



Examining the Role of Dialect in Children's Writing Samples



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Introduction

African American English (AAE) is a dialect that uses alternative morphological and phonetic forms distinct from Mainstream American English (MAE). Findings from previous research have often linked high density of AAE with lower literary performance, especially when compared to MAE speakers (Horton-Ikard, 2010). Though recent research has confirmed that dialect usage does not cause poor literary performance, little is known about how written dialect use is perceived given the expectations for academic writing to be in MAE. The present study focuses on the relation between narrative quality ratings and the use of AAE dialect in narrative writing samples.

Methods

Participants:

This study includes 35, 2nd grade African American students. The participant's writing samples were taken as a subsample from a larger study done in the southeast region of the United States. Exclusion criteria includes speakers who were not African American or samples that were not legible.

Inclusionary criteria:

- African American student and English speaker
- Received either free or reduced lunch

Measures:

Dialect Density Measure (DDM)

- Coded samples using coding manual based on previous research (Washington & Craig, 2002).
- Total # of Codes/Total # of Words using the systematic analysis of language transcripts (SALT)

Narrative Writing Quality

- Students responded to the prompt, "One day when I got home from school"
- Used a 6-point rubric to rate each sample based on: main idea, organization, sentence structure and word choice
- Topics were chosen so students would not be penalized for the use of AAE (e.g., standard conventions such as grammar or spelling errors)
- Composite scores were calculated; students were graded out of 72 points

Traits Rubric for Ideas: K-2

Key question: Does the writer engage the reader with fresh information or perspective on a focused topic?

	Not Proficient			Proficient		
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Does not communicate an idea through writing	Attempts to present the idea, but it is vague and there is no support through writing	Conveys the idea in writing in a general way but support is lacking or not convincing	Presents a simple idea with some details in writing	Conveys a rich, clear main idea using multiple sentences with supporting details	Conveys a clear, focused, and well-developed idea in writing that is fresh or original
Main idea	May write letters randomly	Uses some recognizable letters or words	Tries to convey a simple experience or information about a topic, but meaning is not entirely clear	Conveys a clear idea (e.g., through a story, information, or opinion)	Conveys a focused main idea	Presents a focused, complete, and fresh or original idea
Details and support	Presents drawing or writing that is lacking details	Provides one or more clues or details in a drawing but does not support main idea; presents no written details	Offers one or two simple details in writing but does not develop them sufficiently	Includes several written details and/or reasons supporting the idea	Features many specific written details and/or reasons that develop or support the idea	Uses specific, interesting, important details and/or reasons to develop or support ideas and demonstrate understanding

*This rubric is one of the four topics graded for narrative quality; main idea was graded out of 12

Results

Correlation Analysis

		AAE Codes	MAE Use	Narrative Quality Rating
Mainstream American English Use	Pearson Correlation	-.682**	1	.450*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.007
	N	35	35	35

* There is a medium to large correlation between MAE use and perceived narrative quality ratings (n = 35, r = .45, p = .007)

Descriptive Data

Measures	Participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Mainstream Use (%)	35	58.82%	100%	88.23%
Narrative Quality Rating (points)	35	26.5	70.5	46.53

*Descriptive data presents the ranges of MAE use and the ratings for narrative quality

The relation between dialect density and narrative writing quality was investigated by using a Pearson correlation coefficient. Dialect density was calculated and reversed to find the use of MAE for positive correlation. There was a medium to large correlation between MAE use and perceived narrative ratings; students who had a higher use of MAE in their writing were more likely to have higher perceived composite scores. The proportion of dialect use helps explain 20% of variance in writing quality ratings for second grade students.

Discussion

The results of this study give further insight into the role of dialect in children's writing samples. Although the data analysis shows a positive relation between the use of MAE and narrative quality ratings, descriptive data shows that there was an average of 88.23% MAE use with an average of 46.5/72 points for narrative writing. Put more plainly, despite a majority of students having a high use of MAE, average narrative quality score was only ~65%, suggesting that other factors may account for ratings of narrative quality. Examination of other likely related factors such as grammar, spelling errors, and other standard writing conventions, was outside the focus of this study.

Limitations include the choice of writing prompt. The writing samples were taken as a subsample from a larger study, so we were not able to choose a more contextualized prompt. Using a decontextualized prompt like, "One day when I got home from school" may result in less of a narrative writing and more of a given list. Another limitation may include the socioeconomic status of the sample, as students who receive free or reduced lunch are generally at-risk for lower proficiency in standardized tests.

Future Direction

Further research may provide more dialect awareness for educators and benefit students who use AAE dialect. With professional development and training, dialect speakers can become more proficient and comfortable in linguistic flexibility or code-switching. Different variables that can be tested in future research may include a more contextualized prompt or consider AAE speakers who are more proficient in their writing skills (middle/high-school students).

References

- Horton-Ikard, R., & Pittman, R. T. (2010). Examining the writing of adolescent American English speakers: Suggestions for assessment and intervention. *Topics in Language Disorders, 30*(3), 189-204. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TLD.0b013e3181efc3bd>
- Washington, J. A., & Craig, H. K. (2002). Morphosyntactic forms of African American English used by young children and their caregivers. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 23*(2), 209-231. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716402002035>