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# Why Deny Speakers of African American Language a Choice Most of Us Offer Other Students?

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## Why Deny Speakers of African American Language a Choice Most of Us Offer Other Students? A Talk to the Research Network Forum at CCCC on 4/2/08

Peter Elbow

In this paper, I'm drawing on a much longer essay with the same title that is in press in a book titled *The Elephant in the Classroom: Race and Writing* (Hampton Press, 2008, Jane Smith editor). I'm making an argument, but I'm all too aware that we're awash in arguments about writing and race. What we need is what you listeners can give us: empirical research. At the end, I'll mention some research questions that particularly strike me.

\* \* \*

"Black" language is sometimes more deeply stigmatized than "Black" skin. People who have learned not to think that others are stupid if they have a darker skin, sometimes nevertheless think others are stupid if they speak the language coded Black. (In this essay I'll refer to it as African American Language (AAL), but I could use African American Vernacular English or Black English or Ebonics. I don't see a reason for distinguishing--though Ebonics originally had a much wider meaning.)

This is only one among various reasons why teachers don't usually invite student speakers of AAL to *write* in that language. The traditional approach with these students is to keep speech and writing apart and to teach them to develop a separate language for writing.

Marcia Farr is a prominent researcher who fights against racism and the stigmatizing of nonmainstream dialects, and she defends this traditional approach. In responding by email to my 1999 "Mother Tongue" essay, she wrote:

I worry a bit about trying to get them to write in their 'mother dialect.' . . . [U]sing it in the classroom (unless in creative writing) confuses form with function. I think it's more important to get them to fully realize the adequacy of all dialects. "Leave their oral language alone," as it were, but teach writing in SE [standard English].

Obviously, this approach *can* work. It's probably produced much of the good writing in mainstream English by speakers of AAL. In effect, this approach asks students to try gradually to build a separate dialect or linguistic gear for writing. The goal is to help students gradually become fluent or automatic in producing correct written English. It's a long path, but this approach can help AAL speakers develop the habit of simply *avoiding* their spoken language when they pick up a pen or put fingers to a keyboard. It can help students not be distracted by their spoken language when they write--to avoid "language interference."

In particular, this approach will seem logical for speakers of AAL who are fluent at code switching into mainstream or standardized English. They have already developed have a separate language gear--at least for mainstream *spoken* language--and they can use that non-home language for drafting. (Since they are so much better better at code switching than most mainstream writers like me, they might be able to learn to code switch not just into mainstream spoken English but even into the dialect of mainstream *written* English--i.e., Edited Written English (EWE).

\* \* \*

But even though the traditional approach *can* work, I suspect it has *not* worked well for many speakers of stigmatized versions of English. In this essay, I want to suggest a different approach—especially for speakers of AAL who are *not* fluent code switchers. I am suggesting

that we invite them to start off even very serious writing projects using their comfortable habitual language--AAL--and suggest they wait till the end to get their final drafts into Edited Written English.

Does this sound odd, experimental, or even dangerous? I'd insist that this is exactly the approach that many or even most mainstream teachers offer to mainstream students. Ever since the maturing of the so called process movement, mainstream teachers have routinely invited mainstream white students to start serious writing projects with freewriting or other informal kinds of writing. This means inviting them to write in their vernacular spoken language.

African American Language may be wrong for final drafts of important essays in most school settings and in much of the wide world, but the informal spoken vernacular language that white mainstream students use in freewriting, drafting, and even mid-process revising is also wrong for writing. Even privileged speakers of so-called "standard" spoken English do not speak Edited Written English. I am an overeducated white teacher whose childhood "bad grammar" was often corrected, but some of my problems in writing came from the fact that my mother tongue is wrong for writing. I've only recently figured out an important generalization of great force: *the standardized version of English deemed right for "good" writing is no one's mother tongue.*

So that's my argument: invite both mainstream students and AAL speakers to write in their spoken vernacular language and edit later into EWE. In the end, I think the issue is that simple. Yet nothing is simple when it comes to language and race. So I can't stop here.

### **More About This Mainstream Approach**

What's central to this mainstream approach is an emphasis on learning to be more *strategic* in managing one's focus of attention. Many mainstream teachers have helped students write better and with less frustration by helping them think more consciously about the process they use in writing--and in particular to notice the difference between three very different kinds of mental work:

- *generating* or invention: finding lots of ideas and words.
- *revising*: improving the ideas and reasoning and organization.
- *editing* or *copy editing*: improving minor wording for clarity and style--and fixing the surface grammar, spelling, and other conventions.

Most writers may function "recursively" but too much recursivity is a big problem: when writers put too much attention on later stages, this tends to interrupt and interfere with the earlier mental tasks. Most teachers have learned to give this advice against too much recursivity: "As you are drafting and working out your thinking, don't interrupt yourself with questions of grammar or *proper* language." When teachers require students to turn in drafts for feedback before revising (as so many good teachers now do), they are helping students to treat revising and editing as a later stage. Whether or not we call this a "process approach," it's an approach that has been adopted by a large proportion of writing teachers.

And it's the approach I am suggesting we offer to speakers of AAL. I have never taught classes made up mostly of African American students--but my thinking on this matter started during a year when I was teaching writing to students who were mostly speakers of Hawai'ian

Creole English (commonly called “Pidgin” in Hawai’i). The stigmatization of this language is like that of AAL. And I have plenty of authority and experience with this mainstream approach. I use it for my own writing and I use it in my teaching. Obviously my automatic command of written grammar is pretty good (though friends who read my drafts sometimes wonder), but I’ve found over many years of teaching that this approach also works well with lots of poorly prepared students who don’t have much command over the grammar and conventions of the written dialect.

### **A Word about Choice**

Let me stress that just as I don’t *require* my mainstream students to adopt this approach (though I do require revision), I don’t require it of AAL speakers. I make it invitation. At the moment, most speakers of stigmatized versions of English feel they have *no choice* but to write in mainstream English. I want them to have a choice--and I recognize that they might have various good reasons to decline the invitation:

- Some may not want to use what they feel as an intimate home language for academic tasks that feel alien or clunky.
- Some may feel they’ll be disrespected by classmates if they use it (though they could use it for private writing).
- Some may not want to use AAL because they want to develop fluency in producing EWE.
- A few may actually disapprove of AAL as wrong, bad, defective, or broken. The very mother they learned it from may be pushing them to learn “real English.” I try to show them that this is wrong, but I try to tread gently on a matter so vexedly close to the heart.
- And as I mentioned, students who are fluent code switchers might naturally avoid writing AAL since they can comfortably write mainstream spoken English.

### **How Does the Proposed Approach Compare with the Traditional Approach?**

We must acknowledge right off that *no* approach will be ideal for speakers of AAL--especially for those who don’t codeswitch well. When it comes to learning to write in our present culture, the deck is stacked against them and speakers of other stigmatized versions of English. They cannot prosper in school, college, or the workplace unless they learn to produce a language that is likely to be problematic for them: EWE is farther from their home language than from the home language of mainstream English speakers; and EWE is often experienced as a threat to their identity--indeed they may understandably feel that mainstream English is bent on wiping out their home language. Their only choices are to use this alien language *throughout* a writing project, from the beginning--or to wait and use it during the *last editing stage* of writing. Neither choice is ideal.

Given that no approach can be ideal, I’ll give six reasons why I think it’s preferable to offer monolingual speakers of AAL the approach that most of us offer mainstream students: drafting and even revising in their most comfortable spoken vernacular language--and waiting till the end of the writing process to wrestle with the grammar, lexicon, and conventions of EWE.

(1) *This approach will make writing **easier**.* When students can explore and draft in whatever language is most comfortable and inviting, they stand a better chance of finding *writing itself* more comfortable and inviting. In contrast, the traditional approach makes speakers of AAL continually interrupt their drafting to stop and figure out “correct grammar” throughout the entire writing process. Why ask them to try to become, in effect, “native speakers” of correct writing, when we don’t ask that of mainstream students? The goal of the traditional approach of starting off with “correct” EWE is to *reduce* language interference while drafting. But the approach I’m suggesting *eliminates* language interference while drafting.

(2) *This approach will make their writing **better**.* When speakers of AAL get to draft in their most comfortable language--and postpone any worries about standardized edited written English--they can almost always find more words and ideas. When we write in our most comfortable spoken language, we may ramble and use grammar that’s wrong for important writing, but our language usually has more energy, life, and voice. When students try to use a language that’s not comfortable for them, they often fall into awkward or even stilted language.

In fact, the effort to follow unfamiliar rules can lead students into weird grammatical short circuits that teachers often read as “cognitive deficit.” If the student had simply written the AAL grammar that came easily to mouth, the words would at least have been clear and strong. And often this vernacular language would have been “*correct*” in EWE. That is, when students and teachers are too preoccupied by those stigmatized *differences* between the syntax of AAL and what they call “standard” English, they forget to notice that AAL is “*right*” far more often than it’s wrong.

In addition, people’s spoken vernacular language is usually more connected to their unconscious than any dialect or language they learn later. This gives access to an additional range of experiences, memories, images, words, and ideas.

(3) *The approach I’m suggesting will give students a greater knowledge of AAL and a greater understanding how language works.* Notice how the traditional approach fails here. It tries to make EWE habitual and automatic so students don’t have to think about it. This means gradually putting to sleep their conscious knowledge of the differences between AAL and EWE or mainstream spoken language. But when AAL speakers are invited to write in their own vernacular language and wait till the end to worry about the rules of EWE, that final editing process forces them to notice and consciously compare the two grammars and lexicons. This constant practice in comparative linguistics will give them more conscious knowledge of AAL and help demystify the grammar and conventions of EWE. Instead of just trying to become “automatic” in the language of “correct” writing, they will become students of language difference.

(4) *The approach I’m suggesting will help students realize that not **all** serious writing has to end up EWE White English.* For quite a while, we’ve seen a good deal of important published writing in AAL and other stigmatized versions of English (see the appendix for examples). But somehow teachers have tended to assume that all this published writing in AAL writing is irrelevant to the writing lives of AAL speaking students in our classrooms.

I ask all my students to revise and copy edit all their *major* essays (three or four), but I invite speakers of nonmainstream versions of English to revise and copy edit at least *one* of these essays into a “non-standard” non-EWE final version. I want them to understand that *revising and editing have no inherent link with EWE*. I want them to learn to revise and edit for

good thinking, clarity, liveliness and wit--and to realize that EWE has no monopoly on those virtues. Indeed they sometimes notice that EWE can get in the way of clarity, liveliness, and wit. When they accept this invitation, they end up with a carefully revised and copy edited paper in their home language.

There are more and more opportunities for sharing and publishing writing in other versions of English such as AAL or Spanglish. In my teaching of first year writing, I publish three or four class magazines each semester. This is an ideal site for various versions and registers of English--and they often lead to useful discussions about different versions of English. School newspapers, school literary magazines, and even some local Sunday papers are good sites for publishing good, well revised and edited feature pieces in nonmainstream versions of English. When students are deprived of the choice and forced to write in EWE, they are stuck with only this one writing gear.

(5) *This approach will also help them realize that EWE is **not** a single monolithic dialect or register.* Suppose we want to lay out the rules for EWE. It's an impossible task! There is no single "proper" version. Teachers are notoriously variable in what they insist on as "correct." Some want students to avoid all informality, while others find it inappropriately stuffy to avoid all first person or all narrative or all statements of feeling (not to mention all contractions).

More and more scholars in our profession have been calling attention to even wider variations in published, sanctioned versions of written English. For a recent telling argument, see Suresh Canagarajah's exploration in *College Composition and Communication* of the "code meshing" that leads to writing that is hybrid or mixed as to dialect, language, and discourse. Good writers have always enjoyed playing with mixtures of register and injecting energy and capturing readers' attention with unexpected changes of register.

Students are far better served by an approach that allows them to decide in the final stages of writing *where* they want to place their text on the spectrum from "high" EWE to "idiomatic" AAL--and how much mixing or hybridization they want to play with. These mixtures are more and more prominent in publications in our culture. Often, it's only in the last stages of a writing project that one can best make these decisions. If, on the other hand, students develop a dedicated "correct writing gear," they lock themselves into a single bland "proper" version of EWE.

One of Canagarajah's points--along with many other recent arguments for mixed genre writing (see Romano)--is that the traffic between discourses moves productively in both directions--whether it's between formal and personal, between academic and "lay," or between written and oral. "Standard" discourses have always been changed and enlivened by writers using "nonstandard" discourses.

In fact Geneva Smitherman showed that writing with "Black expressive discourse style" can be surprisingly successful with mainstream readers. She and a team of researchers looked at thousands of NAEP exams and showed that this discourse style *raised* scores--as long it wasn't accompanied with the stigmatized syntax or grammar from AAL ("The Blacker the Berry"). In short speakers of AAL who use this approach can learn that one of their options is to allow final drafts to "sound Black" but not have usages that prescriptivist readers will call "errors."

(6) *It will help AAL flourish as a language.* When we help speakers of stigmatized languages produce texts in their spoken vernacular that are carefully revised and edited, we help

demonstrate that these languages can be used for more than informal speech. Few languages survive and flourish unless they are used for writing. One of my larger goals is that nonsanctioned versions of any major language should survive and flourish.

Thus, we can show students how to write *with pride* in stigmatized languages--even when they make a pragmatic decision to suppress that language for the final draft. When AAL speakers *talk* to mainstream listeners, they risk stigmatization unless they can remove even subtle accentual and intonational traces of their spoken vernacular. But when AAL speakers *write* to conservative mainstream readers, they can do most of their work comfortably in their spoken home or street vernacular. Indeed, we can show *all* our students that writing provides a safer site for language use than speaking.

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I've focusing on AAL speakers who are *not* so fluent at code switching into mainstream English as I've laid out the advantages of this approach. But in fact some of the most fluent code switchers will want some of those advantages and if they can choose the approach I'm talking about:

- After all, code switchers too might want to learn more about AAL and EWE by doing the comparative linguistics involved in that final process of editing between the two languages.
- Fluent code switchers might want some of their serious writing to end up in polished AAL—or end up in hybrid registers, code meshing, and mixed genres.
- And fluent code switchers might want to help AAL flourish by doing more writing in it and even publishing some final drafts in it.

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### **An Objection.**

I've encountered an objection to this approach based on a theory about language and thinking. It goes like this:

*If we compare AAL to mainstream English or to the academic English that students must end up with for college essays, the differences are not just small matters of syntax and lexicon. As Frantz Fanon writes, "every dialect, every language, is a way of thinking." If speakers of AAL draft in their home language, they can't just "edit" into EWE. If they want to end up with a school or academic essay (or what David Olson calls "essayist prose"), they'll have to change the very modes of thinking, arguing, reasoning, and organizing that are built into in the very fabric of their drafts.*

I have no quarrel with the premise here, namely, that most languages seem to carry modes of thinking. Certainly, vernacular AAL seems to carry habitual modes of thinking that differ from the thinking required for academic essays (see Ball's research). But this doesn't invalidate the approach I'm suggesting.

For the main benefit of the process-based nature of this approach is the way it asks all students to take their messy, vernacular, informal, talky freewritten drafts and rework them till they reflect the kind of thinking and rhetoric that are needed for academic essays. We see plenty of inappropriate arguing, reasoning, and organizing in the drafts of mainstream first year college students. Mainstream students often rely too much on the kind of associative organizing, unsupported feelings, and narrative that are said to characterize the thinking of AAL

speakers. One of the main benefits of this approach is to help students avoid the trap they so often fall into: when they are asked to *revise* they often just tinker or polish or correct their language.

In this approach then, the emphasis is taken off the grammar of EWE and put on thinking. It helps all students, whether they are speakers of AAL or mainstream English, learn to focus their efforts on the kind of thinking and rhetoric needed for academic papers. I love the way I can surprise my students with my phrasing in my assignment to revise: “Your job here is to take your first draft or mid process draft and use feedback from me and your classmates to make *substantive improvements in thinking and organization*. Forget all issues of grammar or correctness for now. I’ll ask you to attend to them later.” For I always require what I call a “final final draft”--where the only task is grammar and copy editing.

So when these AAL speakers are asked to revise, their job will be exactly the same as it is for mainstream students. Take that statement of feelings and rewrite it as an argument with clear supporting reasons and examples. Reframe that story so it functions more clearly as supporting evidence for a more conceptually stated main point.

This job of revising for academic or essayist thinking is hard work for mainstream students and AAL speakers alike. But it’s the crucial work for most school and business writing. And when AAL speakers do this work, they demonstrate an interesting distinction that Geneva Smitherman makes between *two* dimensions of AAL: “Black English Vernacular *discourse style*” and “Black English Vernacular *grammar*.” Using this distinction, she explicitly recommends the approach I am talking about. She writes:

I am often asked "how far" does the teacher go with this kind of writing pedagogy. My answer: as far as you can. Once you have pushed your students to rewrite, revise; rewrite, revise; rewrite, revise; and once they have produced the most powerful essay possible, then and only then should you have them turn their attention to B[lack] E[nglish] V[ernacular] grammar and matters of punctuation, spelling, and mechanics (“Black English/Ebonics” 29).

Lisa Delpit is sometimes cited as a blanket critic of all uses of AAL in school, but her famous objections are more nuanced. In fact she writes specifically in favor of the kind of writing approach that I’m advocating:

Unlike unplanned oral language or public reading, writing lends itself to editing. While conversational talk is spontaneous and must be responsive to an immediate context, writing is a mediated process which may be written and rewritten any number of times before being introduced to public scrutiny. Consequently, writing is more amenable to rule application--one may first write freely to get one's thoughts down, and then edit to hone the message and apply specific spelling, syntactical, or punctuation rules (25).

The important point here is that the use of a dialect or language does not lock someone into one way of thinking or organizing. There may be significant links between language, thinking, culture, and identity. But links are not chains. The central premise here is that people can use any variety of English for any cognitive or rhetorical task. Thomas Farrell brought attention to this issue by claiming, in effect, that people cannot analyze or think abstractly in AAL. Smitherman was at pains to contradict this notion in almost all of her writing. Putting this differently: Does mainstream English--or EWE--"own" certain kinds of thinking and certain discourses? Must people give up their cultural identity to take on certain rhetorical or



intellectual or cognitive tasks? Surely we can validly invite speakers of AAL or other dialects and cultures to take on academic tasks and write an academic essay in their home dialects--as Latinos, African Americans, or Caribbeans.

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### **The Need for Research**

Here are some research questions that I would invite you researchers to pursue.

- What are the experiences of teachers and students who try out this approach to teaching writing?
- Code switching. Many or most speakers of AAL in our culture learn to code switch to one degree or another. Explore differences in this ability. Depending on their level of skill and comfort in code switching, what is their experience of writing in general--and in particular in using this approach to writing?
- How about differences between the experience of AAL speakers and speakers of other stigmatized versions of English? How about the experience of less stigmatized versions of English such as various Asian-inflected versions of English or “interlanguages”?
- Which student speakers of AAL accept and decline the choice of writing in AAL. What are their reasons and feelings?
- How valid is Smitherman’s analysis of the features of AAL “discourse style” versus AAL grammar? What alternative descriptions might be useful?
- It would be helpful to do more of the research started by Smitherman and her team on the responses (and grading) of mainstream teachers to AAL discourse style and AAL grammar.

Researching these questions and others will help us answer the essential question: under what conditions and for what kinds of teachers and students is it most useful to invite speakers of stigmatized languages to start off important writing projects in their home languages?\*

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\*I’m indebted to far more people than I can name who’ve helped me try to work out this thinking over the years. In the works cited below, I list other essays of mine on the topic.

### **Appendix:**

#### **Examples of Published Writing in NonMainstream Varieties of Written English**

##### **AAL or Black English:**

Childress, Alice. *Like One of the Family*. Boston: Beacon, 1986. *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. 1966.

Hurston, Zora Neal. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1937.

Sanchez, Sonia. *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon P, 1999.

Sapphire. *Push: A Novel*. NY: Knopf, 1996.

Smitherman, Geneva. See her columns in *English Journal* (collected as chapter 20 in her *Talkin That Talk*. See also parts of her *Talkin and Testifyin*.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. NY: Harcourt Brace, 1982.

### **Caribbean Creole English:**

Bennett, Louise. *Selected Poems*. 1982

Clarke, Austin. *The Polished Hoe*. NY: Amistead, 2003. New York, Warner Books, 2000.

Hodge, Merle. *Crick-Crack Monkey*. London: Heinemann, 1981

Hopkinson, Nalo. *The Midnight Robber*. NY: Warner Books, 2000.

Lovelace, Earl. *The Wine of Astonishment*. NY: Vintage, 1984.

*The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (see section on oral and oral-influenced poetry)  
Harmondsworth England: Penguin, 1986.

Sistren, with Honor Ford Smith, ed. *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*. London: Women's Press, 1986.

### **Hawai'ian Creole English ("Pidgin"):**

Lum, Darrell H. Y. *Pass On, No Pass Back*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge P, 1990.

Yamanaka, Lois-Ann. *Blue's Hanging*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge P, 1993.

### **Hispanic/Latino/a English:**

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinters-Aunt Lute, 1987.

Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Rivera, Tom'as [EDITOR: accent over a] *...y no se lo trag'o la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. Houston: Arte P'ublico, 1992.

Trevino, Jes'us Salvador. *The Fabulous Sinkhole and Other Stories*. Houston: Arte P'ublico, 1995.

### **Scots:**

Kelman, James *How Late It Was, How Late*. NY/London Vintage, 1998.

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- . "Vernacular Englishes in the Writing Classroom: Probing the Culture of Literacy." *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Eds. Christopher Schroeder, Patricia Bizzell, and Helen Fox. Heinemann, 2002. 126-38.
- Olson, David. "From Utterance to Text: the Bias of Language in Speech and Writing." *Harvard Educational Review* 47. 1977: 257-81. to
- Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multi-genre Papers*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "'The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice': African American Student Writers." *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and Community*. Urbana IL: NCTE, 1994, 80-101.
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