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“I Never Really Knew the History behind African American Language”: Critical Language Pedagogy in an Advanced Placement English Language Arts Class

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This article responds to two long-standing dilemmas that limit the effectiveness of language education for students who speak and write in African American Language (AAL): (1) the gap between theory and research on AAL and classroom practice, and (2) the need for critical language pedagogies. This article presents the effectiveness of a critical language pedagogy used in one eleventh grade advanced placement English Language Arts (ELA) class. Findings show that students held negative attitudes toward AAL before the implementation of the critical language pedagogy, and that the critical language pedagogy helped students to interrogate dominant notions of language and to express an appreciation of AAL.

The motivation for the critical language pedagogy that I describe in this article stems from my experience being ill-prepared to address my AAL-speaking students’ language and literacy needs when I worked as a high school English teacher. I recall having a discussion with my students about code-switching from AAL to Dominant American English (hereafter DAE). This discussion revealed that my students either held negative attitudes toward AAL (although they spoke it) or resisted using DAE because they felt that it reflected the dominant culture, and they did not want to be forced to imitate a culture of which they did not consider themselves part. One student flat out said, “What would I look like speaking in DAE? It don’t even sound right.” The questions and concerns that these students were raising shed light on the critical linguistic issues that code-switching pedagogies fail to address, and unfortunately, at that time, I did not have the pedagogical tools necessary to provide my students with a critical understanding of AAL.

This experience speaks to at least two dilemmas limiting the effectiveness of language education for students who speak and write in AAL. First, there is a gap between theory and research on AAL and classroom practice (Gilyard, 2005; Smitherman, 2006; Smitherman & Quartey-Annan, 2011). While language scholars are currently calling for critical1 approaches that respond to the language and literacy needs of students who speak and write in AAL (Alim, 2005; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008; Paris, 2012; Young, 2009), some K-12 English Language Arts (hereafter ELA) teachers—even at this late hour in history—are not prepared to view AAL in a larger system of language learning (Alim, 2005, 2007; Ball & Lardner, 2005; Ball...
& Muhammad, 2003; Gilyard, 2005). Second, many classrooms are informed by code-switching pedagogies that (1) fail to consider the matrix of language, identity, and power (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008), (2) postpone students’ ability to think critically about linguistic imperialism in a pluralistic world (Canagarajah, 2006), (3) advise teachers to ignore the relationship between language and race (Young, 2009), and (4) cause students to feel linguistically and culturally inadequate (Fogel & Ehri, 2006). Given these dilemmas, it is crucial that literacy educators and researchers investigate the implementation and effectiveness of critical approaches that align existing theory and research on AAL with classroom practice. However, there are few studies that capture such pedagogical applications and how they improve the language education of students who speak and write in AAL (Alim, 2005, 2007; Chisholm & Godley, 2011; Godley & Minnici, 2008).

With these needs in mind, I became interested in exploring the possibility of a pedagogy that moves beyond filling students’ linguistic toolboxes with code-switching techniques and toward providing them with a critical understanding of the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of AAL. Drawing on the work of Alim (2005, 2007), Kirkland and Jackson (2008), Chisholm and Godley (2011), and Godley and Minnici (2008), I use the term “critical language pedagogy” to describe an instructional approach that encourages students to interrogate dominate notions of language while providing them space to value, sustain, and learn about the historical importance of their own language. This article documents students’ responses to a critical language pedagogy that I co-taught in one eleventh grade Advanced Placement (AP) ELA class.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Despite there being decades of research on AAL and it being the most studied and written about language in the world (Gilyard, 2005), it has yet to be embraced as a resource for educational innovation in twenty-first century ELA classrooms (Paris & Ball, 2011). This is overwhelmingly problematic given that there is no indication that AAL will be used less in U.S. society (Paris & Ball, 2011), and the enrollment of black students in American K-12 institutions is expected to increase by 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). This suggests that ELA classrooms will become increasingly multilingual and multicultural (Kinloch, 2005). Language scholars have consistently argued that teachers must shift their pedagogies and practices to value the rich resources that multilingual speakers and writers bring with them to ELA classrooms, yet many classrooms continue to be informed by monolingual ideologies (Ball & Muhammad, 2003; Canagarajah, 2006; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008; Shaughnessy, 1977; Smitherman, 1995; Young, 2009).

**Moving Beyond Code-Switching Pedagogies**

One monolingual approach that is commonly used in ELA classrooms to address the needs of speakers and writers of AAL is the code-switching approach. The code-switching approach is concerned with getting users of AAL to develop facility in DAE by restricting AAL to informal contexts and DAE to formal contexts (Canagarajah, 2006; Wheeler & Swords, 2006).
Critical scholars of language Kirkland and Jackson (2008) argue that code-switching pedagogies do not improve students’ attitudes toward their own languages, and these pedagogies perpetuate students’ feelings of linguistic and cultural shame as they fail to consider the matrix of language, identity, and power. Kirkland and Jackson call for teachers to take a critical instructional approach to language—one that:

- addresses critical-linguistic issues,
- makes students aware of the historical importance of AAL,
- considers the significance of all sociolinguistic forms and provides students with opportunities to investigate, accommodate, and critique such forms,
- addresses negative assumptions about languages and their speakers,
- is explicit about the political act of language (i.e., making students aware that every time they speak or write, they are engaging in a political act),
- provides instruction to all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, which offsets the assumptions that perpetuate linguistic discrimination. (pp. 148–149)

Canagarajah (2006) asserts that the code-switching approach postpones linguistically marginalized students’ critical literacy practices, reproduces monolingual ideologies and linguistic hierarchies, disables students’ contexts of linguistic pluralism, keeps codes separate but equal, and does not contribute to long-term goals of accepting minority languages and World Englishes. Additionally, Canagarajah declares that code-switching pedagogies also convey to students that their language “should only have a restricted place in [their] repertoire” (p. 1624), and it insinuates that only one code can be present at any one time. Last, he argues that code-switching pedagogies do not uphold the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution, but instead grants teachers the right to students’ languages.

Young (2009) argues that code-switching pedagogies urge teachers to ignore race when teaching African American students to code-switch. He specifically calls out linguist Rebecca Wheeler and teacher Rachel Swords for advising teachers to “refrain from referring to race when describing code-switching” (p. 50). Young insists that teachers cannot ask students to code-switch without mentioning the politics and interconnectedness between language and race. Otherwise, teachers would be drawing on the experiences of these students’ heritages, “then render them invisible [and] extract their historical and contemporary experiences from the discussion” (p. 51). In other words, Young is arguing that the code-switching approach implies a racist, segregationist response to the language habits of African Americans “that contradicts our best efforts and hopes for our students” (p. 51).

The above critiques make evident that code-switching pedagogies are a response to the linguistic and technical differences between AAL and DAE, but they do not address historical or social differences (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008).

Toward a Critical Language Pedagogy

The theoretical basis for the curriculum that I explore in this article builds on Alim’s (2007) idea of critical language pedagogy, which is situated within a framework of critical awareness. This framework targets schools not only as a primary site for language wars but also as a site obligated
to provide linguistically and culturally diverse students with a critical awareness of their “social and linguistic reality” (p. 163). Alim recognizes the tensions between the development of critical language pedagogies and the lack of their broader implementation and, thus, argues that critical language pedagogies should incorporate both theory and practice “so that innovative approaches might begin to be implemented in classrooms as part of a broader educational movement advocating locally relevant and continually negotiated curricula” (p. 63). Alim suggests that a critical language pedagogy should: (1) engage teachers in the same type of critical language pedagogies outlined for their students, (2) provide teachers and their students with a “wake up call” of linguistic inequality, and (3) encourage teachers and students to interrogate received discourses on language, which are always connected to issues of race, gender, power, class, and sexuality.

There are not many examples of how Alim’s notion of critical language pedagogy is being applied in schools; however, Godley and Minnici (2008) provide a description of how they applied critical language pedagogy to a week-long unit about dialects and language variation in three 10th grade English classes. Their model draws on scholarship from the fields of New Literacy Studies, linguistics, and critical pedagogy. Current perspectives in each of these fields push toward rethinking and reimagining approaches to language instruction, particularly for linguistically and culturally-diverse students. The first component of Godley and Minnici’s framework is identifying and critiquing dominant language ideologies. This component promotes the examination of questions, such as, “How can language be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations?” and, “How can language be used to resist, redefine, and possibly reverse these relations?” (Alim, 2007, p. 166). The second characteristic of the critical language pedagogy framework is dialogism, which requires a classroom space that values and highlights students’ viewpoints through discussion and debate. A dialogic classroom environment must be democratic and obliterate “the distinction between teacher and student so that everyone can teach and learn through classroom conversations about language, language ideologies, and language use” (Godley & Minnici, 2008, p. 323). The final component places students’ everyday language experiences and use at the center of intellectual discussion. This component is premised on the belief that for language instruction to be genuinely critical, it must “build on students’ understandings of the world around them, including language use” (Godley & Minnici, 2008, p. 324).

Whereas Godley and Minnici’s (2008) framework of critical language pedagogy uses the interconnectedness of language and power to encourage students to develop critical perspectives on language, my version of critical language pedagogy presents students with a critical understanding of the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of AAL to heighten their consciousness of their own language. More specifically, I use problem-posing activities to encourage students to interrogate dominant notions of language and to become active agents in their own language education (Freire, 1970). In what follows, I present some of the activities from the critical language pedagogy and then show how students responded to a curriculum that offered them a critical understanding of AAL.

**METHOD**

This pilot study builds upon two other pilots that I conducted, which explored teacher attitudes toward AAL and their pedagogical responses to language diversity. Attitudinal surveys and interviews from the previous studies revealed that teachers held negative attitudes toward AAL and
their students who spoke it and that teachers were underprepared and unaware of existing pedagogies that address the needs of students who speak and write in AAL (Baker-Bell, 2009; Baker-Bell, 2010). The results from these studies, combined with my experience being ill-prepared to address the language and literacy needs of my AAL-speaking students, have led to my ongoing research project that seeks to bridge the gap between theory and research on AAL and classroom practice.

**Research Context, Participants, and Researcher Role**

The study took place at Academy High School (AHS), a public high school located in a suburb in the Midwest. At the time of the study, approximately 98% of the 340-student population at AHS was African American. The participants involved in this study included 27 eleventh grade students, their teacher, Mrs. Dixon, and me. Eighteen of the student participants were female, and nine were male. All of the participants, including Mrs. Dixon and me, were African American. Based on features of AAL that Mrs. Dixon examined in the research literature, she identified all of her students as speakers of AAL with a robust ability to code-switch between AAL and DAE. Although her students were speakers of AAL, Mrs. Dixon informed me that they were robust code-switchers because they knew how and when to “flip the switch,” in other words, use DAE on formal assignments and AAL on informal assignments.

I met Mrs. Dixon, a certified English teacher with more than 19 years of experience teaching ELA, at a professional conference for English educators 15 months before the study was conducted. When I first met Mrs. Dixon, she struggled with understanding the significance of teaching and learning about AAL in the context of school. Despite her uncertainties, she was eager to learn more about AAL and how it could enhance her teaching practice. Hence, she and I met periodically at coffee houses over the course of 15 months to discuss AAL and its practical concerns related to classroom pedagogy. In an interview following the study, Mrs. Dixon revealed that these meetings helped her to unearth her biases about AAL and contributed to her having a paradigm shift. Each year, Mrs. Dixon teaches a five-week unit on language, identity, and culture as part of the curriculum for eleventh grade AP English. After learning that she did not include AAL as one of the languages in her unit, I suggested that she adds a section within the unit that focused exclusively on AAL. Mrs. Dixon liked the idea and invited me to co-plan and co-teach a one-week lesson plan on AAL. However, conflicting schedules and time constraints interfered with our ability to co-plan; therefore, I independently designed the five-day lesson plan that we co-taught in Mrs. Dixon’s ELA class.

Mrs. Dixon and her students were aware that they were participating in a research project and that the implications from the study would be presented and used to inform my research on AAL. They consented to participating so as long their identities were made anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. The students requested bagels for their participation in the study, and I invited Mrs. Dixon to be part of my panel presentation (the presentation had already been accepted) at a professional teaching conference; she gladly accepted. Mrs. Dixon and her students understood that my role in the research project would be co-teacher, researcher, and participant. I acted as a co-teacher only in moments when Mrs. Dixon felt that my expertise of AAL was necessary. Still, neither of us took on the traditional teaching role; we acted as facilitators since the activities were mostly self-directed and student-centered. I was a researcher at all times, even when I was co-teaching.
Data Collection and Analysis

To make sense of how students responded to the critical language pedagogy, I used students’ written work and the transcriptions from three activities (descriptions follow) as data. My goal for data analysis was to understand how students responded to a curriculum that positioned AAL as valuable. As I read through the data, I began to recognize reoccurring themes across student responses to specific activities. For example, I noticed that many of the students responded to activity 1 with negative perceptions of AAL. Activity 3 revealed that most students began to interrogate dominant notions of language, and students articulated an appreciation for AAL by the time they had reached activity 5. I used these emerging themes as code categories for analyzing students’ written work and transcriptions of activities 1, 3 and 5.

Description of Curriculum

The AP ELA class met five days per week, and the class sessions were 55-minutes long. The AAL curriculum was implemented and completed during the second week of the five-week language unit. During week one of the unit, students focused on the theme “language and power,” and during week three, they concentrated on the theme “language and identity.” The desired outcomes for the entire language unit were for students to:

- understand the complex nature of language systems,
- recognize who is privileged and who is marginalized by language use,
- recognize how one’s identity may shape his or her language,
- apply critical literacy to various texts, and
- participate in various thinking routines in order to think deeply about texts.

Activity 1

Activity 1 was designed to unveil students’ initial attitudes about AAL before I implemented the critical language pedagogy. The activity called for students to read two language samples—one written in AAL and the other in DAE (students were not informed of which sample represented AAL and which sample represented DAE until after the activity was complete)—and to construct a cartoon that corresponded with each language sample. Students were then prompted to write a 2–3 paragraph response expressing their feelings about both languages and their rationale for the cartoons that they created (see Figure 1).

Activity 2

Students engaged in a whole-class discussion about their cartoon illustrations and responses to activity 1. Mrs. Dixon wrote the attitudes about AAL and DAE that emerged from the discussion on the dry erase board.
Directions: Each box below contains a language sample from two different varieties of English. Read the sentences in each box, and then, complete the following steps: Step (1) construct a cartoon featuring two people: one person representing Language A, and one person representing Language B. Include the cartoons in the blank boxes on the following page. For step (2), write a 2-3 paragraph response that expresses your feelings about Language A and Language B. Be sure to include any initial thoughts that came to mind as you read the languages, constructed the cartoons, and/or think of people who communicate in either language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language A:</th>
<th>Language B:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I said, “I ain’t run the stop sign,” and he said, “you ran off!”</td>
<td>I did not leave that water bottle on the lunch table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t nobody gonna put they hands on me.</td>
<td>No one was responsible for the accident; the street light was not working at the time of the collision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t nobody say nothin’ to dem people!</td>
<td>We could not speak to the teacher without her getting upset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t nobody say nothing after that.</td>
<td>Marcus and I were the only two students present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasn’t nobody in there but me an’ him.</td>
<td>I told him that the conversation was inappropriate to have in a classroom setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tell him to be quiet because he don’t know what he talking about.</td>
<td>My father works all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My momma be working all the time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A. Baker-Bell © 2011

**FIGURE 1** Activity 1.

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**A Conversation about African American Language (AAL) and standard English**

Is AAL equivelent to slang? Is it broken English? Do the words make any sense?

Actually, AAL can be defined as a black-origional, rule-based linguistic system that is influenced by African Languages and the English language. AAL is intimately connected with a history of oppression, resistance, and rich linguistic and literary achievements in African America. (Richard & Richard, 2000; Pate & Rod. 2011).

1. |

2. |

3. |

A. Baker-Bell © 2011

**FIGURE 2** Activity 3, Conversation 1.
“A Conversation about African American Language” was intended to be a problem-posing activity that exposed students to the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of AAL. The activity invited students to participate in three conversations (see Figure 1 for a sample of conversation 1. See Appendix for a sample of conversations 2 and 3). Each conversation included three or four characters engaging in a discussion about language. One of the characters represented the uninformed, negative attitude that is often upheld by the general public about AAL. For example, as depicted in Figure 2, one of the characters asks, “Is AAL equivalent to slang? Is it a broken-version of the English language? Do the words make any sense?” The second character in the conversation was designed to interrogate and counter dominant assumptions about AAL, revealing that it is a rule-based linguistic system. Finally, the worksheet includes a blank section that provides space for students to contribute to the conversation. Some students responded to this activity individually and others responded as a group. Activity 3 concluded with a class discussion about the activity. The value in this activity is that it provided students with evidence about AAL that is traditionally missing from language instruction.
Activity 4

Activity 4 was assigned as homework. Students were invited to read and write a 2–3 paragraph response to Smitherman’s (1999) scholarly article *Ebonics, King, and Oakland: Some Folk Don’t Believe Fat Meat Is Greasy*. Students were provided various writing prompts from which to choose (see Figure 3).

Activity 5

On the final day of the unit, the students, Mrs. Dixon, and I engaged in an open, unstructured discussion about AAL. Students asked questions, made arguments, shared experiences, revealed quandaries, and highlighted features of AAL.

FINDINGS

Negative Perceptions of AAL

Research shows that the predominant view of AAL among AAL-speaking students is generally negative (e.g., Kirkland, Jackson, & Smitherman, 2001). The students I observed echoed this view in their responses to activity 1 by using terms, such as “improper,” “grammatically incorrect,” “broken English,” and “language of the ignorant and/or uneducated” to characterize features of AAL. I also noted that some students’ negative perceptions of AAL represented their perceptions of those who speak it. One student indicated in his written work for activity 1 that “People who communicate like [this] are illiterate and aren’t very school educated.” This notion also was articulated by another student who stated that when she read language Sample A, she “thought of someone who’s careless, ignorant, dumb, angry, cocky, inconsiderate.” Some scholars have argued that negative attitudes toward AAL are fostered in classrooms (Smitherman, 1981; Zudima, 2005). Evidence from Kirkland and Jackson’s (2008) study demonstrates that students’ negative perceptions of their own language are increased when they receive uncritical language instruction. Even so, classrooms are not the only breeding grounds for shaping language attitudes. Students’ perceptions of language also are influenced by how AAL is viewed in contexts outside of school. For instance, AAL is not always seen as socially or intellectually valuable in the context of family, thus, AAL is often corrected or suppressed when used in the home (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008).

Although students had negative perceptions of AAL, their perceptions of DAE were positive. Students generally identified DAE as “proper,” “literate,” “grammatically correct,” and the “language of the well-educated and well-mannered.” This attitude is to be expected since most language instruction privileges DAE over other languages and dialects (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008). The positive attitudes toward DAE and the negative attitudes toward AAL spilled over into the illustrations that students constructed for activity 1. The illustrations that 13 of the students sketched to represent communicators of DAE included white, preppy, studious individuals from suburban communities (see Figure 4, column B). Quite the opposite, illustrations associated with AAL commonly displayed images of African American men with body tattoos, chains around their necks, and saggy pants (see Figure 4, column A) and young women with big earrings,
miniskirts, tank tops, and flamboyant hair styles. To make sense of the illustrations that were constructed, I relied heavily on students’ written responses that expressed their feelings about the illustrations. The student who constructed the illustrations in Figure 4 indicated in her written response that for the AAL sample, she “thought of an ignorant gang banger with his pants sagging and his chain hanging low. I thought of someone who’s careless, dumb, angry, cocky, and inconsiderate.” She also indicated that she “drew a nerdy, preppy little girl” to represent the DAE language sample. The student stated that the character who represented DAE speaks “how people are supposed to [speak].” Many of the student participants in Kirkland and Jackson’s (2008) study depicted speakers of AAL as gangbangers and members of criminal activity as well. Kirkland and Jackson found the student illustrations alarming and concluded that these illustrations reflect a negative reaction to African American culture.

Interrogating Dominant Notions of Language

Kirkland and Jackson (2008) maintain that students will retain and reinforce negative attitudes about AAL if they continue to receive a language education that fails to address the social, cultural, and political complexities of language. To promote positive attitudes, activity 3 encouraged students to interrogate dominant notions of language through their learning of the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of AAL. Many students responded to this activity with critical questions, such as “What makes [DAE] better than AAL? At one point, wasn’t [DAE] considered unacceptable? Why is [DAE] being taught in schools and not AAL?” and “How could one culture be asked to stop speaking their native language, yet letting another culture’s language...
dominate and rule society?” These questions reveal that students’ developed an understanding of linguistic inequality and how language can be used to “maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations” (Alim, 2007, p. 166). Furthermore, these questions indicate that students recognized that there is not anything inherently wrong with AAL or inherently right about DAE. According to Alim (2007), this kind of awareness is viewed as a “wake up call” for students and the first step “in challenging a given social order” (p. 173).

**Appreciation of AAL**

I noticed that many students expressed an appreciation for AAL following activity 3. After learning that enslaved Africans created AAL out of the remnants of their mother tongue (West African Languages) and parts of the English language and that AAL is connected to a history of oppression, resistance, and rich linguistic and literary achievement (Paris, 2009; Rickford & Rickford, 2000), one student indicated, “this represents that [enslaved Africans] were smart enough to create their own language.” The student realized the richness of AAL and recognized that it reflects the ingenuity, not ignorance, on the part of enslaved Africans. This activity also led students to draw a direct link between language and culture. In a discussion with peers, one student asked, “Why do we have to take African American culture away?” Parallel to Smitherman’s (1999) thinking, the student understood that language represents a people’s theory of reality; therefore, to eradicate AAL from one’s linguistic repertoire would essentially eradicate one’s culture, as culture and language are inseparable.

By the end of the final activity, students also began to push at other issues related to AAL and DAE. One student, for example, pointed out that the devaluing of AAL and the privileging of DAE are directly aligned with the history of slavery in America. He argued that AAL is viewed negatively only because it was a language once spoken by slaves, thus, DAE is privileged because it was spoken by white people, who were the privileged group during slavery. Extending this conversation, another student commented that “if AAL was used by the dominant population and DAE was used by the minority population, then AAL would be deemed the superior language and DAE would be viewed as inferior.”

Another student speculated about the connection between language, power, privilege and education:

> [S]chool systems wanted to get rid of children’s intimate language, not just AAL, but other languages too [for] a universal language that everyone must speak. This is a direct relationship with who runs the school systems! Europeans.

The student recognizes that the push for individuals to communicate in DAE is not only for the purposes of adding a universal language to their linguistic repertoires, but also for the purpose of stripping individuals of their native languages. By pinpointing the relationship between school systems and Europeans, the student is suggesting that DAE is a language that reflects the majority of Whites; therefore, school systems naming DAE the universal language or the official language of school, privileges white students over students whose native language is not DAE. The student goes on to recommend that schools...
incorporate everyone’s language so that everyone could have the same advantages . . . today our curriculum is structured to cater to the white student . . . this is why there are extreme learning curves between black and white students.

Similar to Kirkland and Jackson’s (2008) argument, the student realizes that white students are able to flourish in their literacy education because they are able to learn about the history and rules of their language and are able to use their language to learn about themselves and their world in a way that benefits them. Conversely, most black students’ literacy education requires them to learn about DAE without confirming or learning about their own linguistic heritage. This often leads to students despising their own language, culture, and oftentimes themselves (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008).

CONCLUSION

As we move forward in improving the language education for our AAL-speaking students, we must reconsider the role of AAL in twenty-first century English classrooms. The goal is no longer to teach students to code-switch or merely use AAL as a bridge to add DAE to their linguistic repertoires, which was a goal of the twentieth century. The current goal is to prepare students to be global citizens, which requires pedagogies, such as critical language pedagogies, that seek to preserve AAL in addition to making students critically aware of their social and linguistic realities (Alim, 2007; Paris, 2012). Although many language scholars have advocated for critical approaches (e.g., Alim, 2005, 2007; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008; Paris, 2012; Young, 2009), many classrooms continue to be plagued by monolingual attitudes and approaches. In recent years, researchers (e.g., Alim, 2005, 2007) have theorized and advocated for the implementation of critical language pedagogies, but few studies exist that capture the pedagogical application of this approach or how it improves the language education of students who speak and write in AAL. This article responds to this gap by describing the application of a critical language pedagogy and students’ engagement with it. This article also establishes that the collaboration between educators and researchers and the dissemination of pedagogically-grounded language arts curriculum could be valuable in our efforts to align theory, research, and classroom practice. Teachers interested in implementing the critical language pedagogy that was described in this article should consider the dynamics of their own classroom (e.g., grade level, linguistic and cultural backgrounds of teachers and students, and content area) before implementing or modifying such a pedagogy. Further, while the findings from this pilot study were promising, they should only be viewed as initial findings, and the innovation should be tested in a more controlled and designed way.

NOTES

1. Following Godley and Minnici (2008), I use critical to describe approaches “that challenge dominant ideologies, reveal and question power structures, and foster students’ abilities to affect changes in the world around them.” (p. 320)
2. In April of 1974, members of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted the SRTOL resolution that defended the rights of students to use whichever patterns and varieties of language that reflected their own style and identity. The resolution opposed and demystified the validity of a standard English and called for teachers to respect language diversity and uphold the rights of students to their own languages. The resolution also disputed the inaccurate belief that any one dialect is more prestigious than another (Smithnerman, 1999). The SRTOL position statement has been extended to address English Only policies, English as a Second Language (ESL), and bilingual education (see Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011).

3. Problem-posing is a term coined by Paulo Freire to describe a method of teaching that emphasizes critical thinking for the purpose of liberation.

4. It is important for me to make explicit that the data that I collected were part of a pilot study or a “trying out” in preparation for a major study.

5. I use pseudonyms for all names and locations to protect the identity of the participants and the school.

REFERENCES


April Baker-Bell is a Ph.D. candidate at Michigan State University in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, & American Cultures. Her research interests are situated in critical studies of African American Language at the intersections of literacy and pedagogy.
APPENDIX A

Activity 3, Conversation 2. (Color figure available online).
Activity 3, Conversation 3. (Color figure available online).