ToggleTalk®
An Evidence-Based Program for Teaching Young African American English Speaking Students to Switch to Standard American English for Academic Purposes

National testing and accountability movements across the United States and recent widespread adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) herald major changes in expectations for both students and teachers. By the end of the elementary grades, students must demonstrate command of standard English grammar when writing, speaking, reading, or listening. Students must also understand how language functions in different contexts and be able to make effective choices for meaning and style specific to a variety of discourse contexts. Increasingly teachers need to teach standard conventional forms of English, but often they are ill-prepared to design and implement effective programs for their young students.

Cross-linguistically, students who use classic/standard dialects are advantaged when learning to read compared to their peers who speak more colloquial/regional forms (Alrabaa, 1986; Ibrahim, 1983; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003). In the United States, Standard American English (SAE) is the dialect associated with educated and professional discourse, and the one that aligns most closely with classroom instructions and written English. African American English (AAE) is a major dialect in the U.S. which has been the focus of considerable research. Students who can shift away from their heritage AAE language forms to SAE academically outperform their non-shifting peers (Charity, et al, 2004; Craig et al, 2009). It is the AAE speakers’ awareness of linguistic forms and context differences, and their ability to adapt their linguistic forms to the context that are the variables impacting reading acquisition (Craig, Kolenic, & Hensel, 2014; Terry, 2014; Terry & Scarborough, 2011), not the fact of being an AAE speaker.

Based upon 20 years of research, at the University of Michigan we have developed a curriculum for young AAE speaking students. The curriculum includes instructional lessons scaled down from earlier research by Wheeler and Swords with older students (Wheeler & Swords, 2006; 2010). The new curriculum is named ToggleTalk®, to signify our educational goals to teach today’s students to become bi-dialectal and skilled at code-switching back and forth between AAE for informal discourse and SAE for more formal academic contexts.

The Core Elements of ToggleTalk®

Lesson goals and materials were created over three years, tested in classrooms, revised, and retested (U.S. Department of Education, R305A100284) resulting in three final components:
- Dialect Assessment Battery (DAB), a proximal measure of student progress
- Dialect Recognition Lessons
- Dialect Production Lessons

The DAB is comprised of two psychometrically-equated versions, which teachers administer to establish an initial baseline, and again to post-test. Subtests include: Dialect Recognition (DR)- awareness of the two dialects; Elicited Imitation (EI)- production of SAE forms in a low cognitive load context; and Translation (T)- reformulation from AAE to SAE.

In the Dialect Recognition lessons, a formality metaphor is introduced, starting with clothing differences, then places, and finally language as informal: home-informal-AAE, and formal: school-formal-SAE. Formality characteristics are intuitive and have been readily understood by young students. The Dialect Production lessons apply a well-known linguistic method, Contrastive Analysis, to teaching SAE production of five major AAE features characteristic of student discourse: Zero Plural, Zero Past Tense, Subject-Verb Agreement, Zero Copula, and Zero Article. The program scripts all lessons so that teachers can be successful regardless of the depth of their grammar knowledge. Saliency and repetition are core intervention strategies. Lesson activities include oral and written tasks using sentence strips, pictures, props, and original story books.
Program Effectiveness

Initially, a small-scale study was conducted to test program effectiveness in an authentic educational setting. The partnering public school district, in the northern Midwest was characterized by high African American student enrollments, high poverty, and persistently low academic achievement. Teachers were four K (n = 2) and 1st grade (n = 2) non-Hispanic White females with ≥ five years’ experience. Students were 34 AAE-speaking boys and girls in K (n = 19) and 1st grade (n = 15); 28 students completed the project. Students mirrored national trends. Although not in special education, they evidenced low reading skills but within normal limits, declining across grades; low vocabulary scores within normal limits; and dense AAE feature production in discourse.

The study employed a pre-test/post-test design. The formality metaphor was introduced and the DAB was administered, along with tests of: word decoding and identification, receptive vocabulary, dialect measures, and school-administered diagnostic reading. Dialect Recognition and Production lessons were completed during 8-weeks, organized around 20 minute lessons, twice per week as part of the English Language Arts curriculum. Post-testing repeated the DAB and the standardized testing measures.

Pre- and post-testing comparisons revealed the following.
• Students significantly increased their scores on DR and EI subtests with moderate to large effect sizes (Cohen’s d) at K (0.67, 0.71) and 1st grades (1.85, 0.90). Students in K approached significance on the T task (pairwise \( t = 1.81, p < .100, d = 0.44 \)).
• Multi-level modeling revealed DR and EI post scores were 2.84 points higher on average than pre, controlling for grade and vocabulary. For the T test, 1st graders scored 2.4 points higher than K students, controlling for pre/post status.
• As students increased DAB scores, they also increased scores in reading. An experimental alpha level was set at .10 as appropriate for a distal measure of the intervention effect with a small sample size. Letter-word recognition standard scores increased significantly, \( t(27) = 2.00, p = .06, d = 0.38 \). This positive change is noteworthy because the improved standard reading test scores occurred within the relatively short 8-week timespan. Multi-level models revealed an average gain in standardized decoding scores of 2.14 between pre- and post-testing.
• Students generalized their use of the formality metaphor to remind themselves and peers to switch to SAE during subject lessons which were not the focus of the intervention.
• Teachers judged the program high on feasibility and characterized it positively. They demonstrated implementation feasibility, scoring highest on their ability to implement the curriculum using language that was reflective of overall program goals.

Research demonstrating the effectiveness of ToggleTalk® is ongoing.

Conclusions

The project demonstrates that a curriculum designed to increase awareness of dialectal differences and to increase student abilities to switch to SAE as needed, can be successful and well-accepted in school districts with limited resources for teaching conventional forms of academic English.

Holly K. Craig, Ph.D., November, 2014

For more information about ToggleTalk® go to www.ventrislearning.com.