How a dialect-shifting curriculum shapes K-1 teachers’ attitudes toward language variation: A mixed-methods study

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Roadmap

- Rationale
- Background: Dialect Diversity, Literacy, and Teacher Attitudes
- Study Context
- Quantitative Survey Study
- Qualitative Interview Study
- Discussion
Rationale: Dialect variation and early literacy

- Correlation between usage rate of non-standardized dialect features and lower literacy measures in children who speak African American Language (Charity et al., 2004; Connor & Craig, 2006; Terry & Connor, 2012)
- Potential explanations
  - Linguistic differences / children’s metalinguistic awareness
  - Teacher attitudes
- Potential area for intervention
Background: Dialect variation in North American English(es)

- **Dialect**
  - Language variety that is shared by a community of speakers
  - Mutually intelligible

- **Dominant American English (DAE)**
  - Standard(ized) American English, Mainstream American English
  - Associated with high-SES white speakers

- **African American Language (AAL)**
  - African American (Vernacular) English
  - Family of varieties spoken in predominantly African American communities
  - Lots of diversity

Jones, 2020
Background: Language Ideologies

- Standard Language Ideology (Lippi-Green, 1997)
- Appropriateness-based approaches (Flores & Rosa, 2015)
Students’ right to their own language (CCCC, 1974)

- AAL is fully suited to academic and professional discourse (Young, 2010)
- Instruction should interrogate linguistic norms (Baker-Bell, 2020)
- Code-meshing encouraged

This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!

- teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!
- teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch and teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy instead!
- political discussions and praxis that center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!
- teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!
- Black dispositions in the research and teaching of Black Language!

This list of demands was created by the 2020 Special Committee on Composing a CCCC Statement on Anti-Black Racism and Black Linguistic Justice, Or, Why We Can’t Breathe!
Study Context: Efficacy Study of ToggleTalk®

- Scripted curriculum for K-1
- Contrastive analysis, comparing AAL and DAE
- Home/school, formal/informal
  - Appropriateness
Study Context: Efficacy Study of ToggleTalk®

- **Metropolitan school district**
  - Mid-atlantic US
  - ≥89% Black/African American
  - ≥89% Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

- **Randomized controlled study (school-level)**
  - Business-as-usual control

- **Students receive assessment battery before and after curriculum implementation**

- **Teachers at intervention schools received a full-day training session and ongoing support.**
Roles and Positionality

Zachary Maher:
Ph.D. Candidate, White, Male, DAE speaker, no contact with teachers
Wrote initial script, coded interviews, analyzed data

Carolyn Mazzei:
Project staff, White, Female, DAE speaker, worked with teachers
Revised script, conducted interviews, coded interviews, analyzed data

Tatiana Thonesavanh:
Project staff, Black, Female, DAE + AAL speaker, worked with teachers
Revised script, conducted interviews

Ebony Terrell Shockley:
Co-PI, Black, Female, DAE + AAL speaker
Provided feedback throughout process

Jan Edwards:
PI, White, Female, DAE speaker
Provided feedback throughout process
Quantitative Survey Study

- Research question: do teachers’ attitudes toward dialect variation become more favorable after teaching the curriculum?
- Teachers (n=32) completed a dialect attitude questionnaire before and after program implementation (adapted from Wiese et al, 2017)
- Rated agreement with statements about dialect variation (Likert-type scale)
Results

- Teacher-level means calculated
- “Don’t know” excluded
- Teachers with >15% “Don’t Know” excluded

- Attitudes significantly more favorable at post than at baseline ($t[31]=3.5, p=0.001$)
- No effect of condition
Discussion

- Limits of quantitative survey methodology
Qualitative Interview Study:

- Research questions:
  1. What are the attitudes of K-1 teachers of AAL speakers toward their students’ language?
  2. Do these attitudes change as a result of teaching ToggleTalk? How?

- Participants:
  Teachers from same metropolitan district, SY 2019-2020 (n=16)
  - Condition: 9 ToggleTalk Intervention; 7 Control
  - 2 schools per condition
  - Demographics: 3 African American, 13 White; 3 Male, 12 Female
  - Years teaching: 1-30 years
Qualitative Interview

- 1-hour semi-structured interviews
- Same-race interviewer
- Conducted via Zoom, at the end of the school year (May 29-June 8, 2020)
- Audio recorded and transcribed
Coding Qualitative Interviews

- 2 Rounds of deductive coding
- All data coded both rounds separately by ZM and CM (Dedoose Software)
- Key themes:
  - Correctness
  - Appropriateness
  - Change from intervention
- Intervention (ToggleTalk) / Control (Business as usual)

Saldaña, 2013
Excerpts from Themes: “Correct” Language

But just listening to how she speaks, you know, but even like now, a lot of people ... think she is white. But you speak white. What does that mean? You're speaking right. ... where do you start to put a color on it? (✏ Control)

[AAL is] very slang heavy, not following grammatical rules ... (✏ Control)

I think the students as they get older they do learn like a proper way to talk and a non-proper way. Because I know, like at five, it doesn't matter where you grow up; you're going to say things that might not be correct (干预)
Accepting “incorrect” language

And even though [AAL] might not be grammatically correct, it's like a known language. ([Intervention])

You don't have to be grammatically correct, or say things the correct way. Because people understand, you know. (Intervention)

I'm not going to say we need to accept it, but if that's their way of expressing themselves for right now, go ahead and use it. (Control)
Why don’t children speak “correctly”?

some parents haven't been taught themselves how to speak correct English …

*We talk the way we hear things around us.* (✎ Control)

I think when children are speaking they’re not doing it like to be wrong, they’re doing it because *they’re not developed quite yet* there for the way it works. (✎ Control)

*So, it was a challenge I think because they’re so young …* *they’re still learning language itself and the way to use verbs.* (,Integervention)
Appropriateness

I want them to use formal language when they're in the formal settings and ... I want them to know it's OK to use their informal language when they're in informal settings. ( Intervention)

... it is the teacher's job to correct a student so that they speak not informally, in a certain setting. If you speak that way at home, that's one thing. But this is the way we speak in school. ( Intervention)

So, I don't want, I never wanted them to associate the way that they were talking, or talk more informally with each other to be wrong because it's not wrong. It's how they're talking, but there's a place for it and then there's just a place that it's expected. ( Intervention)
Emerging Theme “Change”: Intervention School 1

...we wanted to get away from saying “proper English” while we were teaching the ToggleTalk ( Intervention)

So now I see why [speaking AAL] is OK for them to do, whether it’s at home or with friends or whatever. Teaching it hasn’t necessarily changed. I still think they should be taught the formal way. ( Intervention)

[Teaching ToggleTalk] made me more aware of not wanting to use my home language, letting it slip out. ( AAL speaker, Intervention)
Emerging Theme “Change”: Intervention School 2

... before this program Toggle Talk, I had never really thought about it. Like I know in the classrooms some kids say things differently. On the streets we say things differently. (↕ Intervention)

I think it built more comfortable conversations with my kids to just talk about language itself. (↕ Intervention)

... it made me more comfortable with knowing that like, the other classrooms were doing that and that it was something that can continue to grow for our students in the place that they’re learning in. (↕ Intervention)
Discussion

- Themes of “correct language” and “appropriateness” emerged in qualitative interviews.
- Intervention provided opportunity for greater reflection and terminology to ground conversations
- Results align with curriculum framing
Future Directions

- Terminology
- Role of teacher
- Understanding of “ideal world” vs preparing students for an oppressive world
- Race, language, and identity
- Broader sample of teachers
- Balancing simplicity for young learners and approach for teachers
- Continue Efficacy Study of ToggleTalk
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