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The Status of Dialogue Journal Writing as a Methodology for the Literacy and Language Development of African American Students.

Ingrid Haynes-Mays, Ph.D., Bernnell Peltier-Glaze, Ed.D., and Shanna L. Broussard, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Employing the notion that many students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) often are learning English as a second language, the researchers wanted to implement an ELL technique which allows students to practice writing and improve their writing skills in a nonthreatening manner. Increasingly, dialogue journaling is a literacy strategy that is being used in classroom settings at all instructional levels for a variety of purposes. Studies done in the area of composition support the notion that free writing activities help to develop confidence and efficiency among first language (L1) and second language (L2) students (Peyton, 2000). Dialogue-journal writing provides students with the opportunity to explore and experiment with language.

What Is a Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate on a regular basis. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is actively participating in the interchange, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing. The first documented use of dialogue journals was with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers, in California (Peyton & Staton, 1993).

What is African American Vernacular English (AAVE)?

AAVE is a dialect spoken by many African Americans in certain settings and circumstances. Like other dialects of English, AAVE is a regular, systematic language variety that contrasts with other dialects in terms of its grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary (Baugh, 1993; Rickford & Rickford, 2007; Labov, 1970; Labov, 2001). The term used to refer to languages and dialects of African Americans has gone through many changes. The voice of Black America has been variously labeled as Black English (BE), Black Dialect, Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American English (AAE) and recently, Ebonics by non- linguists (Baugh, 1993; Bailey, 1993; Dillard, 1970; Hunt, 1978).

Speakers of AAVE have been characterized to have language deprivation, which suggests that they speak “bad” English or are too ignorant and unintelligent to speak any other way. Adjectives such as “slang,” “mutant,” “lazy,” “defective,” “ungrammatical” and “broken English” have all been used incorrectly to refer to AAVE and are demeaning.

Instead, AAVE is a systematic language variety, with patterns of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and usage that extend far beyond slang.

For the purpose of this study, we only focused on the grammatical Features:

1. Absence of the –s in third person singular –of the simple present of the verb
e.g., she walk for *she walks*
2. Plural –s absence in the general class of noun plurals
e.g., four girl for *four girls*
3. Reduction of final consonant clusters when followed by a word beginning with a vowel or when followed by a suffix beginning with a vowel
e.g., lif for *lift up*
4. Absence of possessive morpheme [s], [z], or [ez]
e.g., Jack car for *Jack’s car*
5. Copula and auxiliary absence involving forms of the verb “to be”
e.g., she nice for *she is nice*
6. The use of habitual be
e.g., Sometimes my ears be itching.
7. The use of “been” to mark an action that took place or a state that began a long time ago and is still relevant.
e.g., You been paid your dues a long time ago.
8. Multiple Negation- Absence of third Person singular ‘s
e.g., She don’t believe nothing I tell her.
9. Generalization of ‘is’ and ‘was’
e.g., We was watching television.

See Fasold, (1972) in Wolfram, (1998), Baily & Thomas (1998), Rickford (1999), Hinton & Pollock (2000): Wolfram (1994)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The different dialects children bring to the school environment and how schools deal with the difference has been polarizing topics among educators. In recent articles concerning the language barriers affecting student achievement in public schools, Labov (1972) reports that many students in schools today speak some form of vernacular English and are often told they speak ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ English. He claimed that the perception of most people is that Standard English equals “good grammar,” and this belief is embedded into institutions, especially in educational settings. Because Standard English is used for the main forms of communication in America, this particular dialect is firmly associated with public life.

These issues directly affect the academic achievement of African American students. For the last decade there has been renewed focus on improving the instruction of children at risk for not learning to read and write. In previous years, “at risk” was a label given to students who were considered to be non-readers; today, the term at risk refers to the students’ environment, which hinders the student from learning.

Labov (1972) further explains that many instructional programs have produced disappointing results in teaching African American students to read and write. He also claimed that many have even complicated the process for the struggling learners by offering approaches that are philosophically different from those offered in the classroom.

Many linguistic suggest that there is a need for school curriculums that focus on language variations and dialect (Norton & Toohey, 2004). This particular curriculum would provide socially accepted approaches for teaching students from various dialects; however, if the focus is on African American students who speak AAVE, there are still many who question whether AAVE has a place in the classroom. So the question then becomes do we accept all dialects, except AAVE.

The issue of whether AAVE has a place in the classroom is debatable, however, AAVE does exist and its presence is apparent in some children’s writing and speaking skills. Because of the social, historical, and political relationship to AAVE, many educators are struggling to find approaches for helping their African American students. This particular study specifically investigates the effectiveness of an ELL methodology, dialogue journal writing on African American students writing skills.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to better understand the effectiveness of an ELL methodology, Dialogue Journal Writing with African American students. This study sought to qualitatively examine the effect of dialogue journal writing on African American Students' literacy and language skills. The two guiding research questions for this study were: What is the effect of dialogue journal writing on African American students' writing skills? What role does gender play in the response generated during the dialogue writing exchange between student and teacher?

METHODOLOGY

This research draws from two sources: 1) an informal meeting and 2) the dialogue journal writing sessions. The study was designed to last three months in which the control group was taught using the traditional methods of teaching following the Language Arts Teacher Edition (i.e., Celebrated Reading) and did not participate in the Daily Dialogue Journal Writing. Data were collected using a mixed methods approach, primarily through a pre and post writing test and descriptive analysis of the journal entries.

Informal Meeting

An informal meeting was held in January, before the dialogue journal writing session started. It was between the researcher and the subjects of the study. The students were briefed on the concept behind dialogue journal writing and what is expected of them throughout the experimental period. The students were also informed of the criteria for the dialogue journal. They were given the freedom to write on any topic of interest because in free-writing activities they are not limited to any topic. The important consideration in free-writing is fluency. Besides that, they were given the encouragement to express their feelings, thoughts and opinions in their journal writing.

Dialogue Journal Writing Sessions

Students were given notebooks in which to write their daily journal entries. Students wrote on the top-side of the paper and the teacher responded on the bottom-side of the paper. Every Wednesday the students were given the opportunity to speak in front of the class and

discuss the conversations written in their journal. The students were given 5 of the 15 minutes to just read and the remaining 10 minutes to communicate with the class. Surprisingly, the students enjoyed going to the front of the class and talking. Speaking in front of the class greatly motivated the students to want to speak and write more in their journals. During the students' presentations the researcher would politely interrupt them as they said something grammatically incorrect; for example, a student said "Me and Mrs. Haynes was talking about favorite foods in our journal." After the presentation of three to four students, students would begin self correcting themselves during their oral conversations.

Lastly, all entries remained private unless the teacher and student consented to sharing entries with the class. The students were also told that the experiment would continue for a period of seven weeks and that they were supposed to write at least twice a week to the teacher and researchers. Finally, they were told to enjoy the exercise as their writing will not be graded or marked. This method provides a non-threatening writing environment for the students.

PARTICIPANTS

The subjects of this study were 49 African American students in the fourth grade in a rural small school district. Two of the three classes were used as subjects for the study. The classes were randomly selected based on a coin toss, in which one class was the experimental group and the other class the control group. The students were between the ages of ten and eleven years of age. The classes had been grouped heterogeneously, consisting of children with varying academic abilities.

Tables 1 and 2 show the mean and standard deviation for the students' ages. In the control group (C), 0% of the students were nine years of age during the study, 50% were 10 years of age, 36% were 11 years of age, and 14% were 12 years of age. In the experimental group (T), 29% of the students were nine years of age, 54% of the students were 10 years of age, 17% were 11 years of age, and 0% was 12 years of age. It appeared that there were not any students in the control group that were nine years of age as well as there were not any students in the experimental group that were 12 years of age. In looking at the overall percentage, 33% of the students were above the average age for the grade, which was fourth grade.

TABLE 1: School, Class, Sex, Age, and Teacher’s Race-Fourth Grade Student Body

School	Class	Boys	Girls	Total	Age	Teacher’s Race
Greenhill Elm.	T	14	10	24	9-11	African American
Greenhill Elm.	C	9	16	25	10-12	African American
Total		23	26	49		

T- Treatment

C- Control

TABLE 2: Mean and Standard Deviations of Student’s Age

Variable	Group	M	SD	n
Age	Control	10.6364	.7267	22
Age	Experimental	9.8750	.6797	24

DATA ANALYSIS

The data from the pretest-posttest control group and experimental group was analyzed and descriptive analysis were provided. The statistical method used to test differences in means was analysis of variance (ANOVA). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical results. The data from the daily dialogue journal writing were analyzed by two raters using a qualitative writing scale. The students were evaluated based on two criteria: (1) the frequency of AAVE in their writing and (2) the student’s quality of writing. Two rubrics were used to assess the students’ writing ability. The qualitative writing scale score ranged from 1 to 4; a score of 1 suggests that the student was unable to respond to the writing prompt. A score of 4 suggests that the student’s content was appropriate and relevant to the topic, language was standard, and vocabulary increased. However, the rubric used to evaluate the student’s overall score was very different. In this particular rubric the score ranged from 1 to 4, in which the score of the 4 suggests that the students used Standard American English (SAE), paper was well organized, contains complete sentences, paper is about the topic, and includes several details that support the topic. All students observed have been exposed to AAVE features; however, we were trying to determine their levels of usage of specific AAVE features in their writing.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare pre and posttest means of students in the control and experimental groups. Results of the ANOVA, shown in Table 3, yielded no significant difference in the results, $F(1, 43) = .256, p = .616$ for Quality Score and $F(1, 43) = 3, 520, p = .067$ for the AAVE score. Several *t*-tests were conducted on the pretest scores to determine mean gains from the pretest scores to the posttest scores. It was important to the researcher to determine if the Daily Dialogue Journal Writing had helped reduce AAVE

features in the student's writing in the experimental group over the three month period. The control group's mean pretest significantly exceeded the mean of the experimental pretest results. A t test for independent samples indicated a significant difference in the AAVE writing score, $t = 2.457$, $p = .018$. In using the AAVE's writing rubric, the students in the control group averaged a score of 3 on their writing samples, which suggested that students used some features of AAVE in their writing. However, the Experimental group averaged a 2.7, which suggested a high frequency of features in their writing. A dependent samples t -test was conducted to assess significance of gains from pretest to posttest (Table 3). A dependent sample t -test was conducted to assess significance of mean gain between females and males in their quality score of writing as well as the AAVE score in writing between the two groups. Table 4 indicates that the results indicate that there was no significant difference in quality score between females and males participating in the daily dialogue journal writing, $t = .489$, $p = .627$. The t -test also indicated that there was no significant difference in AAVE score between females and males participating in the dialog journal writing, $t = .409$, $p = .702$. Although some of the students did not show any evidence of AAVE features in their paper, their quality score was a good representation their writing ability set forth by the State. There was no significant statistical difference among groups with regard to their writing based on the two criteria. However, it is clearly seen in their writing samples of the experimental group that the journal writing helped to improve their overall writing performance.

The present study demonstrates that daily dialogue journal writing is highly effective in improving African American fourth-grade students' writing skills. This improvement is based on the student's ability to reduce many of the AAVE features in their writings. Further, it is the direct and constant model of the teacher's response of Standard American English (SAE) in the journal that proves to be very instrumental. These beneficial outcomes were obtained even though the experimental conditions were not significantly different on measure of instructional progress.

TABLE 3: ANOVA of Posttest Scores (AAVE Score/ Quality Score)

School	Sum of Square	df	Mean square	F	Significance of F	Eta Squared
AAVE Score	2.847	1	2.847	7.556	.009	.149
Group	1.326	1	1.326	3.520	.067	.076

Error	16.202	43	.377	49		
Quality - Score	21.619	1	21.619	32.201	.000	.428
Group	.172	1	.172	.256	.616	.006
Error	28.869	43	.671			

TABLE 4: Reports mean(M) and Standard Deviation(SD) and t-test for Quality Score and AAVE Score Writing for female and males

Variable	F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	M	SD
Quality Score	.002	.967	-.489	.627		
AAVE Score	.695	.409	-.409	.702		
Gender Male					3.2083	1.4136
Gender Female					3.2273	1.2318

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The present research examined the effectiveness of an ELL methodology, Dialogue Journal Writing on African American students writing skills. The descriptive analysis of the journal entries were categorized into 3 areas: content, language and vocabulary. In regards to the content area, the researchers were trying to examine whether the students stayed on topic and added feedback to topic discussed in the journal. In examining the language area, the researchers were trying to examine the frequency of AAVE grammatical features within the writing as well as the student’s ability to self correct during the writing session. The vocabulary area was examined by the students’ ability use more SAE terms or vocabulary, rather than using their everyday colloquial term in their writing.

1.1 Content

The data on content in all subject area showed that there was improvement in the students’ writing content. In the beginning of the writing session, students did not seem to stay on topic and provided little content to the dialogue exchange. The teacher decided to provide the students with an incentive for staying on topic and providing more content to the writing. If the students stayed on topic and provided content, the teacher or the researchers would place a

sticker in their journals. At the end of the week, students could claim their prize based on the number of stickers in the journal.

1.2. Language

The data on the subjects' writing skills in English showed that all students showed improvement in their language skills. Students were made aware of the AAVE grammatical features before they started journaling. We believe this contributed to the improvement. AAVE features such as the possessive form and noun plurals improved greatly. However, subject verb agreement still remained to be more of an issue in their writing.

1.3. Vocabulary

The ranges of vocabulary in the subjects' writing show that there was an improvement in the use of vocabulary. Both male and female students presented an adequate level of vocabulary development and showed variety in their word choice. When the mean of journal entries were compared, it revealed that male students scored the highest mean of 4.5 followed by the female students of 4.1.

CONCLUSION

The overall results of this study revealed that the students' writing ability did improve quantitatively and qualitatively. There are several reasonable conclusions that can be formed from these findings. The first is that AAVE, as reported by African American and Euro-American researchers does exist. Based on the journal entries collected, the AAVE grammatical features are present in all students' writings. The second conclusion is that Dialogue Journal Writing, an ELL technique proved to be very effective in improving African American students' writing skills. The third conclusion is that most teachers would agree that teaching students how to write is probably the most difficult skill to teach, especially those students who speak AAVE and lack the ability to speak SAE.

In conclusion, dialogue journals not only open a new channel of communication, but they also provide another context for language and literacy development. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Because the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing.

SAMPLE DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Student Response:

Hello my name is RC. I was named after my dad XSr. I am the only child. I have one dog. I have a very messy room. I have many friend. On the weekend I played Gex 3 Deep Cover Cecko. I even play Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver. I like to write story about Ravin Warriors, Glazy Sulfer, and Dragon ball GT.I. I draw very much I pretend like as if I were Ryo, of the Wild Fire. I am only ten years old. I only have the playstation games Gex 3, Warpath, Namco Museam, Soul Reaver, Warzne 2100, and Akuji. My cousin Eric has more playstation game than I do I also like the Knuckles gell pen.

Teacher Response:

It is very nice to meet you. I enjoyed reading about you and all the things you like to play with. My son is also the only child. He also has a messy room. Before he can go outside he has to clean his room. He does not like to clean his room. Sometimes he tries to put his toys and clothes under the bed or in the closet. When he does this, I usually go to the kitchen and get a broom and rake them in the middle of the floor. He hates when I do this. My son has a dog and his name is Skippy. He loves his dog.

Student Response:

Today I fed my dog. I got on the bus. I looked out the window, pretending that, I was surfing. I thought about "Pokeman Silver," the one Allen has. He said he would give it to me, but he hasn't given it to me. Then, when the bus driver stops at Trevins house he doesn't get on. I figured he was over Mario's house, but he wasn't. When I go home I'm going to walk the dog and skate. What have you done today?

Teacher Response:

Hello RC,

Well, last night I cooked dinner and I helped my son with his homework. I really did not watch any television last night, I was so tired. RC, do you like surfing? Have you ever gone surfing?

Student Response:

Michael Jordan became a basketball champ. Michael was also bald. Churches were in a basketball tournament. I liked basketball, because some of our young boys of our church were in a game against another church. We were about to win until they, called substitution and put me down and catch up. Then, he got tired and I subbed him. But we were still behind. But it was fun. Soon as I came from the game I wrote a story of “Galazy Surfers.” Do you like to write stories.

Two days ago I walked my dog and we chased cattle and the bull. I played “Soul Reaver” and I took the soul from a demon. It was super, ultra, ultimate scary. I drew a picture of knuckle, the Echidna Sonic, the Hedgehog, and Tail the little Red Fox. I gave them pants. Do you like to draw? My dog Kyda ate a jawbone and teeth of a dead deer. I past by Bryon and Jokari’s house after my tooth was pulled. They didn’t see me but I saw them.

Teacher Response:

RC, I cannot draw; however, I do love to play basketball. I used to play basketball in college. RC, I even tried out for the WNBA; however, I had an old knee injury that would not allow me to run at full speed. Did you go to the dentist to have your tooth pulled, or did you have someone at home to pull your teeth out?

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