



Jamesia Nordman, a professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, talks with eighth-grade students. Nordman said young African American English speakers tend to oscillate between languages.

Will Black English be embraced in classrooms?

Advocates say inclusion could encourage literacy

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As debates rage across the country over the way children learn to read and state lawmakers work to adopt measures that would promote the science of reading in schools, there's an oft-overlooked component to teaching children how to read: the language in which students speak, and specifically the language many Black students speak.

Embracing the language that some Black students speak can encourage literacy, education leaders say. But other scholars still say there's work to be done to embrace Black English in the classroom and in understanding the most effective ways to teach speakers how to read and stoke enthusiasm about reading and literature as they age.

Black English, or African American English, is a language spoken among Black Americans, according to scholars. The origins of Black English are contested, with some arguing the language derived from Creole and Caribbean influences and others claiming African origins.

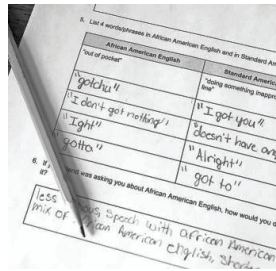
The language originated as Africans and Europeans interacted during the slave trade, according to Geneva Smitherman, co-founder of the African American and African Studies Department at Michigan State University and one of the foundational researchers in African American English and its treatment in schools.

Raven Jones, an associate professor of teacher education at Michigan State University and co-founder of the Zuri Reads Initiative, which promotes literacy across metro Detroit, wants her students, prospective teachers, to understand that there are many valid ways of speaking, reading and articulating ideas, including in academic environments.

"I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a certain criticality or skill set that you bring into these environments," she said. "But they should also be representative of who you are."

Teaching African American English

African American English still isn't fully embraced in the classroom, scholars and advocates said, but Smitherman and others said they're optimistic that educators today are doing a better job of responding to students who speak the language. And research by dozens of linguistics scholars has contributed to understanding the nuances



Embracing the language that some Black students speak can encourage literacy, education leaders say. PHOTOS BY ERIC SEALS/DETROIT FREE PRESS

and particulars of the language, including its role in the classroom and reading instruction.

Yolanda Holt, a sociolinguist and professor in the department of communication sciences and disorders at East Carolina University, said consciously involving community members in research around reading and language is crucial to understanding how educators can better teach students who speak African American English.

"All languages have value; if the child is able to communicate effectively, that's good," she said. "We want to use the language that they bring to school to engage them with literacy practices."

Often, the conversation around African American English has seen the language as a deficit that needs to be addressed in school, Holt said, instead of an asset. And much of the broader research and dialogue around how children learn to read, often referred to as the science of reading, often leaves out the science of how African American English speakers learn to read, Holt said.

One important nuance, Holt explained, is how African American English speakers might pronounce certain words. There might be variations in how a child pronounces the word "fire," for example. An African American English speaker might pronounce fire like "fiyah." Using a science of reading approach, teachers often help students through phonics, mapping sounds to letters. But they may not take into account different pronunciations or language variations or may see the different pronunciation as a problem.

Jamesia Nordman, a professor of English at Grand Valley State University who has taught English language arts and English across different grade levels, said, like Spanish speakers, young African American English speakers tend to oscillate between languages, from African American English to standard American English (SAE).

Teachers should "let them vacillate between AAE and SAE, and gradually teach them the SAE rules and mechanics and things like that. ... I think you just teach them in conjunction with one another," Nordman said.

'A place of understanding'

Beyond the mechanics of reading instruction, there's another dimension to understanding African American English in classrooms: embracing it and showing children that they should value their language, Nordman said.

"It is a language; it's not slang," she said. "We need to teach our kids that they're both valid and valuable."

Nordman didn't always feel that her first language, African American English, was seen as valuable as a student growing up in Detroit, and felt she was often made to feel ashamed for the way she spoke, constantly being corrected. In college at Eastern Michigan University, people always noted her "accent," even though she was from Detroit, a 40-minute drive from EMU's campus.

"It would have been really powerful if I had been able to come from a place of understanding," she said.

To foster inclusion and hone a passion for reading, school libraries, classroom bookshelves and required reading should include books that include African American English, Nordman and others said. Some examples: "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas, "Honey Baby Sugar Child" by Alice Faye Duncan, and "Fly Girl" by Omar Tyree.

To show they value the identities and experiences of students, educators can teach standard and Black English ideas side by side, Jones said. For example, she said, standard English speakers might say, "I'm OK." But there are other ways of communicating that in different communities, such as: "I'm straight," "We alright" and "I'm good."

"Even though standard English is telling us one way of being and saying, it's the same with African American English: We're doing the same thing, just in a different way, which is more culturally responsive to our needs," Jones said.

Research around African American English is ongoing, and Holt encourages Detroit residents, if asked to participate in such research, to ask questions about the research being conducted and to ask whether researchers are engaging Black families as part of that research process.

"African American English, it's positive, it's not going anywhere," she said. "We want to encourage people to use a language that speaks to their soul."

Smitherman is optimistic. "I feel very good about the changes that have been made and that I've been a part of," she said.