessed prior to
the participant group being formed, and did not qualify or disqualify a student from being a participant in this study.

The teacher participants included in the focus discussion group had differing ethnicities, varying teaching experience levels, and are different ages. The group was quite diverse. The purpose of varying these factors is to ensure diversity and varied perspectives; to promote the quality of the focus group discussion. There were 9 females and 3 males.

Shanydra is an African American female, Math teacher at James Prep. She has taught 7th grade math at James Prep for two years, and grew up in a relatively large urban area in Central, New York.

Christina is a Caucasian female, History teacher at James Prep. She has taught 5th grade history at James Prep for 4 years, and grew up in a substantially wealthy suburb in Upstate, New York. She has a history undergraduate degree, and holds a master’s degree in Literacy. She was selected to complete an interview as well.

Claire is a Caucasian female, ELA teacher at James Prep, and has been teaching ELA in urban school settings for 5 years. She has been at James Prep for 3 years, and now teaches 8th grade ELA. She grew up in a rural region of New York. Currently, Claire is seeking her master’s in Literacy and has been doing research and curriculum building for code-switching pedagogy.

Shaniqua, is an African American female, Math teacher at James Prep, and is currently experiencing her first year teaching. She worked with minority students as part of her undergraduate education and her passion for closing the achievement gap drew her to work at James Prep.
Caitlin, is a Caucasian female, art teacher at James Prep, and is currently experiencing her first year teaching in America. She has experience teaching overseas, in Africa, and has a strong passion for social justice and urban students. She was selected to complete an interview as well.

Diane, is an Asian American female, ELA teacher at James Prep, and has taught ELA at James Prep for three years. She completed coursework during her undergraduate education at James Prep, and servicing minority children became a strong passion for her.

Erica, is a Caucasian female, ELA teacher at James Prep, and has taught ELA at James Prep for two years. Before James Prep, she taught History at a suburban middle school. Her passion for serving students of color extends beyond Upstate, New York, as she too spent time overseas teaching English to foreign students.

Tammy, is an African American, principal at James Prep, and has been with James Prep since 2009. She served as an ELA teacher for years, as well as an instructional coach for other new teachers. She is currently seeking a degree in Educational Leadership, and has vast knowledge of AAE and other non-MAE forms of English. As principal of James Prep, she played a large role in the approval of this study, and was incredibly supportive of the action research.

Sandra, is Hispanic American, and is the director of special projects for James Prep. She grew up in a burrow of New York City, and taught in charter schools there for nearly 10 years. Her experience with children of color is vast, and her stances on social justice issues are well known to James Prep staff, as she is often seen or heard advocating for the rights of others. She also expressed direct interest in participating in the focus group, due to her passion for code-
switching and the unjust nature of linguistic conformity that society places upon stigmatized groups.

Jamere, is an African American 7th grade science teacher at James Prep. This year is his first year teaching. He grew up in an urban region in Georgia, and worked with children of color throughout his undergraduate studies. Although Jamere admitted his knowledge of code-switching was limited, he was willing to participate in the focus group in an effort to learn more about the topic.

Thomas, is a Caucasian science teacher at James Prep. He has taught 5th grade science at James Prep for the last four years. He grew up in an urban region in Massachusetts, and experienced poverty nearly his entire childhood. He attended primarily African American schools due to his urban residence, and grew a passion for working with students of color as he taught at charter schools in both Massachusetts and New Mexico, before relocating to Upstate, New York. He was selected to complete an interview in addition to the focus group discussion.

Brian, is a Caucasian ELA teacher at James Prep. He is in his first year at James Prep, but before that taught for two years as a substitute teacher in wealthy suburban schools in Upstate, New York. As a result of acquiring his teaching job at James prep, Brian has found a new passion for teaching students of color.

**Researcher Stance**

Currently, I am a graduate student at St. John Fisher College, seeking a Master’s degree in Literacy Education, birth through grade 12. I am currently certified in New York State for both Childhood and Special Education, for grades 1 through 6. I also hold early childhood certifications, for both general and special education, birth through grade 2. For this study, I was
an active participant observer (Mills, 2014). I was a full participant in the study by facilitating the sessions, while also maintaining active, structured observation through various experiencing data collection techniques. To the students in the tutoring sessions, it seemed as if normal teaching was occurring. When in reality, I was facilitating the lessons while recording valuable experiencing data.

**Method**

Three tutoring sessions were facilitated over the course of 6 days. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each session was given a specific purpose. All three of these sessions were facilitated in a whole group setting (12 students total), although each of the instructional tutoring sessions may include elements of small group discussion and independent tasks.

The explicit code-switching instruction, each session, was broken down into three succinct parts. Appendix A shows the short-range schedule for the entire plan of tutoring. First, students were taught basic principles of dialect variance, and what it means to have an accent and speak a non-MAE dialect. Second, students were given the opportunity to be immersed in a contrastive analysis lesson, where AAE is directly compared to MAE and students got practice in identifying non-MAE statements alongside Standard English (see Appendix B for the lesson plan/mark-up). Third, students learned the practicality of dialect shifting through lecture and discussion, and had the opportunity to practice their code-switching abilities in simulated college/job interviews with their peers. Two of these code-switching practice sessions were held on a different day than the whole group activity, and were audio recorded separately. The purpose of recording these sessions was to analyze the sessions for oral code-switching ability, as well as ask the students questions about their comfortability with the oral code-switching
process. Throughout all phases of instruction, there were multiple student work samples collected including Do Now warm-up tasks, note sheets, exit ticket questions, writing response assessments, and reflection responses (see Appendix C for examples of student work samples).

Throughout the tutoring sessions, I took anecdotal notes in observation of students who are responding well to the explicit instruction, and how they are reacting to the instruction. I jotted down various quotes and exclamations that were said by students during small and whole group discussion, and well as one on one teacher-student interactions. I was able to observe their personal comfort with the content in an effort to better understand the effects of code-switching instruction on students. Also observed were moments where instruction seemed to “click,” or moments of high student engagement.

The teacher focus group was held once, for 20 minutes, see Appendix D for the discussion questions which fueled the focus group. These questions were utilized to move the group from one topic to another swiftly and seamlessly. During the focus group, I acted as the facilitator and leader of the discussion. The focus group was held after school, and was set up in a round table format in an effort to maximize teacher engagement and participation. Teachers were placed in chairs in a circular formation, in the resource room at James Prep. The teachers completed a brief questionnaire at the end of the focus group to assess their beliefs of AAE and dialect shifting formally after the formal discussion.

Three separate, one-on-one, teacher interviews were completed and audio recorded in an effort to supplement data gathered from the teacher focus group and the teacher questionnaire. These were approximately 10 minutes in length and conducted after school in the James Prep resource room.
Quality and Credibility of Research

Credibility in qualitative research means a “researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (Mills, 2014, p. 115). To ensure credibility throughout this study there were three strategies which were employed throughout the entire duration of the research. First, triangulation occurred as experiencing, enquiring, and examination data was collected in various ways. Second, multiple raw data items were collected in this study including student work samples, assessment responses, and other documents. Third, member checks were completed to test the complete report with the study’s participants before allocating it in final form.

Transferability is another important aspect in acquiring validity of qualitative research. According to Mills (2014), transferability refers to everything being context bound, and how research should not have the goal of being generalized to larger groups of people. Mills also comments that “truth statements” should be avoided, and “context-relevant statements should be developed (p. 116). In an effort to ensure transferability, this study collected detailed descriptive data as well as included detailed descriptions of the context. In doing so, this study was eligible to relevant comparisons to similar contexts and situations.

According to Mills (2014), dependability is extremely important as it pertains to the stability of the data collected and analyzed within a study. Dependability is essential to ensuring the validity of qualitative research. This research study ensured dependability by overlapping methods and creating an audit trail. Overlapping methods was relatively easy as all of the data being collected was directly related as they all pertain to code-switching and students’ beliefs of code-switching. Establishing an audit trail was simple as well; by describing each process in
detail and providing access to all artifacts and documents, even months or years after the research is complete.

In order to maintain the validity of qualitative research, one must also take into account confirmability. Confirmability refers to “the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (Mills, 2014, p. 116). In an effort to remain objective, this study practiced reflexivity, a means of intentionally revealing biases and underlying beliefs which may otherwise harm the process of the research. To ensure confirmability, a personal journal was kept throughout the research process, and I reflected in the journal as the study progresses, and recorded all thoughts, musings, and questions that naturally arose.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

For the student participants in the study, both parental permission and student assent were obtained in order for them to become participants in the study. Both children and parents were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the study, and the overall purpose of the study. For the adult participants in the study, consent forms were obtained in order for them to participate in the study. Just like the children, the adult participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the study, as well as the overall purpose of the study. No person was able to participate in the study without the correct permission and consent (or assent).

Initially, all 32 students in a sixth grade homeroom were informed about the study and were asked whether they would like to participate in the study or not. Those who agreed to participate were given parental permission forms to take home and bring back to school within the next two days. After a two day waiting period, the group of participant students was
finalized, according to who turned in the forms on time, and these students were given assent forms before the first tutoring session commenced.

For the teacher focus group, teachers were invited to attend the discussion, and were asked to review and sign consent forms before we began the discussion. These forms included permission to document their beliefs and ideas in the study (with pseudonyms). Teachers who participated in the one-on-one interviews were asked to sign consent forms which specifically requested permission to be audio recorded.

Throughout this study, all marks identifying names of participants were removed from the artifacts collected for analysis. Any student or teacher names referred to in the analysis or discussion sections of the study are pseudonyms, used for the purpose of discussion only.

Data Collection

For the purpose of triangulation and ensuring credibility and confirmability, three different types of data were collected including experiencing, enquiring, and examination.

For experiencing data, field notes were taken throughout all processes in an effort to capture student engagement and excitement surrounding the topic of code-switching. Anecdotal notes were also taken on anything that occurred throughout the research process that might be of use to the analysis or discussion.

The teacher focus group, teacher interviews, and various student questionnaires, recorded code-switching practice sessions, and reflections, serve as enquiring data. Anecdotal notes were also taken throughout the focus group to capture important points of emphasis. The focus of the discussion was on AAE, code switching, dialect variance in writing, and thoughts on possible solutions to the effect of dialect variation on literacy performance in the classroom. The group
was facilitated by the use of discussion questions and prompts. There were questionnaires given to students before and after the explicit code-switching instruction tutoring sessions, to obtain an idea of what they knew about language variance and AAE, as well as how they feel about code-switching pedagogy. Also, throughout the process reflection responses were collected from students with the intention of later analysis and review.

For examination data, short writing responses (approximately 100 words in length) were collected from the students before and after the explicit code-switching instruction, to assess the students’ growth, or lack thereof, in terms of their use of AAE in their writing. These writing pieces were assessed for AAE features, as defined by the various research studies from the literature review. The prompt will be very similar for both writing assessments, and the assessment of AAE features will remain the same as well.

Data Analysis

The data collected from this action research project included writing samples (pre- and post-), Exit Ticket reflections, Questionnaire (teacher focus group), Do Now quizzes, code-switching practice transcriptions, teacher interview transcriptions, and anecdotal notes of student comments and observations of student behavior throughout the tutoring sessions. The (pre- and post-tutoring) student writing samples were assessed for frequency of AAE features by using Redd and Webb’s (2005) outline for distinctive features of AAE (Appendix G). Included in Redd and Webb’s discussion of distinctive features are AAE elements such as vocabulary, slang, historically black words, novel meanings, so-called obscenity, pronunciation, syllables, vowels, consonants, spelling, grammar, nouns and pronouns, adverbs and adjectives, verbs, and sentence patterns. All of these features “are unique” and make up the “basic core of AAE features that” cross boundaries of geographical region (p. 19). Each writing sample was assessed for AAE
features per sample, by counting the total number of AAE features and total words, and calculating the percentage of AAE words per sample. In addition to this, pre- and post-tutoring samples were compared to analyze the effectiveness of the code-switching tutoring sessions.

While students were engaged in small group discussion, or other various activities, anecdotal notes were recorded using pen and paper. These notes showed valuable opinions and observations made by the students as well as observations made by the facilitator throughout the tutoring process. The anecdotal notes were transcribed. Do Now quizzes and Exit Ticket reflections were analyzed for highest leverage responses, trends in student answers, as well as any apparent gaps in understanding. An additional data set includes the questionnaire teachers were asked to complete after the teacher focus group. The questionnaires were analyzed for highest leverage responses, trends in answers, as well as any general observations.

For all the data retrieved, findings were compared to leading research and theoretical frameworks. Tables were assembled to display the data collected. Also, student work samples were photographed after AAE feature analysis to assist the discussion of findings.

**Findings and Discussion**

The data which materialized from this action research includes field notes, teacher questionnaires, student writing samples, audio recording transcriptions, and other various student work samples. After careful exploration and analysis of the data, three themes seemingly emerge. The first theme displays how teachers understand the need for code-switching instruction in urban school settings, yet their efforts to implement and promote code-switching pedagogy school-wide are not effective and ideal, according to recent research. The second theme reveals that students were very proficient with contrastive analysis, and even showed mastery in this area
across multiple separate tasks. Alternatively, the third and final theme shows how although students showed mastery with contrastive analysis tasks and relative proficiency and pleasure in code-switching during oral language use, students were unable to translate their style shifting abilities to their writing task after the explicit code-switching tutoring.

**Teachers Understand the Need for Code-Switching but Implementation and Promotion Efforts are Futile**

Considering the nature of professional development and the need for teacher development to continue throughout all stages and levels of teacher experience, it is not incredibly surprising that the teachers at James Prep expressed their belief in the use and instruction of code-switching in urban school settings. It can be reasonably assumed, that due to the young age of the teachers involved in the teacher focus group and the nature of teacher candidate undergraduate and graduate programs and their inclusion of various diversity issues in coursework, teachers at James Prep already had an extensive understanding of what code-switching is, and have opinions which generally support the inclusion of code-switching in curricular decisions and other various academic means. This understanding was displayed in Exit Ticket questionnaires through the analysis of three of the five total questions. The first question, question #1, asked teachers “is code-switching something students in urban schools need to know” (Appendix H), and teachers responded by circling either yes or no. The second question, question #4, asked “how often do you correct non-standard forms of English used by your students? (in oral or written language)” (Appendix H), and their choices were “never,” “less than once a day,” “about once a day,” and “more than once a day.” The third question, question #5, asked teachers “would you be inclined to give a lower grade/score to a student who displays various non-standard features of English in their writing?” (Appendix H), and teachers
responded by circling either yes or no. The goal of these questions was to gather teacher opinions on style shifting and assess their tendency to correct student use of AAE and other non-standard forms of English in their classrooms, and their perceptions of students who use such features on a daily basis. By seeing teacher tendencies to correct student speech and promote code-switching, one can begin to make generalizations about the use and promotion of code-switching in the academic setting, and the degree of its effectiveness.

Question #1, asking whether or not code-switching is something urban school students should know, showed unanimous results. All 12 teachers selected “yes” as their answer. The unanimous nature of teacher responses shows how the teachers at James Prep understand the need for students to develop code-switching skills. Knowledge of the need to teach style shifting is the first step in effecting change among dialect variance opinions in schools; teachers must understand there is a need for students to understand style shifting and realize the potential benefits code-switching carries for its users, before positive change can result and student-lives can be affected. James Prep is certainly on the right path to helping their students conform to (unjust) societal language norms, according to the opinions of their teachers, but more concrete systems needs to be implemented to fully effect change at the school. It is seemingly odd that systems are not in place to teach code-switching considering the teacher population seems to believe in its purpose and the benefits it provides students. One would think that if the teachers at a school believed in style shifting and understood its potential benefits, that the school would have concrete systems in place to instruct students appropriately and to promote code-switching actively among their students.

A comment made during one of the teacher interviews connects to the notion just previously drawn that concrete systems, routines, and procedures are needed for effective code-
switching pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching to take place. Thomas, 5th grade science teacher at James Prep and career urban charter school teacher, acknowledges that James Prep as a whole could “be more transparent about the social and racial” aspects of code switching and language instruction (Teacher Interview, 2015). Thomas’s comment aligns with critical language pedagogy which says that in order for students to fully understand the language norms of society, they must engage in critical discussion and analysis of the societal injustice which places such unfair language restraints upon them. Thomas also commented explaining his belief that “(Professional development) would help (James Prep) feel more confident in addressing those issues with students,” and that if “everyone were on the same page” greater change and “linguistic progress” could be more easily obtained at James Prep (Teacher Interview, 2015). The notion of “linguistic progress” is quite inspirational, although it seems the current policies at James Prep are creating quite the antithesis of progress. Thomas also commented saying, “there are staff members here who are scared to have those conversations with kids because they are white,” (Teacher Interview, 2015) and professional development and implementation of critical language pedagogy would potentially change that. While James Prep has both black and white teachers, they do have more white staff members, and since the vast majority of the student population is African American, it is seemingly plausible that white teachers are not comfortable having critical linguistic and societal conversations with their students.

Question #4, asking how often teachers at James Prep correct non-standard English oral and written features of language does not display the same clear-cut information as the results of question #1, nevertheless an important claim can be made through analysis. In response to question #4, one teacher responded “never,” one teacher responded “less than once a day,” four
teachers responded “about once a day,” and six teachers responded “more than once a day.”

Responses show the tendency of teachers at James Prep to correct non-standard English features used by students in their classrooms. The act of correcting non-MAE language features in student writing and speech is inconsistent with critical language pedagogy (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013), as well as Culturally Responsive Teaching. 50% of the focus group agreed that they correct students more than once a day and 33% of the focus group agreed they correct students about once a day. What this data set shows is a clear misunderstanding of code-switching, as well as an inconsistent understanding of how to effectively promote style shifting among students.

Teachers at James Prep understand students need to have the ability to switch between native and standard dialects, yet when students use a dialect which is not favored in a particular situation in school they are being corrected, instead of praised for their style shifting efforts, or engaged in scholarly discussion about code-switching necessity. In her teacher interview, Christina, 5th grade history teacher at James Prep, considered correcting student speech in school as a method for teaching students about code-switching. One comment Christina made that is fairly interesting is, “when they say ain’t, I correct them, but we have conversations about using that language outside of the classroom just not in class using that dialect” (Teacher Interview, 2015). While it sounds positive that she is having conversations about student home languages, correcting students’ speech is simply not an effective way to promote code-switching and linguistic mastery. According to critical language pedagogy and the research of many scholars, correcting students publically about their dialect variance and language use in school is unjust and culturally unaccepting (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013). Inconsistency is shown here once again; teachers at James Prep believe they are helping
students by correcting their home language use and asking them to switch to Standard English, but this is not offering students the chance to style shift naturally, and on their own. The teacher interview also shows an intriguing comment made by Christina; she says in response to being asked about when her students – whether in homeroom or history class – are allowed to speak or write in their native dialect, “Never. (Slight laugh). My students don’t talk; they don’t get to talk very much at all” (Teacher Interview, 2015). A student not being able to speak much in class, let alone at all, is a scary notion. Critical language pedagogy insists that students analyze the social unjust nature of language norms throughout society through peer discussion and exploration. Also on a more simplistic level, why are students not given the chance to speak to each other in their home languages? In response to being asked about any issues with having them solely use MAE in the school setting, Christina commented saying, “when they step outside of school they can talk however they want like on the bus and at home with friends and family” (Teacher Interview, 2015). It seems relatively unreasonable to expect students to speak one day for nine hours per day – James Prep school days are extended, and are nearly nine hours in length – then expect them to speak completely different the rest of the time. This utterly defies the theoretical framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), students need to experience multicultural educational experiences daily, including linguistic exchanges and experiences. Inconsistency with James Prep teacher actions and effective code-switching pedagogy are seen once again. While James Prep teachers see the need and potential benefit of code-switching, there are no systems in place to effectively promote code-switching, and thus there is inconsistency within their style shifting efforts and promotion across the board.

Question #5, which asked teachers whether they would be inclined to give a lower grade or score to a student who displays various non-standard features of English in their writing,
provides intriguing insight into the opinions of James Prep’s teachers on non-standard features of English and AAE. First of all, three teachers did not answer the question, one due to her non-instructional position, another due to her content area’s tendency not to assess writing for linguistic nuances and only assessing the content of the writing (history), and another due to her belief that oral responses should not be scored negatively while written responses should be. In terms of the rest of the teacher participants, six said they would score students negatively if they displayed features of non-standard English, while three said they would not score students negatively if they displayed features of non-standard English. Once again, inconsistency in the promotion of code-switching across the board is displayed by these teacher responses. This data aligns with the research and observations of Johnson and VanBrackle (2012) that some educators believe features of AAE and other non-standard English forms carry a negative connotation, and negatively affect a scorer’s perception of the student’s writing. James Prep teachers seemingly have this belief. Instead of valuing student cultural identity and placing importance on students using their home language, which is suggested by the theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching, James Prep teachers believe native dialect features are distracting, and their perceptions of students and student work are effected negatively due to this notion. Sixty-seven percent of the James Prep focus group teachers would provide a lower score to students who display non-standard English in their writing. While James Prep teachers might believe scoring student writing with AAE features in mind and providing feedback to students about these scores and why they received them is a good start to developing a school-wide culture of style shifting, it is seemingly inconsistent with the ideals of Culturally Responsive Teaching as well as critical language pedagogy (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013).
The data shows inconsistency among James Prep teachers and their beliefs about and understanding of effective code-switching pedagogy. While they believe correcting students' home language use in school is a good step towards establishing effective code-switching pedagogy norms school-wide, according to Culturally Responsive Teaching and critical language pedagogy their efforts are not effective nor are they appropriate. Also, two of the three teacher interview participants said students are not getting enough time to engage in conversation or writing tasks which employ their home language. In response to being asked when students at James Prep are allowed to speak and write in their native dialect, Caitlin responds “I don’t think they ever do” (Teacher Interview, 2015). Caitlin’s comment connects with Christina’s comment about her students and the amount they speak during homeroom and history class. Also, Caitlin’s interview provides an interesting take on James Prep’s current promotion of code-switching pedagogy and linguistic freedom. When asked to comment on how she believed James Prep was doing in terms of promoting and supporting code-switching, she said “are we teaching them how to use both languages, or dialects, no. I don’t think we are doing enough talking about code-switching” as well as “honoring cultures” (Teacher Interview, 2015). Caitlin seems to understand the need for students to use both languages while at school, in an effort to both honor their home culture and practice switching in and out of Standard and non-Standard English dialects. According to Culturally Responsive Teaching, varied language use and linguistic experiences are incredibly essential to effective instruction. It is quite clear, that while James Prep teachers understand the need for code-switching and have a fairly decent understanding of what code-switching is, but their efforts in establishing school-wide norms surrounding code-switching instruction and promotion do not align with current research and the beliefs of many scholars and is thus not adequate.
Students Displayed Their Proficiency with Contrastive Analysis

One of the major elements of the explicit code-switching instructional tutoring sessions was contrastive analysis. To reiterate, contrastive analysis is the side-by-side comparison and discussion of two dialects or languages. This was built into the tutoring sessions due to research which supported its inclusion in style shifting curriculum and pedagogy (Fisher & Lapp, 2013; Godley et al., 2006; Wheeler, 2008; Wheeler, 2010). The student participants in this action research were able to display their superior understanding of contrastive analysis in two specific tasks.

The first was an independent practice activity, after students were engaged in a contrastive analysis lesson (see Appendix E). The lesson featured a brief explanation of the focus for the lesson, a discussion and guided notes portion which defined both Standard English and Urban Vernacular English, and a feature analysis mini-lesson. The feature analysis mini-lesson included a discussion of specific differences between dialects, by highlighting certain features of language which change between Standard English and Urban Vernacular English. Students were asked, using a cold-calling technique, to read aloud the Standard English statement followed by the Urban Vernacular English statement. Then, students were asked to identify the differences between the statements, noting specific elements which changed when the statement became non-standard. Students marked up their note page using boxing annotations to display the specific differences. After, students were given the chance to independently practice writing Urban Vernacular statements in Standard English, essentially practicing code-switching in writing. The goal of this activity was to allow students to independently practice comparing Urban Vernacular English with Standard English statements, and to assess their understanding of the concept after being explicitly taught the two dialects, and the similarities and differences
between them. On the previous page, students were guided through a similar activity, and then given the chance to practice on their own. Students were asked to generate the Standard English version of various Urban Vernacular statements such as “They be so excited,” and “Can’t nobody stop me.” Figure 1 shows a student example of the activity described above.

Notice that this student correctly provided the Standard English equivalent for each Urban Vernacular English statement. Punctuation was not assessed since the focus was on the students’ ability to translate specific dialect features. While punctuation can be considered an element of AAE, it was not discussed in the feature analysis mini-lesson, thus it was determined not necessary to assess in the contrastive analysis independent practice. Seven out of eleven
students (one student was absent that day) scored a perfect 6 out of 6 on this independent practice activity. Collectively, the participating students – ten African-American students and one Hispanic student – scored a 95% for all the contrastive analysis questions in this activity. The data shows collective proficiency and a concrete understanding of the concept of differing dialects or dialect variance. An interesting observation however, is that three out of the four total incorrect answers were the same. The common incorrect answer was falsely identifying the Standard English equivalent for “He be yelling and stuff.” All three students, instead of switching the verb “be” to a more appropriate verb, omitted the verb in the statement altogether by writing “He always yelling and stuff.” This sentence they wrote is consistent with the common AAE feature of incorrect verb usage or lack of verb where it is normally necessary (Redd & Webb, 2005). While students certainly showed proficiency with this task, it is interesting to note such a common incorrect answer, and provides insight into particular AAE features and their ease of shifting from non-MAE to Standard English.

The following tutoring session, to get students thinking about previous instruction, students were given a Do Now Quiz (Appendix F) which asked them to read various statements and identify whether the statements were Urban Vernacular English or Standard English. Figure 2 shows an example of how the students selected their answers.
This Do Now was collected and assessed for student understanding of dialect variance and contrastive analysis skill. As a whole, the students scored 99%, only missing 1 question out of a total of 96. The only incorrect answer – shown in Figure 2, question #5 – was a particularly difficult statement which included two features of non-standard English dialect. It can be reasonably assumed that question #5 was missed due to a lack of coverage of double or multiple non-standard features in a single statement during our feature analysis and contrastive analysis activities from the previous tutoring day.

Students seem to clearly understand the differences between standard and non-standard forms of English. This understanding of the differences between MAE and non-MAE language features could be due to the “professional” culture at James Prep, and the tendency of the teachers to promote “professional language” and hold students accountable for their language choices, whether oral or written; although the teachers’ consistent means of holding students accountable is not aligned with Culturally Responsive Teaching principles. It can also be
reasonably deduced that students have such a profound understanding of the differences between standard and non-standard English due to the current schooling culture and how students are asked to learn in and use Standard English exclusively. The data has somewhat revealed a culture of code-switching in disguise. While students understand the differences between dialects and the need to shift between styles, it is not due to efforts made at James Prep by teachers and curriculum, but rather the perpetuated culture of schooling which utilizes only MAE and demands students comply with MAE at an early age. According to the data derived from this action research, contrastive analysis, supported by many leading researchers in the area of code-switching pedagogy (Fisher & Lapp, 2013; Godley et al., 2006; Wheeler, 2008; Wheeler, 2010), is an effective means to teaching students the differences between dialects of English, particularly analyzing specific features which define a certain dialect.

**Students Lack the Ability to Translate Contrastive Analysis and Oral Code-Switching Skills to Written Code-Switching**

During the third and final tutoring session after the contrastive analysis Do Now Quiz, students were given the definition of code-switching and provided with the opportunity to discuss code-switching with their partners. After small group discussion students were asked to report out with their group’s thoughts on code-switching. One student said it seemed like speaking in one’s native dialect was “the cool way to talk,” and framed speaking Standard English in a negative light by saying “it felt weird” (Table 4). Students feeling more comfortable speaking their native dialect and feeling more uncomfortable speaking and writing Standard English is a common observation and underlying understanding of dialect variance (Redd & Webb, 2005). Simply put, speaking one’s primary discourse should feel more comfortable and normal, hence it being labeled one’s *primary* discourse. Another student commented saying
sometimes it is “unnatural to speak standard,” and that they were more “comfortable” speaking in their native dialect. These are observations that, in conjunction with scholars, make sense and are most likely typical observations and beliefs of students who speak non-MAE dialects and learn only in Standard English (Amicucci, 2014; Hill, 2009; Godley et al, 2006; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Wheeler, 2010).

After this discussion amongst peers in small group and with everyone in a whole group setting, students were given the chance to practice code-switching with their partners using authentic context. Students were given the scenario of being in an interview for college or a job. They were told they were to engage in a conversation with their partner which aimed to learn more about each other, something that is common among college interactions and job interviews. I used two laminated color cards, one purple and one green, to hold up for the students, signaling which dialect to shift to (purple and green were chosen to avoid one color having a more positive connotation than another, causing one dialect to seem “better” than the other). The practice was framed as being oral code-switching. The students seemed to enjoy the practice, and were happy to be given the opportunity to practice oral code-switching with their peers.

After practicing, students shared out reactions to the oral code-switching practice. One student said she “felt more natural” during the use of native dialect and “laughed more” (Anecdotal Notes, 2015). The notion that students laugh more while using their home language and feel more comfortable is not ground-breaking; it certainly is logical and makes sense. Yet it causes one to consider why James Prep teachers do not allow students to use their home language in their classes if it promotes comfortability and self-identity, which aligns with the theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994), and would certainly increase student engagement and achievement in their courses as well as begin to improve their code-
switching instruction. Another student commented saying they would style shift in class but “it depends” on the situation (Anecdotal Notes, 2015). All of these observations and comments show that students have an understanding of code-switching, but are not accepting of the need for them to conform to the use of MAE. This notion of non-compliance in terms of code-switching to Standard English and conforming to societal language norms can possibly be traced back to the first theme presented in this section, and the negativity consistently perpetuated regarding non-MAE language forms at James Prep by their teaching staff.

Two of the code-switching practice scenarios were audio recorded in an effort to gather more insight into the proficiency and observations on behalf of the students. Four female students were chosen at random to have their code-switching practice session recorded. Table 1 shows the transcription of one of these recordings. The students were reminded of instructions for each colored card, and expectations for using each specific dialect, and then were given the opportunity to begin an authentic conversation. They were to ask each other questions, similar to an interview situation. The students were asked to begin their discussion in Standard English, then, after a few comments made back and forth between the students, they were directed (by holding up the orange card) to continue their conversation in their native dialect. The students found this part quite amusing, even pausing to laugh in the middle of their conversation (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Student Code-Switching Practice*
<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>So green means what…?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Standard English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Right. And Orange means what…?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Informal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Right, remember we call that non-Standard English, the way you, and me too, naturally talk at home. Ok, so you guys are going to ask each other questions and talk. When I hold up the green card you will use….</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Formal English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Right, Standard English, and when I hold up the orange card you will use…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Natural Dialects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Excellent! Okay, let’s begin. Go ahead and start with a professional, formal question… Go! (Green card up).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>How was your day today Brianna?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>It was perfect. Everything went well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Ok, what do you want to be when you grow up?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>I want to be a dentist.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>That sounds very interesting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>(Orange card goes up).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Brianna, wassup, how you doin'?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Hey, sup best friend? (Both giggle quickly and continue). What’s goin on?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>So you wanna go to the movies tomorrow?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Na, I’d rather go bowlin.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Ok, so let’s go bowlin then!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>(Green card goes back up).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>So Brianna, would you like to go bowling with me tomorrow?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Yes, that sounds like fun. It was my idea you know!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>What would you prefer? Going bowling, or going to an amusement park?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>I would rather go bowling. I think.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This is the entire code-switching practice session.

As shown in table 1, students were able to effectively use MAE in their initial Standard English conversation. For example, Abby was able to start the conversation with a very formal, and Standard dialect-formed question, saying “How was your day today Brianna?” (Table 1). Without hesitation, Abby was able to come up with this question and begin the conversation in Standard English. This connects to the claim stated earlier that students know MAE because of the current culture of schooling and perpetuated use of MAE-only in schools across the country. Brianna was also able to seamlessly craft an MAE sentence, in response to Abby’s conversation starter, by saying “It was perfect. Everything went well” (Table 1). This response from Brianna confirms that both students are capable of using Standard English in their oral language use.

Switching to their native dialect in the middle of the practice session proved to be fairly easy for
the students as well as amusing and fun. Without hesitation, Abby shifted into her home language and asked Brianna a question, saying “Brianna, wassup, how you doin?” (Table 1). There are two AAE features in this question posed by Abby in her native dialect. The first is the use of popular slang words, i.e. “wassup”, and the second is dropping the ending consonant on various words, i.e. “doin” (Redd & Webb, 2005). The same two distinct features of AAE were featured in Brianna’s response to Abby’s question. Brianna said, “Hey, sup best friend? (Both giggle quickly and continue). What’s goin on?” (Table 1). The popular slang word Brianna employed was “sup” and the word which included an ending-consonant omission was “goin” (Table 1). The giggle noted in the transcription also confirms the previously noted claim that students seems to have fun and “laughed more” during use of native dialects (Anecdotal Notes, 2015). Also, when switching back to Standard English to finish the practice session, the students were able to change their language set quite impressively, immediately continuing the same conversation with different dialects. Upon switching back to Standard English use, Abby quickly asked Brianna, “So Brianna, would you like to go bowling with me tomorrow?” (Table 1). This once again, proves Abby’s proficiency with MAE, most likely due to the current culture of schooling throughout America, although her comfortability and primary discourse use resides within AAE. One word in particular that Abby was able to use in two varying forms was bowling. During the non-MAE portion of the practice session, she refers to bowling as “bowlin,” but then refers to the sport as “bowling” when asked to switch back to Standard English during the last portion of the practice session (Table 1). This ability to switch one word between dialects furthermore proves Abby’s proficiency with oral code-switching.

Although this situation is not an entirely authentic code-switching situation – students are rarely asked or needed to shift dialects in the middle of a conversation, usually one has to select a
dialect to employ before an interaction occurs, not during it – it was a worthy indication of their knowledge of how to use both dialects orally, in communication with another. In addition to the code-switching practice, the students answered a few questions after the practice session in an effort to gain information on their enjoyment of the code-switching practice itself, as well as to gain insight into their beliefs of MAE and using Standard English and native dialects at school. After being asked to share any observations and feelings they had about the code-switching practice session and their experiences, Abby said “It was fun… It was cool practicing going between having fun and talking normal, to being professional” (Student Code-Switching Practice, 2015). This indicates her agreement with previous notions and observations that the student participants in this study believe speaking and interacting in their native dialect is “fun” and that they also consider non-MAE language forms to be “normal” (Anecdotal Notes, 2015), despite Standard English nearly being the only variance of English students are exposed to while at school due to the current culture of schooling across America. In addition, Brianna said she wished they could use non-MAE features of language more during school at James Prep because when using more informal language “we can laugh a little bit and have fun usually it’s when we are being informal, and then going back to learning and stuff it gets more formal” (Student Code-Switching Practice, 2015). Brianna’s comment extends the belief that students are more comfortable using their native dialect across various contexts. Culturally Responsive Teaching requires teachers to use student culture and language throughout daily educational experiences, and if James Prep teachers began implementing this theory consistently, it is reasonable to assume they may also see an increase in appropriate and natural use of MAE in given contexts since students’ home languages will be put on an even playing field with that of greater society.
Although students showed enjoyment and proficiency in oral code-switching, their oral style shifting skills as well as their capability of understanding contrastive analysis, they did not translate to their ability to code-switch in writing. In congruence with the first theme of this section, student lack of code-switching in their writing may reasonably be attributed to the teachers’ tendency to count non-MAE features against students. The culture which has been established at James Prep which involves teachers requiring Standard English and Standard English only, leads students to shy away from code-switching simply because it is forced. Without valuing the student home language, children are less likely to naturally and willingly switch to another dialect other than their own (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013). After the oral code-switching practice, students were engaged in a brief discussion about code-switching in writing, and the importance of style shifting for the purpose of writing responses on state exams, college essays, job applications, and more. After this discussion, one student commented that she naturally changes her writing to conform to Standard English, and that she doesn’t “write what (she) says.” Students completed the post-assessment writing task following this discussion.

The pre- and post-tutoring writing samples were assessed for typical AAE features, as defined by Redd and Webb’s (2005) distinctive features of AAE. The results were quite revealing. Table 2 shows the results of assessing both writing sample sets.

Table 2

*AAE Features in Student Writing Samples Pre- and Post-"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of AAE Features</th>
<th>Number of Words Total</th>
<th>Total Percentage of AAE Features</th>
<th>Number of AAE Features</th>
<th>Number of Words Total</th>
<th>Total Percentage of AAE Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>2.091%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>2.258%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total Percentage of AAE Features refers to the amount of AAE Features in comparison to words total.

Table 2 shows how the students did not improve their written code-switching ability after the tutoring sessions. Students were given explicit instruction on code-switching and were prompted to use code-switching skills when writing their second assessment response. It was explicitly stated: “Use your knowledge of code-switching and dialect variance to switch out of your native dialect in this writing task.” The idea that the students were not able to successfully code-switch in this pre- and post-writing assessment, after the tutoring sessions and style shifting practice, is really quite intriguing, considering the tutoring sessions were designed based on consistent findings throughout recent research on the topic of code-switching. Their lack of willingness of or capacity to code-switch seemingly aligns with the first theme presented in this findings discussion; that James Prep teachers perpetuate a negative culture around home languages and native dialect, thus causing students to choose against code-switching. The difference in AAE features per total number of words is 0.167%, albeit not incredibly alarming, but the slight increase in total number of AAE features is relatively significant.

The simple fact that the students did not display at least a minimal decrease in AAE features employed throughout their writing shows a lack of confidence in their use of language in
general, similar to what Thomas said in his teacher interview. Particularly worth noting is when Thomas says, “There’s confidence being built in knowing that they are being heard and understood” (Teacher Interview, 2015). Thomas was referring to using native dialects in school, and pairing that with code-switching instruction in an effort to build student confidence in using multiple dialects of language, thus improving their natural ability to code-switch. Thomas’s suggestion aligns with Culturally Responsive Teaching as well as the ideas of many scholars (Godley & Escher, 2012; Godley et al., 2006; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013). Thomas also comments about his homeroom at James Prep and his efforts to promote student home discourses throughout his daily practices. He said, “in homeroom, we have a much different set of expectations, in homeroom we do, and I do, speak in less formal tones, whenever it’s appropriate…and it’s much less formal sometimes, and there’s a lot less formality” (Teacher Interview, 2015). Thomas’s efforts align with those of Culturally Responsive Teaching. By allowing his students to have moments of informality, at a school where linguistic formality and Standard English are almost exclusively allowed, he is giving them the chance to feel valued culturally, and have their identity accepted and appreciated. These actions and opportunities provided by Thomas in his homeroom are promoting language confidence, which is a large step in the road towards developing effective style shifting skills in students. Although Thomas is seemingly doing his best to promote effective code-switching instruction to his homeroom students, his actions are seemingly being drowned by the detrimental actions of many at James Prep. By adding similar actions to Thomas’s and more elements of critical language pedagogy to the explicit code-switching tutoring sessions, perhaps the students would have acquired more tools to improve their post-tutoring writing samples to include less AAE features.
Although the students failed to produce improved writing samples in terms of their AAE features employed, one student in particular showed her ability to code-switch in writing by improving from four AAE features in the pre-tutoring writing assessment, to zero AAE features in the post-tutoring writing assessment. Figure 3 displays the pre- and post-tutoring writing samples of this student, and shows the improvement in her use of AAE and other non-standard features in her writing.

*Figure 3.* Photos were merged into one file; the number in the upper right corner of the documents signifies the first or second writing assessment.

Specifically, this student shows improvement in her ability to select Standard English verb endings, verbs, and word endings. It can also be reasonably assumed that in her post-tutoring writing sample, she chose a non-standard feature in her sentence, and then made an edit to remove it, and maintained Standard English throughout the writing. According to Redd and Webb (2005), language learning and specific language skills, such as code-switching, “move
naturally from listening to speaking and then to reading and writing,” and students who show the ability to switch between dialects in writing, most likely are able to do so orally, and vice versa (p. 83). The student featured in Figure 3 has shown her ability to code-switch in writing, simply due to her change in distinctive AAE features from pre- to post-writing assessment. However, collectively the student participation group did not show the ability to actively code-switch in their writing. This notion of general failure from the vast majority of the group to display code-switching skills on their writing assessment, once again goes back to the inconsistency of the teachers at James Prep and their ineffective promotion of code-switching pedagogy, previously noted in the first theme of this section. It was noted during day one of the tutoring sessions, that the particular student featured in Figure 3 has family members who speak distinct non-MAE dialects, specifically her grandmother. Perhaps the student featured in Figure 3 has been previously taught how to code-switch by family or past teachers, or has more confidence in style shifting simply due to the fact that her home language is valued highly by friends and family while code-switching and use of Standard English are encouraged as well.

**Implications and Conclusions**

There are many implications for teachers which arise from this action research. The goal of action research is to serve as an incredibly powerful agent of change (Mills, 2014). While the research itself was not groundbreaking, nor were the data sets incredibly telling, powerful observations can be drawn from all data forms – including the teacher focus group questionnaire, teacher interviews, student code-switching practice sessions, student writing assessments, Exit Ticket reflections, Do now quizzes, and anecdotal notes – which can inform and impact the everyday academic interactions teachers have with inner-city students in particular.
The current culture of schooling throughout America has caused students to become aware and knowledgeable of Standard English or MAE, but due to schools’ lack of engaging staff and students in effective code-switching pedagogy has caused students to feel as if their primary discourse is wrong, or inferior. Just because students know MAE due to the current culture of schooling in America, and even know MAE through the use of supplemental contrastive analysis instruction, does not mean students can code-switch, or that a school’s culture is promotive of effective style shifting pedagogy. Students at James Prep are well-versed in MAE. They are directed to speak it during class, they have to write using Standard English on all in-class assignments, and all of their homework assignments are completed using MAE. This knowledge of and persistent use of MAE does not give students a sense of pride and ownership surrounding their own home discourse, causing students to want to use their native dialect as much as possible, and to avoid code-switching. If students are not given the chance to use their home language at school, what makes teachers think students will make an active decision to switch to MAE in a given context? The decision and willingness to code-switch from one’s native dialect to Standard English must first come from a feeling that one’s language is as mutually acceptable as another (Hill, 2009; Vetter, 2013), and at James Prep, home and school discourses are not weighed equally, causing students to potentially avoid code-switching altogether.

As previously noted, it is incredibly important to first build a sense of cultural acceptance for one’s native dialect, before teaching and supporting the use of MAE in the classroom, as well as helping students develop context-appropriate code-switching skills. Without first showing appreciation for the student’s discourse, it is difficult to expect students to appreciate a discourse which is not their own. At James Prep, while teachers unanimously agreed that code-switching is
something that students in an urban setting need to know, they are not helping to build a culture which appreciates one’s home language. Teachers at James Prep consistently identify moments when students are not using MAE and are using their home language, and ask them to repeat or “correct” what they said or wrote using Standard English, and in doing this teachers are perpetuating a cultural norm where MAE is the only accepted language and students are wrong when they employ other language features and dialects. The implications for this notion of language conformity are quite staggering. Students will grow as learners, thinking their language cannot be used in any setting other than with people of their immediate culture. By lacking promotion of one’s cultural identity, through language, we are denying children of the opportunity to express themselves fully, become a part of the greater fabric of society, and to attempt to make language choices on their own. At an early age, children are making style shifting choices without prompting or instruction (Connor & Craig, 2006; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004), yet as they grow up in our society’s schooling culture of using MAE and MAE only, they are guided not towards style shifting but away from it.

Teaching students MAE daily and exclusively, and making sure they switch out of their native dialect to conform to MAE-use norms, is not a sufficient way to build a code-switching culture at any school. Contrastive analysis is a great way to build knowledge of differing dialects or languages, but in today’s current school culture where students are forced to learn MAE and are familiar with its use, it almost seems like a waste of time. Data showed that students nearly mastered contrastive analysis concepts yet did not translate their ability to differentiate between dialects on their written assessment. Although recent research argued contrastive analysis as a preferred means of beginning to develop code-switching skills for students (Fisher & Lapp, 2013; Godley et al., 2006; Wheeler, 2008; Wheeler, 2010), it seems as if critical language
pedagogy is the more appropriate choice for promoting style shifting among inner-city youth. While this action research was designed in an attempt to employ elements of both contrastive analysis and critical language pedagogy concepts during the tutoring phase, the impact of today’s school culture is immensely counter-productive to most code-switching efforts, potentially even methods and instructional systems created and established by recent research studies.

What can be reasonably determined through data analysis and seeking the implications of this action research is the reality that what is lacking in this study are some key principles of critical language pedagogy. These elements are lacking, at James Prep and within the study’s direct instructional plan, most likely to due to the schooling culture established at James Prep and across the nation. The main objective of critical language pedagogy is to aid students in improving their understanding of the grammatical patterns of privileged dialects, while at the same time they explore why those dialects hold their societal power (Godley & Minnici, 2008). According to Godley and Minnici, critical language pedagogy’s goal is made of two major parts. This study failed to explore why Standard English holds its societal power, as well as addressing the unjust nature of forcing language conformity upon all youth, in particular children of color. What the notion of critical language pedagogy lacking in schools implies, is that we need to first change the culture of schools across the nation before we can begin to expect students to willingly employ, and switch to, MAE across contexts. Sure, there are many things teachers can do as individuals to create change and align their daily activities and routines with Culturally Responsive teaching – such as engaging students in diverse novel studies, celebrating diversity through various cultural holidays/events, and curbing social studies and historical curriculum to include discussions of race, ethnicity, and social justice issues – but to create change on a larger scale we must change our school systems, and adapting critical language pedagogy as school
policy would go a long way to supporting the language use of students who speak AAE and other non-MAE language forms.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this action research was to examine how explicit code-switching instruction impacted students' ability to code-switch from their native dialect to MAE in their writing. An additional goal of the study was to explore how the teachers at James Prep felt about code-switching, and how it impacts their opinions on and relationships with the students they teach, who predominately speak a non-standard form of English. The theoretical framework which drove this action research is Culturally Responsive Teaching. Culturally Responsive Teaching is an instructional pedagogy that distinguishes the significance of incorporating students' cultural references and identity in all facets of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The literature which was reviewed in an effort to gain insight into the area of code-switching and non-Standard English forms, showed how AAE and other non-MAE English forms impact student literacy performance in the classroom. Also, the literature showed various ways to teach code-switching to students who employ non-MAE regularly, including critical language pedagogy and contrastive analysis. What was found as a result of data analysis was that students failed to translate knowledge of MAE and non-MAE, their near mastery of contrastive analysis tasks, to their code-switching abilities. Simply understanding Standard and non-Standard English language forms was not enough to naturally improve code-switching abilities in writing, even after explicit instruction in what code-switching is and why it is important in today’s society.

Implications from this action research study are quite far-reaching. Our current schooling system does not appropriately utilize critical language pedagogy, nor does it allow for effective Culturally Responsive Teaching. Therefore, students’ native dialects are not welcomed in the
classroom, nor are their cultural identities valued and celebrated. The lack of Culturally Responsive Teaching across our nation’s schools leads to a lack of mutual respect between the cultural normed dialect of MAE and native non-MAE dialects, in the eyes of students who employ non-Standard English forms. While teachers are able to engage their students in culturally responsive learning and promote critical language pedagogy within their classrooms, it is the larger scale of changing school systems which shows the most promise in improving the code-switching abilities of young urban students across the country.

There are many ways to improve this study for the purpose of replicating and improving it in future action research projects. First, it would be beneficial to increase the amount of tutoring days to (at least) 5, in an effort to include more elements of critical language pedagogy towards the end of the instructional tutoring schedule. Changing the direct instruction to include closer examinations of why MAE holds such societal power and the unjust nature of conforming one’s language to fit the norm of society might produce better results in terms of the student’s ability to code-switch during their written assessment. Secondly, the teacher focus group discussion should have been recorded. One teacher expressed their discontent with being recorded, and the decision was made to forego the recording in an effort to include all who were willing to participate. This was a mistake on behalf of the facilitator, as that one individual should have been removed from the group and the focus group discussion could have been recorded. By audio or video recording the session, the opinions and beliefs of the teachers at James Prep would be captured more easily, and thus the data would be more conclusive and impactful. While the teacher interviews were quite revealing and most certainly were beneficial to the study as a whole, the discussions within the teacher focus group could have revealed more about James Prep and the beliefs of the professional educators.
This study fell short in terms of its goals. Not only was the original question not completely answered, but in the end the data did not sufficiently create enough evidence to answer the question definitively, one way or the other. I think the time constraints placed on the tutoring sessions by James Prep, had a significant impact on the amount of data was collected, as well as the tutoring schedule and instructional plan as a whole. Also, the culture at James Prep and across the nation in general, surrounding diverse language use in the classroom was significantly detrimental to the study’s results. This action research, while it derived a few impactful and important implications for current teachers and schools, it failed in its attempt to explore code-switching in writing, through the facilitation of a direct instructional plan over a three day period. After careful analysis of all the data, it seems reasonable to conclude that if the original tutoring plan had included more emphasis on critical language pedagogy, specifically focusing on critical analysis of the social injustice certain racial groups face and how/why the privileged language in America has taken its form, may have produced better results.

This study still leaves us with a few questions. Students expressed their belief in code-switching and their realization that it can be extremely helpful, but why weren’t they able to display style shifting abilities in the writing assessment? Are writing and spoken code-switching completely different concepts, and should direct instruction differ for each? Due to the nature of today’s schooling including MAE as the only acceptable language to be used in our classrooms, is contrastive analysis truly a task which should be included in code-switching pedagogy and instruction? Would it be wise to place increased emphasis on critical language instruction in replace of dialect variance lessons and contrastive analysis tasks? This action research study leaves us wanting to learn more about code-switching and its impact on urban students. While a major goal of the study was to answer this question, we still want to learn more about the topic.
Although this study does not directly answer the research question, nor does it provide readers and teachers with a direct answer on how to teach code-switching to students of color and youth in urban regions, there are many things that we are left thinking about as a result of this study. Primarily, schools today are doing our students a disservice by not valuing their home language and celebrating the cultural diversity of its students, and we can see the impact of this on the data and events within this study. Also, just because a teacher understands code-switching or seemingly has an adequate understanding of why style shifting is important, it does not mean they are equipped to teach and promote code-switching in their schools. Professional development is needed in the areas of Culturally Responsive Teaching and critical language pedagogy, and readers of this study are left wondering how schools can begin to implement these ideas immediately. The bottom line is that we can teach students to code-switch and we can engage students in culturally responsive learning in classrooms, but in order to cause grand change and improve the lives of our nation’s inner-city youth, we must begin to change our school systems to promote social justice and critical language pedagogy. By changing our school systems, we can then begin to change the future of our society.
References


CODE-SWITCHING INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT WRITING


Appendix A

Day 1:
- Free write prompt (data to assess non-MAE writing features) – 10 minutes
- Discuss dialects and accents, small group discussion – 5 minutes
- Show YouTube video about dialect variation – 5 minutes
- Complete exit ticket reflection – 5 minutes

Day 2:
- Quick dialect variation Do Now – 5 minutes
- Contrastive Analysis mini-lesson, with notes – 15 minutes
- Complete exit ticket reflection – 5 minutes

Day 3
- Contrastive Analysis Do Now – 5 minutes
- Code-switching introduction – 5 minutes
- Guided Practice, code-switching practice, mock college/job interviews – 10 minutes
- Free writing prompt (data to assess non-MAE writing features) – 10 minutes
Appendix B

Contrastive Analysis
10/27/2015

Name: __________________________________________

**Today's Focus:** We are going to analyze differences between Standard English and Urban vernacular dialects. We will discuss why urban dialects are not wrong; they are just different from Standard English in various ways.

**Standard English:** The variety of English _______ in U.S. ______, ______, and ______ circles as well as in the mainstream ______.

**Urban vernacular English:** The native dialect of a specific urban ______, or a dialect used in the area, region, or state inhabited by that population.

**Feature Analysis**

**Directions:** Read aloud the Urban Vernacular English statement, then say "OR..." and read aloud the Standard English equivalent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Vernacular English</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They happy.</td>
<td>They are happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then we had played outside.</td>
<td>Then we played outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We gon win. OR We gonna win.</td>
<td>We are going to win.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She be talkin.</td>
<td>She is talking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He been finished.</td>
<td>He finished a while ago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They done got it.</td>
<td>They already got it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I loves my new car.</td>
<td>I love my new car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She ain't got it.</td>
<td>She doesn't have it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't nobody beat us.</td>
<td>Nobody can beat us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why I can't play?</td>
<td>Why can't I play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There go my momma.</td>
<td>There is my momma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turn over the page!
Contrastive Analysis  
10/27/2015  

Name: ________________________________

**Directions:** Practice writing these statements in Standard English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Vernacular English</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They be so excited!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He be yelling and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why I can’t go with you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t nobody stop me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Exit Ticket - Reflection.

Name:

1. Standard English is a variety (or dialect) of English privileged in U.S. ....
   a. Colleges, schools, and stores.
   b. Academic, government, and professional circles.
   c. Communities of white people.
   d. Communities of non-minority people.

2. Urban Vernacular English is spoken by people mainly located in...
   a. Farm countries
   b. Colleges
   c. Hip-hop dominated communities
   d. Cities

3. Select the choice which best represents an Urban Vernacular English-based statement.
   a. Why can't I go to the mall?
   b. I just can't believe the way you're acting.
   c. I'm gon get mine.
   d. Quit acting crazy!

4. Why do you think you learned this today? Think about the long-term potential of knowing this and how it could help you in the future.

   What I learned today was that
   not every speaks differently when learn
   because every comes from different places.
Contrastive Analysis - DO NOW
11/2/2015

Name:

Directions: Read the statements below. Circle whether the statement is Urban Vernacular English, or Standard English.

1. He been finished.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

2. We are going to win!  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

3. I love my new bike.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

4. She been done.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

5. How I can’t do it?  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

6. Then we went out.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

7. Somebody gon die.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English

8. Ain’t nobody finished.  
   - Urban Vernacular English  
   - Standard English
### Directions: Practice writing these statements in Standard English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Vernacular English</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They be so excited!</td>
<td>They are so excited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He be yelling and stuff.</td>
<td>He always yelling and stuff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why I can't go with you?</td>
<td>Why can't I go with you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't nobody stop me.</td>
<td>Nobody can stop me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y'all need to stop</td>
<td>You all need to stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is you</td>
<td>Who are you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5/6
Do Now – 10/27/15

Name:

1. What is a dialect?

A dialect is the voice or tone a person speaks depending on where they come from.

2. Why does it make sense that everyone has a dialect?

It makes sense because everyone has a different way of speaking.

Exit Ticket - Reflection

Name:

1. Do you have an accent or dialect? (Circle One) [YES] or NO

2. In college or during a job interview, would a special accent or dialect help or hurt your chances of impressing someone? (Circle One) HELP or HURT

3. What did you learn from today's session?

I learned that everyone has a different dialect and everyone is different.
Appendix D

Jeff Allen
Teacher Focus Group Questions
GRDG 690
12/1/2015

• What is code-switching? Provide a definition.

• Do students need to code-switch? Why or why not? (Take a poll on this one and have teachers elaborate).

• How can we best assist students in their acquisition of code-switching skills?

• Do you allow students to code-switch in class and on assignments without penalty?

• When are they allowed to talk-write in their primary discourse? Which assignments?
  o Why are they allowed during these times specifically?
  o What is the benefit to allowing the use of their native discourse?

• How do you teach students about code-switching? Or, how should we teach code-switching?

• Is it unjust that we require students to code-switch?

• Should we promote use of home languages? If so, how?
Appendix E

**Directions:** Practice writing these statements in Standard English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Vernacular English</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They be so excited!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He be yelling and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why I can’t go with you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t nobody stop me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Contrastive Analysis - DO NOW
11/2/2015

Name: __________________________________________

Directions: Read the statements below. Circle whether the statement is Urban Vernacular English, or Standard English.

1. He been finished. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
2. We are going to win! Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
3. I love my new bike. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
4. She been done. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
5. How I can’t do it? Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
6. Then we went out. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
7. Somebody gon die. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
8. Ain’t nobody finished. Urban Vernacular English OR Standard English
Appendix G

Chapter Two

What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

In spite of the controversy over its classification, linguists agree that AAE is a distinct and rule-governed variety of speech. What, then, are the features that distinguish it from Standard American English or other nonstandard American varieties such as Southern White American English? Wolfram and Schilling-Estes point out that in some instances a particular aspect of AAE pronunciation or grammar is unique rather than the feature itself, while in other instances the uniqueness is a matter of the frequency of use:

For example, -s third person singular absence (e.g., she walk) is found in both African American and Anglo American vernaculars but . . . [s]ome African American speakers show levels of absence between 80 and 90 percent while comparable Anglo American speakers show a range of 5 to 15 percent absence. (171–72)

In addition to such differences, anthropologist Arthur Spears has demonstrated that AAE includes camouflaged forms, constructions that look like those in other varieties of English but possess unique uses or meanings in AAE (see “Black English”, 850), as in he come talkin bout gittin a job and he call himself workin, both of which express indignation in AAE.

While certain aspects of AAE are unique, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes conclude that much of the uniqueness of AAE lies in its distinctive combination of features. Although the particular combination may vary from Connecticut to Mississippi to California to Texas to North Carolina or from rural to suburban to urban areas, there is a “basic core” of AAE features that crosses geographical boundaries (174–75). Some AAE speakers do not
use all of these features or use them only some of the time, but nearly all African Americans understand them (Dandy 39).

In this chapter, we explore some of the distinctive features of AAE’s vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and rhetoric, especially those that may surface in a student’s writing. If you wish, you can practice identifying these features in the student writing samples in Appendix A.

Vocabulary

One unique set of features that is most recognizable and important is vocabulary. According to Smitherman, African Americans have forged a unique vocabulary from West African languages (e.g., cola), the traditional black church (e.g., git the spirit), black music (e.g., funky), and racial oppression (e.g., the Man) (Black Talk 17). As we stated in Chapter 1, these words include but are not limited to slang. AAE vocabulary can accommodate slang, historical words, novel meanings, and, at times, obscenity, just as Standard English does. The AAE speaker does not, however, have to use any of these words.

Slang

Typically coined by African American teenagers and musicians, AAE slang reflects the endless creativity of the African American people. Consider, for instance, such metaphorical terms as hat up (“leave”), lame (“out of step”), and nickel n dime (“petty”) (Smitherman, Black Talk 159, 189, 210). Hip-Hop music in particular has generated some of the most noteworthy words. As anthropologist Marcyliena Morgan notes, today’s Hip-Hop artists have transformed Standard English words in ingenious ways (“Nuthin’” 199):

- By changing the part of speech (e.g., the verb fly becomes the adjective fly, meaning “attractive”)
- By turning prefixes into words (e.g., dis- from disrespect assumes the meaning of the whole word, as in She dissed him)
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

- By attaching suffixes (e.g., converse becomes conversate and beautiful, beautifullest).

AAE speakers also invent new slang terms by replacing words in a phrase. The phrase get your groove on (“get something going” as in dancing), for example, inspired get my chill on (“rest”), get my grub on (“eat”), and get my praise on (“worship”) (Green 30–31).

But African American students are unlikely to incorporate such language in their high school and college essays: they recognize these words as slang and are mindful that most teachers frown on colloquialisms in academic writing. If they can switch to Standard English easily, they may even avoid using slang in class discussions. Therefore, writing teachers are most likely to encounter AAE slang during students’ peer review group sessions and other types of collaborative learning activities, on electronic discussion boards and listservs, and in written dialogue, personal narratives, or creative writing.

To the typical American writing teacher, some of these slang words should sound familiar. As Smitherman has documented in her dictionary Black Talk, some African American slang has “crossed over” into mainstream English, enriching the vocabulary of the whole country (29). Long ago, when African Americans were concentrated in the South, AAE words of all kinds diffused into the speech of white southerners. Today, however, AAE slang in particular usually spreads via African American music to teens of all colors and then into mainstream newspapers and advertising (Rickford and Rickford 97–98). AAE sells everything from sneakers (e.g., You the man in a Nike ad) to vacations (e.g., Chill out in an airline ad) (Smitherman, Black Talk 29). Indeed, because of the influx of AAE words, celebrated writer James Baldwin once characterized AAE as “a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is.” In a 1979 essay, he explains:

Now I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. Jazz, for example, is
A TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on!*

Although imitation is supposed to be the highest form of flattery, many African Americans resent this wholesale borrowing. Smitherman points out some of the cruel ironies of AAE crossovers:

What is it about the language and culture of U.S. slave descendants, these outcasts on the margins of American life, that makes crossover so rampant, especially given the fact that the people who create the language and culture can't cross over... Whatever the motivation for crossover, one thing is certain: in these postmodern times, there is a multibillion-dollar industry based on Black Language and Culture, while at the same time, there is continued underdevelopment and deterioration among the people who produce this language and culture. (*Black Talk* 30–33)

Given that so much African American slang is "out on loan to white people [w]ith no interest," it is not surprising that a new term replaces the old one in the African American community almost as soon as the old one is picked up by whites (Ralph Wiley qtd. in Smitherman, *Black Talk* 33; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 70). For instance, Lisa Green found that *phat* ("extremely good-looking, tasty, or nice")—a term popularized by African Americans in the 1990s—was no longer in vogue with her African American college students by 1999, although it was still popular among her white students (27). Smitherman concludes that

this dynamism is due, in part, to today's rather extreme cultural chauvinism among blacks, which says all whites are lames and if they are using this expression, it's gotten stale and unhip... The other part of the explanation may be due to the historical inimical relations of blacks and whites which dictated the necessity for a black linguistic code. (*Talkin and Testifyin* 70)

Thus, teachers who try to keep up with their African American students' slang may find themselves on a fast-moving treadmill.
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

Says Clarence Major, author of *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, “Black slang is a living, breathing form of expression that changes so quickly no researcher can keep up with it” (xxix).

_Historically Black Words_

In contrast to the ever-changing slang, the words that Rickford and Rickford call “historically black” extend across generational, geographical, and social boundaries in African America (94). Many of these words, such as _ashy_ (“dry skin”) and _suck teeth_ (“to suck air through the teeth to express annoyance”), refer to characteristics of African American life, including cultural traditions, social distinctions, and physical appearance, yet many African Americans have no idea that other Americans may not understand the words (94–95). Hence, these are the AAE words that are most likely to surface in students’ essays. We advise teachers, therefore, to have on hand Smitherman’s *Black Talk* or Major’s *Juba to Jive* for easy reference (see the suggested readings at the end of this chapter).

_Novel Meanings_

While teachers may encounter AAE words that do not exist in standard dictionaries, the most baffling words may prove to be familiar ones to which AAE has assigned a novel meaning. In AAE, for example, _kitchen_ becomes the curly hair at the neckline, _fresh_, “excellent”; and _deep_, “serious.” Sometimes the AAE term alters the standard meaning only slightly; hence, _wack_, meaning “incredibly deficient,” is derived from _wacky_, defined in Standard English as “absurd or irrational” (Morgan, “Nuthin’” 198). At other times, the AAE term conveys the opposite of the standard meaning: it “flips the script.” The classic example is _bad_, meaning “very good,” but there are a host of others, such as _rags_ (“stylish clothes”) and _shut up_ (“talk on”) (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 241, 260). In addition, traditionally negative words sometimes assume positive connotations in AAE, among them _mean, stupid, dope, and phat_, all meaning “excellent.” Accord-
CODE-SWITCHING INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT WRITING

ing to Spears, this type of semantic inversion is just one way in which AAE speakers exercise their broad sense of “semantic license,” which entitles them to invent words as needed (“Direct-ness” 248).

**So-Called Obscenity**

Perhaps the least understood AAE words are what most other Americans and even some African Americans consider obscenity. For instance, Smitherman discusses the notorious AAE term *muthafucka* (or *mutha* or *M.F.*). Although it can sting like a curse word (*That no-good muthafucka*), it can also express admiration (*He a bad muthafucka*) or add weight to a statement (*You muthafuckin right*) (*Talkin and Testifyin* 60). Some students may submit poems or post online messages that draw on this vocabulary—much to the shock and dismay of their teachers. If so, Spears urges us to keep in mind that many AAE speakers do not consider such terms obscene (“African-American” 242). Though he concedes that “obscenity, in the final analysis, is in the ears of the hearer,” he argues that some “obscene” AAE words have been “neutralized” because they are “negative, positive, or neutral in force depending on how they are used” (232). In fact, sometimes an AAE speaker will employ such words merely for their rhythmic quality (237). This so-called obscenity illustrates what applies to most AAE vocabulary: to understand it, you must know the sociocultural frame of reference.

**Pronunciation**

At first glance, AAE pronunciation may not seem as relevant to writing instruction as vocabulary is. A writing teacher might assume that the pronunciation of AAE—the sounds of words and the intonation—rarely influences students’ written work. Yet research suggests that AAE pronunciation can affect students’ spelling as well as the comprehensibility of their speech (*O’Neal* and *Trabasso* 185; *Gilyard, Let’s Flip* 69), especially when students are learning to read and write. Even college students may write what they hear other AAE speakers say: English professor Charles
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

Coleman has found instances of *stalk* for *stork*, *use to* for *used to*, *doggy dog world* for *dog eat dog world*, and other aural/oral misspellings in their academic writing (488–89). Spelling, though, is not the only relevant issue. AAE pronunciation deserves our attention because it can lead to gross educational injustices. As a result of AAE pronunciation, many AAE speakers have been placed in special education and speech therapy classes, or they have become the targets of discrimination (Bailey and Thomas 85). Thus, there are a number of reasons we should take a closer look at the AAE sound system.

In some ways, AAE speakers sound like southern white Americans. After all, both groups pronounce *I* as “Ah” and *pen* as “pin” (Rickford and Rickford 99). Such similarities, however, do not make AAE pronunciation any less distinctive. First of all, it is likely that in the South, where 90 percent of African Americans lived until the twentieth century, white families on plantations and tenant farms picked up these features from African Americans (Rickford and Rickford 100). Second, Bailey and Thomas have documented how changes in Southern White pronunciation since the mid-1800s have magnified the differences between Southern White and African American speech (106). Most important, AAE includes features of pronunciation that are not found in Southern White speech (Rickford and Rickford 100). Consequently, McWhorter remarks, “Most Americans, and especially black ones, can almost always tell that a person is black even on the phone, and even when the speaker is using standard English sentences” (Word 133).

So what makes AAE sound “black”? According to Smitherman, “the real distinctiveness—and beauty—in the black sound system lies in . . . its speech rhythms, voice inflections, and tonal patterns” (*Talkin and Testifyin* 17). For instance, AAE speakers sometimes vary vowels for emphasis (*Sang good now, y’all*) or adopt a lyrical tone (*I say Lo-rd, Lo-rd, Lo-rd*) (*Talkin and Testifyin* 18, 135). We explore these musical qualities when we turn to rhetorical strategies at the end of this chapter. Now, however, let us consider how AAE speakers articulate vowels and consonants and the syllables that contain them. As Rickford and Rickford explain, these pronunciations are “highly systematic, and not the careless or haphazard pronunciations that observers
often mistake them for” (104). Just recall Rickford’s example in Chapter 1: although AAE speakers omit the final consonant in test and hand, they retain the final consonant in pant because pant does not end with two voiceless consonants (such as st) or two voiced consonants (such as ndj (AAVE 323).

Syllables

AAE speakers may stress the first syllable of a word instead of the second (“PO-lice”). On the other hand, if a syllable is un-stressed, they may omit it, as in “fraid” (from afraid) or “sec’t’ry” (from secretary) (Rickford, AAVE 5).

Vowels

In AAE, vowels may change substantially (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 23–25; Rickford, AAVE 4–5), as illustrated below:

- *Ing/ink*: In words such as thing and think, ing sounds like “ang” and ink sounds like “ank,” producing “thang” and “thank.”

- *Complex vowels*: Complex vowel sounds (diphthongs) like those in the word nice are often simplified so that nice sounds like “nabs.”

- *“E”*: Before nasal sounds such as m, n, and ng, the vowel e sounds like i, making pen sound like “pin.”

Consonants

AAE transforms consonants far more than vowels and in ways that resemble the sounds of West African languages (Smith 56). As the following list reveals, AAE tends to omit or simplify consonants, especially at the end of a word:

- *Th sounds*: pronunciation of initial th in a syllable as “d” or “v” (them = “dem,” brother = “bruvver”) and final th as “f” or “t” (mouth = “mouf”)

- *R sound*: absence of r after a vowel (more = “mow”)

- *L sound*: absence of middle and final l (help = “hep”)

— 26 —
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

- **V and Z sounds:** pronunciation of \(v\) as “b” and \(z\) as “d” before a nasal sound (**seven** = “seben,” **isn’t** = “idn”)
- **Str:** pronunciation of **str** as “skr” when **str** begins a syllable (**street** = “skreet”)
- **Ing:** pronunciation of **ng** as “n” in multisyllabic words ending in **ing** (**walking** = “walkin”)
- **Consonant clusters:** simplification of most consonant clusters at the end of a word (**test** = “tes”)
- **Adjacent consonants:** transposition of adjacent consonants (**ask** = “aks”) (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 17; Rickford, AAVE 4–5)

AAE also contracts whole words; for example, **I don’t know** becomes “I ’on know”; **and them,** “nem”; and **I am going to,** “I gon” or “Ima” (Rickford, AAVE 5, 7; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 23–25, *Talkin and Testifyin* 17–18).

**Spelling**

From these pronunciation patterns, you can see how easy it is to confuse certain words from AAE and Standard English. As reading specialist Evelyn Dandy observes, AAE produces many words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently; for example, “den” could mean **den** or **then** and “coat” could mean **coat** or **court** (46). According to English professor Keith Gilyard, such AAE-related homophones account for some of the misspellings he sees in AAE speakers’ papers, such as the misspelling of **mind** in I really wouldn’t mine having an Acura Legend (*Let’s Flip* 69). Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, teachers must pay attention to the context of such words.

But what about the AAE words that are spelled the same yet pronounced differently? Hip-Hop artists have attempted to avoid writing homonyms by inventing spellings that reflect AAE’s distinctive pronunciation and meanings. Morgan lists some Hip-Hop spelling rules:

*Er:* The -**er** ending on words with two or more syllables is spelled -**a**, -**ub**, or -**ah**, as in **brotha** (“brother”).
**A Teacher's Introduction to African American English**

*Ingin*: The *-ing* ending is written as *-in* or *-un*, as in *sunthin* ("something") and *thumpun* ("thumping").

*Reduced Words*: Syllables are reduced and vowels assimilated so that "all right" is spelled *aight*. ("Nuthin" 201–204)

Although such novel spellings may appear in students' creative and informal writing, they probably will not emerge in students' academic essays. In fact, AAE accounts for only a small proportion of AAE speakers' misspellings of Standard English words. In fact, in one experiment most African American children did not spell even AAE-related homophones the same as long as the words were presented in a sentence (O'Neal and Trabasso 179).

**Grammar**

Of all the features of AAE, grammar is the most distinctive for linguists and the most relevant for writing teachers. Compared to Standard American English, AAE relies less on word endings to convey grammatical information, boasts a more complex verb system, and accesses a wider range of sentence patterns.

Below, we look at the most striking characteristics of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and sentence patterns in AAE. As we examine these features, keep the following principles in mind:

1. AAE is "streamlined" (Palacas 340): just as Old English evolved into a language with fewer grammatical word endings, so has AAE, surpassing Standard American English (Gilyard, *Let's Flip* 68).

2. AAE can depend less on word endings because it depends more on contextual clues in the sentence or situation (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 25).

3. In spite of its tendency toward streamlining, AAE retains a highly complex verb system that emphasizes *how* something happened rather than when it happened (Nehusi 93–94).

4. For many of the grammatical peculiarities of AAE, there are parallels in the languages that West Africans spoke before they
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

were enslaved (Nehusi 92–99; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 55–57).

5. Many grammatical forms that look standard are camouflaged: they possess different meanings and uses (Spears, “Black English” 850).

6. Use of AAE grammar varies according to social class, gender, and age: African Americans who are working class, male, or young are more likely than others to use AAE grammar (Rickford and Rickford 126–27). An individual will, however, employ certain features of AAE grammar to varying degrees, depending on the particular sentence, audience, topic, or some other aspect of the situation. As Smitherman says, “[D]o not expect all Black English speakers to use all these patterns all the time” (*Talkin and Testifyin* 31). In short, like speakers of Standard English, AAE speakers exercise their “linguistic options” (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 25).

7. In many ways, AAE is converging with Standard American English. Caught in this transitional stage, AAE speakers may alternate between AAE and standard forms in the same breath. Also, because African Americans were denied an adequate education for centuries, AAE speakers produce some hypercorrections, forms created as a result of overgeneralizing from standard rules (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 28, 32).

8. AAE grammatical features are not errors; they simply conform to a different set of rules than Standard Written English does. In situations where the average reader would expect SWE, however, we use the term SWE errors to refer to all features (AAE or otherwise) that violate SWE rules.

With these principles in mind, let us turn to specific features of grammar. We have drawn most of our explanations and examples from Rickford’s *African American Vernacular English* and Rickford and Rickford’s *Spoken Soul*. Other sources are cited as needed.

**Nouns and Pronouns**

Both AAE nouns and pronouns exhibit the same tendency: to rely on contextual clues instead of word endings to indicate plurality or possession. According to linguist Lorenzo Turner (223–24, 227), anthropologist Ivan Van Sertima (140), and Nehusi
(92), this characteristic is typical of many African languages. Although AAE speakers normally add the plural -s to a noun to indicate "more than one," if another word in the sentence (e.g., two) already signals that the noun is plural, AAE speakers usually omit the -s, as in two boy (Rickford, AAVE 7). In contrast, Standard English is extremely redundant. As Dandy points out, the Standard English sentence There are three books on the chair "has indicated plural in three ways at once: are, three, and the -s on books" (48).

The presence of contextual clues also accounts for the AAE possessive. If a word such as Jamal precedes a noun (e.g., house), AAE speakers may assume that the juxtaposition of that word and the noun indicates who owns what. Hence: Jamal house. As Table 2.1 reveals, this practice extends to the pronouns they and y'all ("you all").

Do not assume, however, that all plural and possessive SWE errors are rooted in AAE grammar. Sometimes overgeneralizing from the standard rules for plurals and possessives leads AAE speakers to produce hypercorrections that have nothing to do with AAE's rules. For instance, AAE speakers may add the plural -s to nouns that have irregular plural forms, producing errors such as mens (Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin 28). Other common plural and possessive SWE errors are simply a matter of spelling. Both AAE and non-AAE speakers may omit or mis-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NOUNS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of plural -s</td>
<td>two boy</td>
<td>two boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of possessive -s</td>
<td>Jamal house</td>
<td>Jamal's house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRONOUNS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional plural forms</td>
<td>y'all</td>
<td>You (plural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tina an' em</td>
<td>Tina and her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(or nem)</td>
<td>associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of possessive form for y'all and they</td>
<td>y'all ball</td>
<td>your ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they ball</td>
<td>their ball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
place the apostrophe after a singular possessive noun (e.g., a girls' coat or a girls' coats). Such SWE errors do not stem from AAE grammar since they reveal an underlying understanding of possession in Standard English. Unlike the AAE form a girl's coat (which indicates possession through juxtaposition), these forms include an -s sound to indicate possession just as the standard form does (i.e., a girl's coat). The same sort of spelling mistake also turns up when students add the possessive -s instead of -s to make a noun plural, producing phrases such as five house's. This too is not derived from AAE (which omits the -s) since the students clearly understand that they need to add an s sound to signal plurality.

Adverbs and Adjectives

Like nouns and pronouns, some adjectives and adverbs also lack grammatical endings. For instance, adverbs such as sometimes may omit the -s ending (Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin 30), while past participles such as concerned that act like adjectives may omit the -ed ending in sentences such as I am concerned (Smitherman, That Talk 170).

Verbs

The AAE verb system differs from Standard English in the way it indicates when something happened (i.e., tense) and how something happened (i.e., aspect). Let's consider tense first.

Time of Action

To convey the present tense in sentences where is and are function as linking verbs, AAE needs no verb at all. Instead of saying, "They are happy," AAE speakers can simply say, "They happy" (Rickford and Rickford 114–16). Meanwhile, to convey the past tense, AAE speakers can exercise a number of options in addition to using the standard past-tense forms. Like speakers of some West African languages (Van Sertima 141), they can rely on a contextual clue (last night) instead of a word ending (-ed) to signal the past, as in I look for him last night. Alternatively, they
can use a lone past participle (She seen him). Or they can combine had and a past participle to indicate the past (Then we had played), especially while narrating (Rickford and Rickford 121–22; Green 91–92).

Linguistically speaking, the present and the past are the only tenses in Standard English, and the same applies to AAE. Therefore, like Standard English, AAE has no word endings to express future time. Instead, it employs un conjugated be (He be here tomorrow) or gon for “am/is/are going to” (We gon win). Or it uses finna (derived from fixin’ to, a regional term) to refer to the immediate future (Rickford, AAVE 6). Table 2.2 summarizes these features.

**Mode of Action**

Van Sertima found that West African languages “place more emphasis on the ‘mode of action’ than on the ‘time of action’” (145). Like these African languages, AAE dedicates more of its resources to specifying how something happened than when it happened (Nehusi 93). Consequently, AAE offers speakers diverse ways to indicate that an action is in progress or has been completed. For instance, to refer to an action that is going on now, AAE omits the helping verb be before the -ing verb: He

---

**Table 2.2. Present, Past, and Future in AAE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRESENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of is and are</td>
<td>They happy.</td>
<td>They are happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PAST</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past participle</td>
<td>She seen him yesterday.</td>
<td>She saw him yesterday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb stem</td>
<td>I look for him last night.</td>
<td>I looked for him last night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FUTURE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconjugated be</td>
<td>He be here tomorrow.</td>
<td>He will be here tomorrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gon</td>
<td>We gon win.</td>
<td>We are going to win.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finna (or fitna)</strong></td>
<td>He finna go.</td>
<td>He’s about to go.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

talkin. But be reemerges in its unconjugated form if the action is habitual: He be talkin. On the other hand, if AAE speakers wish to emphasize how long the action continues, they can add steady: He be steady talkin (Rickford, AAVE 6). Compare these forms in Table 2.3.

If you think the progressive is complicated, take a look at the perfective. Although other English speakers may use a few of these forms, the range of perfective forms available to AAE speakers is astounding. As the following table illustrates, instead of combining a form of have with a past participle, AAE speakers can use unstressed been by itself (He been sick), the past tense after a form of have (She had went), or just the verb stem after a form of have (They have work hard) (Rickford, AAVE 6–7; Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 170). To indicate that the action was recently completed, AAE speakers need not include the word recently. Combining the helping verb done with a verb will do the job—and with extra emphasis: He done finished it or He done finish it. On the other hand, if the action was completed long ago, they can stress been (which we spell here as BIN): He BIN finished or He BIN finish (Rickford, AAVE 6). Notice that when AAE speakers use have, done, and BIN as helping verbs, they often omit the -ed or -en ending on the following verb; in other words, they use only the verb stem. This occurs in the passive voice as well: I am lock in my room (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 170). Table 2.4 summarizes what we’ve covered so far.

In addition to using standard helping verbs (e.g., be and do) in unconventional ways, AAE speakers have invented others such as liketa (meaning “nearly did”) and poseta (short for “supposed to”) while turning the verb come into a helping verb that expresses indignation (Rickford, AAVE 6–7). See Table 2.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.3. Alternative Progressive Forms in AAE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of is or are helping verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He talkin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is talking right now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual be (or bees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He be talkin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He usually talks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bees dat way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That's the way it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steady as an intensifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He be steady talkin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He keeps talking on and on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A TEACHER’S INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Overwhelmed? There’s more, but we’ll stop here. From the preceding analysis, it is easy to see why Toni Morrison once declared, “It’s terrible to think that a child with five present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language” (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 231). Although Morrison apparently counts the progressive forms as tenses, she vividly conveys the complexity of the AAE verb system.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Since AAE shuns endings for most verbs, it is not surprising that it does not require an -s ending to show that a verb takes a third-person singular subject in the present tense. Thus, in AAE, present-tense verbs are usually identical: I walk, you walk, he walk, we

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unstressed been</td>
<td>He been sick.</td>
<td>He has been sick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense after have</td>
<td>She had went.</td>
<td>She had gone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb stem after have</td>
<td>They have work hard.</td>
<td>They have worked hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Done before have</td>
<td>He done finish.</td>
<td>He has already finished. (recent past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed BIN</td>
<td>He BIN finish.</td>
<td>He finished long ago.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Done</td>
<td>She done finish.</td>
<td>She has already finished. (recent past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed BIN</td>
<td>She BIN finish.</td>
<td>She finished a long time ago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liketa</td>
<td>I liketa drown</td>
<td>I nearly drowned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poseta</td>
<td>You don’t poseta do it that way.</td>
<td>You’re not supposed to do it that way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indignant Come</td>
<td>He come walkin in here like he owned the place.</td>
<td>He had the nerve to walk in here as if he owned the place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

*walk*, *they walk*. In contrast, Standard English is inconsistent. As Dandy points out, the third-person singular -s ending is “an irregularity, since no suffix is used to mark present tense with other persons” (50).

There are occasions, however, when AAE speakers use a verbal -s ending where Standard English does not, though the usage may vary regionally. If the verb is *be*, for example, many AAE speakers add an -s to mark the verbs for *you* and plural subjects. Thus, they will say, “*you was*” and “*they is*.” They may also add a verbal -s for emphasis, as in *You know I wants to win* or *I loves my baby* (Pitts; Baugh, *Out* 127). Or they may attach an -s ending to indicate a recurring activity: *I gets my check on the first of the month* (Green 100–101; Smitherman *Talkin That Talk* 24).

Table 2.6 includes these options. Notice that this table does not include all types of SWE subject-verb agreement errors. SWE errors in sentences such as *The cost of the books are too high* stem from the difficulty of finding the subject, not from AAE rules of agreement.

**Sentence Patterns**

So far we have focused on the structure of words. But the structure of some types of sentences also distinguishes AAE from Standard English. In particular, AAE constructs negative statements,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absence of 3rd person singular present tense -s</td>
<td><em>She walk.</em></td>
<td><em>She walks.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| *Is and was* with plural subjects and *you* | *They is some crazy folk.*  
  *You was right.*        | *They are some crazy folks.*   
  *You were right.*      |
| Emphatic -s                   | *I loves my baby.*    | *I love my baby a lot.* |
| Habitual -s                   | *When I think about him, I gets excited.* | *When I think about him, I get excited.* |
questions, and sentences beginning with There and Here in different ways. Also, AAE sentence patterns are reflected in some of the constructions that writing teachers label as “mixed” or “fused” in students’ papers.

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

To negate statements, AAE speakers have retained the ain’t of early British English but have expanded its use so that it represents not only am not but also isn’t, aren’t, doesn’t, don’t, hasn’t, and haven’t. So an AAE speaker can say not only I ain’t lyin (“I am not lying”) but also He ain’t never seen it (“He hasn’t ever seen it”) or He ain’t got no further than third grade (“He didn’t get any further than third grade”). If AAE speakers use ain’t but, however, they merely mean “only”: She ain’t but six years old (Rickford, AAVE 8; Rickford and Rickford 122–24).

Two of the preceding examples illustrate another noteworthy characteristic of AAE: double negatives. While AAE shares this trait with some other nonstandard English dialects, AAE boasts triple negatives, as in I don’t owe nobody nothing (“I don’t owe anybody anything”). Moreover, AAE speakers are free to invert the subject and helping verb to construct negative statements such as Can’t nobody beat us (Rickford and Rickford 123). Table 2.7 presents all of these options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t for am not, isn’t, aren’t</td>
<td>I ain’t lyin.</td>
<td>I am not lying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t for hasn’t and haven’t</td>
<td>He ain’t seen her.</td>
<td>He hasn’t seen her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t for doesn’t and don’t</td>
<td>She ain’t got it.</td>
<td>She doesn’t have it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple negatives</td>
<td>I don’t owe nobody nothing.</td>
<td>I don’t owe anybody anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverted word order</td>
<td>Can’t nobody beat us.</td>
<td>Nobody can beat us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

**QUESTIONS**

The negative inversion shown in Table 2.7 is not the only instance of AAE inversion that distinguishes AAE from Standard English. AAE also inverts the subject and the helping verb in indirect questions when Standard English retains the usual word order and inserts *if* or *whether*. For instance, AAE produces *I asked him could he come* instead of the standard version *I asked him if he could come*. Ironically, while AAE prefers inverted word order in indirect questions, it allows speakers to forgo inversion in direct questions. Thus, instead of asking, "Why can't I play?," an AAE speaker may choose to ask, "Why I can't play?" as indicated in Table 2.8 (Rickford, AAVE 8).

**THERE/HERE STATEMENTS**

AAE offers speakers alternatives to structures such as *There is* and *Here is*. Sometimes, AAE speakers substitute *it* for *there* in sentences such as *It's a school across the street* or *It a school on her street*. At other times, they substitute *they got* for *there are* as in *They got some hungry women inside* (Rickford, AAVE 8–9). They can also replace *there are* with *there go* to present something or someone: *There go my friends in the front row* (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 23). As Table 2.9 reveals, *here go* operates in a similar fashion.

**MIXED OR FUSED CONSTRUCTIONS**

Many of the unconventional sentence structures that writing teachers see in AAE speakers' essays may be rooted in AAE grammar.

**Table 2.8. Question Formation in AAE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inverted word order in indirect questions</td>
<td><em>I asked him could he come.</em></td>
<td><em>I asked if he could come.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No inversion in direct questions</td>
<td><em>Why I can't play?</em></td>
<td><em>Why can't I play?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Double Subjects and Verbs. Take, for instance, the so-called double subject. AAE speakers seem to repeat the subject in a sentence such as *That teacher, she mean.* Smith argues, however, that they are merely commenting on the topic (*that teacher*). Thus, as in some African languages, their sentence divides into a topic (everything before the verb) and comment (everything pertaining to the topic):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That teacher</td>
<td>she [is] mean.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... as opposed to the usual subject and predicate (57):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Predicate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That teacher</td>
<td>[is] mean.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This topic-comment structure may give rise not only to “double subjects” within one sentence but to fused sentences as well. Charles Coleman, for example, analyzes an example from a college student’s paper, *There was this guy that came into the bank he was the banks mail man,* as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There was this guy that came into the bank</td>
<td>he was the bank[’s] mail man.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Says Coleman, “[T]he traditional explanation that these result from running two or more independent clauses together assumes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.9. There/Here Statements in AAE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It instead of <em>there</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>They</em> got instead of <em>there are</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>There</em> go instead of <em>there is or there are</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Here</em> go instead of <em>here is or here are</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that students are working from a subject/predicate orientation” (492). His analysis suggests otherwise.

In addition to so-called double subjects, Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram have noticed what teachers might consider a “double verb,” tell say: They tell him say, “You better not go there” (15). An observation by Van Sertima may apply here, however. He points out that in the African American Gullah dialect of the Georgia Sea Islands, when the sound se (pronounced almost like “say”) occurs “after a verb of saying, thinking or wishing,” it “always means ‘that.’ This use of se is common in some West African languages” (143). Thus, we might interpret the preceding sentence as “They told him that he better not go there.”

Object Complements. Martin and Wolfram have also observed an unusual sentence pattern involving the verb call. In Standard English, a sentence beginning with They call themselves . . . could be completed only with a noun phrase (e.g., “The Wildcats”) or an adjectival one (e.g., poor). But in AAE, in a pejorative statement a verb form can follow call, as in They call themselves dancing, which implies that they do not dance well (17).

Subordinating Conjunctions. Other linguists have noted the absence of certain subordinating conjunctions in AAE speakers’ speech and writing. Rickford points out the missing relative pronoun subject who or that in a sentence such as That’s the man was here (AAVE 8). Although Standard English often omits the relative pronouns who and that, it preserves them when the pronouns are subjects of relative clauses (e.g., That’s the man who was here). According to Palacas, Standard English also preserves that more often than AAE does when that introduces noun clauses. Thus, the following sentence is more typical of AAE: His reply was he thought the test was racist first of all (330). Table 2.10 presents some of these distinctive sentence patterns.

In addition to constructions such as those listed in Table 2.10, Charles Coleman speculates that the frequency of what he calls “by strings” in his students’ essays may be related to AAE. Citing linguistic studies by Elizabeth Sommers and Francisca Sanchez, he suggests that AAE speakers use the preposition by in a more causative way than speakers of Standard English do. For instance,
Sommers recorded *Then she had a telephone call by one of her friends*, and Sanchez, *I got a black eye by this boy* (491). This usage, Coleman proposes, may account for sentences such as the following, quoted from a student’s paper: *By making English the official language would take away one’s constitutional rights* (490). The *by* phrase essentially becomes the cause of the action and therefore attempts to assume the subject position in the sentence.

Such constructions turn up from time to time in students’ writing, but how often do students incorporate other features of AAE grammar in their academic essays? Not as often as you might think. After analyzing 2,764 essays written by African American seventeen-year-olds for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 1969 and 1989, Smitherman and a team of independent raters found a “generally low” frequency of AAE grammatical features (*Talkin That Talk* 167). “Further,” Smitherman reports, “certain prevalent [AAE] speech patterns occur very infrequently in writing, for example, the classic BE aspect, as in *They be tired*” (168). More recently, Elaine Richardson also reported a “low frequency and distribution of AAVE syntax” in the pretest and posttest essays of fifty-two African American first-year college students who had an AAE background (*African* 104–5).

### Table 2.10. Distinctive AAE Sentence Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Double subjects</td>
<td><em>My mother, she told me to go.</em></td>
<td><em>My mother told me to go.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double verbs <em>tell</em> and <em>say</em></td>
<td><em>They tell him say, “You better not go there.”</em></td>
<td><em>They told him that he better not go there.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb as object complement after <em>call</em></td>
<td><em>They call themselves dancing.</em></td>
<td><em>They don’t dance well.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of subject relative pronoun <em>who, which, what, or that</em></td>
<td><em>That’s the man was here.</em></td>
<td><em>That’s the man who was here.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of <em>that</em> before noun clauses</td>
<td><em>His reply was he thought the test was racist.</em></td>
<td><em>His reply was that he thought the test was racist.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

It is worth noting that Smitherman and her team concluded that the number of AAE grammatical features in essays from the NAEP had declined between 1969 and 1989 (Talkin That Talk 175). Nevertheless, given the popularity of Hip-Hop among today’s African American youth, you might wonder whether Hip-Hop will reverse that trend. Certainly, we see a lot of AAE grammar at work in the Hip-Hop Nation. Smitherman explains why:

Because many rap artists are college educated, and most are adept at code switching, they obviously could employ “standard English” in their rap lyrics. However, in their quest to “disturb the peace,” they deliberately and consciously employ the “antilanguage” of the Black speech community. . . . [T]he use of the Black speech community’s syntax covertly reinforces Black America’s 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination. (Talkin That Talk 274)

H. Samy Alim’s research suggests that some African Americans flaunt AAE grammar not only to reject but also to connect. In other words, they consciously increase their use of AAE features whenever they want to “stay street”—i.e., to construct an identity that connects them to the young African American community (55).

Whether the frequency of AAE grammar is increasing or decreasing in school writing, one trend is clear: the incidence has remained high enough to generate public debate, a host of “minority remediation” programs, and a flood of new books about AAE.

Rhetoric

Compared to AAE grammar, African American English rhetoric is far more likely to surface in students’ academic essays, especially in classrooms where most students are facile code-switchers, shifting as needed from AAE to Standard English. AAE rhetoric is the set of discourse strategies that represent how many African Americans use language. In most African American communities, the use of language is a high art; in other words, how and why you say something is as important as what you say.
Appendix H

Teacher Focus Group Questionnaire

Name: ___________________________________________

Directions: Read the question, and circle the response which best fits your opinion.

1. Is code-switching something students in urban schools need to know?
   
   YES or NO

2. On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is the skill of code-switching for students who speak non-standard forms of English?
   
   1  2  3  4  5

3. Do you judge students negatively who use non-standard English in your classroom during oral responses?
   
   YES or NO

4. How often do you correct non-standard forms of English used by your students (in oral or written language)?
   
   Never Less than once a day About once a day More than once a day

5. Would you be inclined to give a lower grade/score to a student who displays various non-standard features of English in their writing?
   
   YES or NO