A common concern among teachers is the challenge of developing a skill set for delivering code-switching pedagogies to young adolescents who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other varieties of English.

Carrie Secret, a well-known teacher who employed the Standard English Proficiency Program while the Ebonics Resolution was in effect in the 1990s, points out the tendency for teachers to negate AAVE speakers’ language features in writing with a “fix something that is wrong” approach (Miner, 1997). Instead, she recommends translating AAVE features in formal writing contexts into Standard English (SE). Similarly, it is necessary to provide a balance of informal writing contexts that value AAVE features, along with formal writing opportunities that call for scaffolding toward Standard English features in a manner that is nonthreatening (Hill, 2009, 2010). Secret additionally recommends exposure to read-alouds of literature with authentic AAVE and SE features to ensure exposure to both language registers while explicating distinctions.

This article will offer a variety of code-switching pedagogies for middle level students that are guided by three mentor texts. Woodson’s (2009) Peace, Locomotion will include conceptualized pedagogies. The remaining two mentor texts were facilitated in my practice among my middle level students and during my research with a seventh-grade English teacher who enacted code-switching pedagogies: Curtis’s (1997) The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963 and Fleischman’s (1997) Seedfolks, respectively. Although the mentor texts and code-switching pedagogies are situated in AAVE and SE, it is possible to transfer teaching strategies to other varieties of English. (SE and academic English will be described interchangeably).

**Code-switching Pedagogies**

Code-switching pedagogies call for employing the use of home language to facilitate informal and formal contexts for writing and speaking (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Adger, Christian, & Taylor, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, code-switching pedagogies involve navigating different registers of the same language.

AAVE can be differentiated from other dialects of English; therefore, its systematic grammatical and phonological features define AAVE as a variety of the English language (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). AAVE is recognized as the “primary language of African American students,” which should be considered in “facilitating mastery of English language skills” (Rickford, 1999, p. 1). Rickford and Rickford (2000) contend that AAVE features are detected in the speech patterns of working class speakers in urban areas. Moreover, many speakers of AAVE do not employ its features all the time, nor do all African Americans speak AAVE.

Balancing formal and informal writing opportunities enhances awareness of their distinctions and appropriate contexts (Delpit, 2006). Delpit claims that access to Standard or academic English promotes access to the culture of power and enhanced educational attainment.
Nonstandard writing features are informed by students’ social worlds (Dyson, 2002). Code-switching pedagogies are aligned with standards devised by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (Greer, Smith, & Erwin, 1996), in which teachers develop a respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects, which tacitly includes AAVE speakers and other varieties of English. Moreover, IRA and NCTE standards promote multiple purposes for writing across a variety of audiences.

Carrie Secret is a notable teacher in Oakland, California, who employed code-switching pedagogies while the Ebonics Resolution was in effect (Miner, 1997). She embraced her preadolescents’ home language by distinguishing between spoken sounds and grammatical features embedded in their home language and SE. Rather than assume a corrective approach, she determined her students responded better upon distinguishing between appropriate contexts for employing Standard and nonstandard English. She read aloud literature grounded in the African American linguistic tradition, along with literature with SE features. Similarly, she provided formal and informal contexts for writing and speaking.

Baker (2002) led her high school students’ negotiation of academic, home, and professional varieties of English to embrace different registers. She contends that students will more likely pursue formal, academic English if they participate in nonthreatening contexts for examining variations of English.

Wheeler & Swords (2006) suggest modeling corresponding grammatical features in AAVE and Standard English. Teachers must support an understanding of appropriate contexts for employing Standard and nonstandard English, rather than imposing that AAVE is incorrect. For instance, the third-person plural pronoun followed by was (they was) is a grammatical feature of AAVE (Rickford & Rickford, 2000) that corresponds with “they were” in Standard English. Rather than deeming “they was” as an error, a teacher must distinguish between appropriate formal and informal contexts for writing.

### Mentor Texts

#### Peace, Locomotion

*Peace, Locomotion* (Woodson, 2009) tells the story of Lonnie Collins Motion, also known as Locomotion, a preadolescent who lives in foster care. The novel is a collection of Lonnie’s letters and poems to his sister, Lili, who lives with another foster family. He assumes the role of “rememberer” and informs her about his life experiences while they are apart. His language is a combination of SE and AAVE. The varieties of English require a close teacher-led analysis to inform writing or discussion about corresponding features and contexts for usage.

Throughout most of the text, Standard English features are present, in addition to their AAVE equivalent. To illustrate, it would be prudent to analyze Lonnie’s standard and nonstandard use of subject and verb agreement. For example, “we were” is employed when he writes about “Before Time,” but on occasion, he writes “we was” in the present time. The invariant be, which calls for actions that occur habitually (Rickford & Rickford, 2000) is used each time he refers to his friends. The first occasion appears at the beginning of the novel: “your homeboys be slapping your back and saying ‘good shot’” (p. 6). Conversely, Lonnie uses “is” and “are” conventionally throughout the text, as he hopes for a future with Lili and explains his daily experiences (see Fig. 1). The corresponding grammatical features can undergo teacher-led modeling, commensurate with Lonnie’s emotions.

The letters and poems are written by Lonnie, which presents the potential for initiating letter- and poetry-writing topics. Topics for let-
ter writing might include Lili’s response to one of Lonnie’s letters, while employing both SE and AAVE. Lonnie’s depiction of Lili’s voice reveals use of SE. AAVE features can be detected on one occasion with the omission of “are”: “Sounds like you in love, big brother” (p. 55). Their use of language presents the possibility of raising awareness of AAVE speakers who do not speak AAVE all of the time. Students can be encouraged to write a letter to a distant loved one, to Lonnie, or to Lili with SE and home language features. Students can be encouraged to write poems with similar language features from Lonnie’s perspective or their own, while using the poems as mentor texts.

Wheeler and Swords (2006) recommend teacher modeling and comparing and contrasting grammatical features across registers. Such an analysis calls for explicitly recognizing that no variety of English is superior to another, and to instill respect for language variation.

**The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963**

The *Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963* (Curtis, 1997) presents an intimate portrayal of the Watson family during the civil rights movement. Adolescents will likely relate to the presence of the family’s idiosyncrasies. The author’s purpose is to deeply connect the reader with the four Watson children to instill an understanding of individual victims of the 16th Street church bombing in 1963.

The language features consist of SE, AAVE, and the dialect spoken in the southern states. The epilogue is written in SE and is an expository text. The language features that characterize the narrative and epilogue are a basis for analysis and discussion, and the distinctions can guide narrative and expository writing.

The initial chapter is appropriate for readers theater. Active participation in readers theater and a teacher’s act of distinguishing between registers can assist students’ familiarity with the

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

**Dialect Detectives: Exploring Dialect in Great Expectations**

*Great Expectations* is rich in dialogue and is written in the dialect of the working class and the poor of Victorian England. The things characters say and how they speak is one of the ways in which readers get to know them. What does Dickens reveal about his characters using dialect? This ReadWriteThink.org lesson is based on the different words that appear in the first book of the novel. It will help students develop a comfort level and confidence in dealing with unfamiliar dialect words and phrases.

This lesson uses *Great Expectations* as an example, but this activity is effective with any work of literature in which dialect is important.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/dialect-detectives-exploring-dialect-30869.html

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Upon identifying the weird family scenario, the organizer guides students’ selection of words that demonstrate home language features. Although the novel uses “we were” conventionally, the student utilized her home language. Students can be invited to perform their stories with their classmates in order to demonstrate and embrace varying home languages. Cultivating a mutual respect for varieties of English provides nonthreatening contexts for exploring language and writing.

The epilogue is appropriate for expository writing in SE. To facilitate expository writing, middle level students can document the involvement of the youth in the 16th Street congregation, which was a catalyst for the bombing. Students can document facts from the epilogue into an organizer (see Fig. 3).

The first column in Figure 3 is intended to support the middle level students’ attempts at expository writing features in their own words, without copying directly from the text. If initial jottings demonstrate nonstandard English features, the teacher or peers can provide feedback to scaffold toward standard language features. The middle column is intended to assist with the understanding of distinctions between formal and informal registers. Modeling with the organizer requires an instructor to explicitly stress appropriate conventions for formal and informal contexts.

Seedfolks

*Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997) tells the story of a vacant lot in a working class, multiracial Cleveland neighborhood plagued by residential flight. Kim is a Vietnamese girl who plants lima bean seeds in honor of her deceased father. Each subsequent chapter is told from the perspective of a character in the neighborhood.
who assumes a role in transforming the vacant lot to a community garden. Each character’s speech represents a different variety of English reflecting his or her ethnic background. One suggested writing opportunity would be to write a *Seedfolks* chapter where students can employ their home language. Students can be guided toward having their chapter take place between characters in the novel and describing their interactions along with their contribution to the garden.

Figure 4 is a sample draft from a seventh-grade classroom where code-switching pedagogies were employed. The middle level student utilized AAVE and SE features, while additionally drawing from what Delpit (2006) would regard as a sophisticated cultural literary tradition. A Terry McMillan flavor can be detected in this excerpt: “I quickly pulled out my new cell phone and chirped my best friend Monique, that girl has good timing because when I called she was just gettin’ out of the shower” (Hill, 2008, p. 15). *Seedfolks* is an ideal mentor text because of the potential for exploring multiple varieties of English.

**Conclusion**

Each recommended mentor text provides the potential for code-switching pedagogies for teachers of AAVE speakers and others who speak a nonstandard variety of English. Young adolescents can refer to the nonstandard English varieties in the texts to guide their use of language features to construct informal contexts for writing. In addition, exposure to standard language features in the texts serves as a guide for writing in SE. When formal and informal writing opportunities are balanced and no variety is superior to another, students are more aware of appropriate contexts for writing.

The following list offers suggestions for teachers who wish to use code-switching in their classrooms:

- Select appropriate mentor texts with authentic code-switching features.
- Construct formal and informal writing contexts that correspond with the context of the mentor texts.
- Maintain an understanding of the rule-governed properties of AAVE and other varieties as they intersect with Standard English. Rickford (2000) is a good resource for explicating grammatical AAVE features.
- Never negate a young adolescent’s language features. Instead, value features for informal writing contexts, while referring to them as a foundation for scaffolding toward corresponding, standard grammatical features.
- Model and design appropriate organizers to assist in distinguishing corresponding grammatical features between Standard English and other registers. Wheeler and Swords (2006) provide appropriate tools.
- The time frame for application should be a year-long effort that coincides with the use of the mentor texts and corresponding writing topics.
- Emphasize that everyone code-switches for appropriate contexts, not just language minority students.
References


Greer, M., Smith, R. S., & Erwin, L. (1996). Standards for the English language arts (Joint publication of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English). Newark, DE, and Urbana, IL: IRA and NCTE.


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