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Academic English as a Second Language for Gaps

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Abstract
For decades, research has pointed to significant gaps between African American and White student academic achievement. In this article, I critically discuss the literature on African American student academic achievement from pedagogical, cultural, and sociolinguistic perspectives. I then argue for a stronger linguistic and pedagogical approach to bridge the gap and propose a curriculum idea that teachers may find useful should they decide to adopt this approach.

Introduction
Research shows significant and persistent gaps between African American and White student academic achievement. For example, according to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education, the average gap in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for African American and White students in grades 4, 8, and 12, in the period 1992-2002, was 29.7%. Throughout this period and at all grade levels tested, the gap was never less than 24% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a). Existing literature discusses this issue from pedagogical, cultural, and sociolinguistic perspectives. In this article, I argue for an academic English as a second language approach to bridge this gap and propose a curriculum idea that teachers may find useful. The approach can serve as a framework for teachers in their scaffolding of the academic language (e.g., Rickford, 2005) and academic culture (Delpit, 1998) and biliteracy (Kifano & Smith, 2005) that are needed by African American English (AAE) speakers.

Possible Sources and Alternatives
Many scholars have argued that cultural discontinuity is the source for the disparity between the academic achievement of African American students and their White peers. They attributed this disparity to a substantial mismatch between students’ home and school cultures (e.g., Duarte & Smith, 2000). To take just one compelling example, Michaels and Cazden (1986) identified differences in story telling patterns between White and African American children. According to these scholars, there is a tendency among White children to tell “topic-centered” stories that focus on one event and typically are short, while there is a tendency among African American children, particularly girls, to tell “episodic” stories that include changing scenes and are typically longer. The significance of this finding to the current article has to do with how African American and White adults in the study evaluated these stories. When asked to evaluate a story told by one African American child, in order to predict her potential for academic success, White adults’ evaluations were uniformly negative. They made comments such as “terrible story, incoherent” and “not a story at all,” in the sense of describing something that happened over time. When asked to assess this child’s academic competence, all White adults rated the children who told “topic-centered” stories. Most of these adults predicted problems in this child’s future schooling, speculating that the child may have difficulty with reading and that her family and emotional problems may hamper her academic progress. African American adults, on the other hand, evaluated this child’s story as “well formed,” interesting, and easy to understand. Three of the five African American adults selected the story as the best of the five stories they had heard and four of them judged the child as exceptionally bright, highly verbal, and predicted great academic success for her (Cazden, 1988). Scholars and educators who hold a cultural perspective call for culturally relevant curricula and the training of culturally sensitive, knowledgeable, and
responsible teachers as a solution to the problem of African American student underachievement (e.g., Delpit, 1998).

Another group of concerned scholars and educators (e.g., Baugh, 2005) argue that underachievement of African American students has to do with sociolinguistic disparity. That is, at home and in their communities, most African American students speak a variation of English that is significantly different from the mainstream English used as the medium of instruction in schools (see Baugh, 2005). Holders of this view discourage the use of AAE and encourage students to learn mainstream American English to increase their academic achievement, calling for a “tough love” approach in which teachers correct any AAE uttered in class (e.g., Delpit, 1998). They promote the acquisition of mainstream English as a second dialect and socialization of students into the mainstream American literacy culture. Some proponents urge parents to provide language models for their children as early as when they are infants and preschoolers by reinforcing mainstream English usage and correcting their AAE usage (e.g., Fox, 1997). Others believe that schools and other educational agencies should help facilitate this endeavor (e.g., Rickford, 2005), urging teachers to develop appropriate and effective teaching strategies such as contrastive analysis (e.g., Perez, 2000), the Home-School Discrimination Drill, and Translation Drills, techniques that are still popular (e.g., LA Local School District 3). Rickford (2005) also encourages teachers to build on students’ prior knowledge using strategies such as showing films and videos which feature different dialects to increase students’ awareness and sensitivity.

Designing and implementing culturally relevant curriculum, training culturally responsible teachers, and engaging students in linguistic awareness exercises can be great start. However, these strategies alone cannot do the whole job. Bridging the academic achievement gap also requires acknowledging and understanding that the issue is partly linguistic for students in general and African American students in particular. The latter face an added disadvantage because many of them come to school speaking an AAE that is substantially different from the English used in schools at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, as well as discourse levels. The differences are substantial enough to hinder communication and cause miscommunication (see Green 2002 for a book-length discussion of this topic).

Furthermore, language students need to succeed academically (in schools, colleges, and society) is a variety of English that is different even from the mainstream every day English. It is decontextualized, cognitively demanding, complex, distanced, and highly structured academic English. It draws on different lexical and grammatical genre conventions to making meaning. Some students come to school with more knowledge with this new ways of meaning making, but others such as many AAE speaking African students do not. This is not to say that the linguistic and other meaning-making knowledge they come to school with is not legitimate or valuable. They are just different from what is expected at school or for academic purposes as shown in the discussion of Michaels and Cazden (1986) study. Therefore, while it is important to value differences, it is also crucial to help students access and develop abilities to articulate the different linguistic capital prized at school and used to construct academic and social knowledge. It is important to reiterate that it can take many years of explicit, intentional, systematic, and sustained language socialization in various academic contexts (e.g., science and social studies classes) through an academic English as a second language (AESL) approach.
The academic English as a second language (AESL) approach is based on Bernard Mohan’s (1986) language and content integrated approach to teaching and learning which is currently gaining increasing popularity in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. It assumes that academic English language learning is a lifelong socialization process that needs to be carried out intentionally in various subject matter contents. This is consistent with Ochs’ (1989) view, which holds that people learn language through socializing and socialize through the use of language. These theoretical perspectives call for pedagogical approaches that enable students to learn not only a language code but also the cultures associated with the language. Note that culture here refers to academic discipline cultures (e.g., the culture of being a mathematician and doing mathematics) as well as professional cultures (e.g., the culture of being a lawyer and conducting a law practice) that mainstream English speakers also need to be socialized into. This is necessary because successful membership in a community requires the ability to function in a manner that is acceptable in that community (Beckett, Gonzalez, & Schwartz, 2004). In other words, the AESL approach acknowledges that all students, including White students who speak mainstream English, have academic (discipline specific) English language needs. But, it also assumes that AAE speaker African American students are in more serious need to be socialized into AESL because they have the added “disadvantage” of home-school linguistic and academic culture discontinuity (e.g., Delpit, 1998; Michaels & Cazden, 1986). It is important to emphasize here that this approach enables regular classroom teachers to avoid obvious singling out of African American students in their teaching by being constantly mindful of the discourse needs of both students in general and of AAE students who face double linguistic challenges in particular.

The Knowledge Framework
How can the academic English as a second language (AESL) approach be implemented? It can be implemented through scaffolding that helps learners appropriate the academic language and cultural practice that they aspire to or must be part of. Research and professional literature shows that Mohan’s (1986) Knowledge Framework (KF) can be helpful in doing this. KF was developed as an analytical tool for language and content integration research but it has also been successfully used as a framework for content-based ESL and foreign language teaching (e.g., Beckett & Slater, 2005; Early & Hooper, 2001; Huang, 2003). The overall purpose of the KF is to draw teachers’ and students’ attention to the thinking skills and the academic language necessary for successfully carrying out a classroom activity, and thus can be applied equally well in teaching AESL to AAE students as it has been in teaching ESL students. But, I am not aware of any proposal or application of this framework in teaching AAE speaker African American students to address academic achievement disparities. Therefore, while KF itself is not a new invention, the introduction of it to teachers and students who are attempting to address the academic achievement gaps between mainstream English and AAE speaker students is new and worthwhile trying.

The strength of the Knowledge Framework is that it is activity based and is intended to be “a guide to the structure of knowledge across the curriculum” (Mohan, 1986, p. 25). As such, it provides a framework for classroom activities around which most language and content teaching can be organized. According to Mohan, teachers can analyze any classroom activity as requiring six major types of knowledge: classification, description, principles, sequence, evaluation, and choice (see Table I). See issue website http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/spr2009.htm Generally, the classification, principles, and evaluation knowledge structures can be used to teach abstract theoretical knowledge and language while the description, sequence, and choice knowledge structures can be used to teach concrete practical knowledge and language. Specifically, the classification structure can be used to teach students how to develop, define, and apply new concepts; the principles structure can be used to teach students how to interpret, explain, and predict data, and draw conclusions; the evaluation structure can be used to teach students how to make judgments and evaluations, and to express personal opinions; the
A description structure can be used to teach students how to describe events such as a science experiment; and so on. Each of the six knowledge structures has both distinct thinking skills and distinct language that need to be learned when carrying out an activity within that knowledge structure. Table 2 below is a semantic representation of the KF, including its six knowledge structures and sample thinking skills and language related to each knowledge structure. See issue website http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/spr2009.htm

Thus if we were to teach a home economics unit, we may select an appropriate content topic such as diet and nutrition. We would then identify thinking skills such as classifying, developing concepts, interpreting data, comparing and contrasting, and drawing conclusions; the language related to the chosen content; and the thinking skills such as “more nutritious, prefer, if ...then, had rather,” etc. that are necessary to carry out the unit. KF also calls attention to specific vocabulary and grammar associated with the discipline’s modes of classification, principles, means of evaluation, etc., which may present different challenges for AAE speaking African American students. Beckett, Gonzalez, and Schwartz (2004) graphically illustrate the knowledge structures that would be involved in a home economics unit on diet and nutrition. They also show some sample key visuals such as a classification tree, cause effect table, evaluation grid, and sequence chart that can be helpful for language, subject-matter content, and thinking skills teaching and learning.

Teachers and AAE speaking African American students can make use of this clear and systematic KF tool in their teaching/learning of discipline-specific thinking skills such as describing a healthy dinner. Given the way many AAE speaking African American students have been socialized to tell a story (Cazden, 1988; Michaels & Cazden, 1986), this would provide opportunities to validate, affirm, maintain, and encourage AAE speaker students’ “episodic” accounts but also help them learn the “topic-centered” structure favored in mainstream as well as in academic English. Furthermore, the KF tool can be used in a sustained approach that teachers and students can use while teaching and learning any subject matter content as long as is necessary as a whole class activity without having to single out AAE speakers. As such, it can be used as a tool to empower students in general and AAE speaking African American students in particular with the academic English as a second language cultural capital necessary for addressing academic achievement inequities. Finally, the individual knowledge structures also provide a checklist teachers and students can use to ensure that all of an activity’s language demands are being met and all of its thinking skills are being covered.

Conclusion

African American student academic underachievement is a significant problem of long duration. Though it is a cultural and sociolinguistic issue, it cannot be solved solely through activities such as word contrasts, compiling dictionaries, and role playing that have been suggested in the literature. Academic underachievement is an issue that needs to be addressed more comprehensively, intentionally, and systematically in a sustained manner. In this article, I have proposed a linguistic and pedagogical approach that does just this and can serve as a framework for teachers in their scaffolding of the academic language (e.g., Rickford, 2005) and academic culture (e.g., Delpit, 1998) or biliteracy (Kifano & Smith, 2005) that are needed by AAE speaking African American students in their quest to close the achievement gap.

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