

Dialect Density and the Codevelopment of Writing and Reading in African American Children



The Study :

The purpose of the study is to examine three-way longitudinal relations among writing, reading, and spoken dialect density in **African American English-speaking (AAE)** children from first through fifth grade.

Study Questions:



1. How does dialect density influence the codevelopment of writing and reading skills?

2. How do contextual factors influence the development of African American English-speaking students?

What is African American English (AAE)?

AAE is spoken by African Americans and includes rules for **language phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics** specific to that population.

This dialect is different from **Mainstream American English (MAE)**, which is typically encountered in academic discourse and English orthography.

What is Dialect Density?

Dialect density is defined as **the degree to which dialect impacts the overall spoken productions** of children who use AAE; low dialect density means dialect use impacts fewer than 10% of utterances, and high density means dialect use impacts more than 50% of utterances (Oetting & McDonald, 2002; Washington & Craig, 1994).

Findings:

Children's dialect density may be influenced by contextual factors, such as family background, type of school attended, and poverty

- **Dialect density** had a **negative influence** concurrently and longitudinally **on reading and writing abilities in AAE-speaking children.**
- **High dialect** users tended to have **weaker reading and writing skills.**
- **Reading had a facilitative effect on writing** even in the presence of heavy dialect use.

Implications for teachers



Students who are better at **decreasing dialect use in the school setting** may be better at **adapting to the classroom language (MAE)**. These students may in turn be more facile in **acquiring adequate reading and writing skills.**

- Learning to **read and write texts (in MAE)** helps children acquire MAE which in turn helps them **decrease their use of AAE when needed.**
- As reading has a facilitative effect on writing even in the presence of heavy dialect use, the use of **comprehensive literacy (reading and writing)** instruction by teachers might be **more beneficial** instead of teaching them as separate strands.



- As **reading has a facilitative effect on writing** even in the presence of heavy dialect use, the use of comprehensive literacy (reading and writing) instruction by teachers might be more beneficial instead of teaching them as separate strands.
- The findings of the study **require more detailed testing** of dialect over longer periods, and ideally some experimental control to understand the relations across changes in these constructs.