

*Introduction to African-American English for ESL Instructors*

The purpose of this project is to provide a high-quality, engaging, and interactive professional development experience for faculty at my institution (Language On Schools) who are interested in learning about African-American English in order to enhance their teaching practice. This short course in African-American English focuses on providing participants with the tools needed to apply their knowledge of this language variety in the classroom, particularly when answering students' questions.

Richard E. McDorman, MA, MLS, CT  
University of Virginia  
School of Education and Human Development  
Department of Curriculum, Instruction & Special Education

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## I. Project Overview

The purpose of this project is to provide a high-quality, engaging, and interactive professional development experience for faculty at my institution (Language On Schools) who are interested in learning about African-American English in order to enhance their teaching practice. This short course in African-American English focuses on providing participants with the tools needed to apply their knowledge of this language variety in the classroom, particularly when answering students' questions. The overall goal of the project is to empower classroom ESL instructors to better meet their students' learning needs by increasing their understanding of African-American English, and language variation in English more generally.

## II. Learner and Contextual Characteristics

### **Target Audience and Value of Addressing this Topic/Issue**

The target population of this training will consist of ESL instructors at a large postsecondary language institution. The faculty who will participate in this training consist of a diverse group of teaching professionals with a wide range of ages, education, professional experiences, perspectives on teaching, and linguacultural backgrounds. Although most faculty speak English or Spanish as their first language, our institution has instructors who also speak French, Haitian Creole, Russian, Portuguese, and other languages. Commonalities among the target audience include minimum educational backgrounds (all hold at least a bachelor's degree, most of which are in fields related to language or language education, or otherwise hold a bachelor's degree or higher in any field in addition to a TEFL/TESL/ESL certificate, with many also having earned graduate degrees) including foundational knowledge of linguistics, experience teaching a common curriculum, and dedication to their students as well as a

commitment to continuous improvement and professional development. Some faculty also have experience teaching other languages in addition to ESL.

Learning about AAE and its speakers will help our institution's classroom instructors better understand issues related to "Standard" English, language variation, and the multiple "Englishes" that exist in our community while developing a foundational knowledge of the linguistic structure and use of AAE. Because AAE is the predominant variety of English used by those who speak English as their first language in Miami, almost all students at our institution will eventually encounter AAE outside the classroom, with some students engaging in frequent communicative interactions with speakers of AAE depending on the parts of Miami in which they reside or work. Until this gap in knowledge is addressed, most of our faculty will remain unable to appropriately and helpfully respond to students' questions about much of the real-world English they are exposed to in the community.

### **Personal Interest in the Topic**

Although ESL is by its nature an interdisciplinary field of study, the majority of my educational background has been in the fields of theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, and translation studies. As a result, I tend to view problems in the language learning classroom from a linguistic lens and seek solutions from applied linguistics and my own experiences learning languages when possible. I also have a deep and abiding personal and professional interest in AAE, a variety of English in which I am fully proficient, having lived for more than twenty years in parts of Miami (Brownsville and Overtown, two historically Black enclaves in the city) where it is spoken as a home language variety by the vast majority of members of the community, and many of my closest friends. I have acquired both productive and receptive proficiency in this variety of English, aided by the fact that my "native" variety of English is Appalachian English,

which shares a considerable number of linguistic traits with AAE in all linguistic domains (phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical/semantic). I was not exposed to “Standard” English on a regular basis until late adolescence and therefore speak it as a “foreign” dialect, which has helped to shape my own views on variation in English.

I have been conducting research into AAE since my graduate program in TESOL at Penn State in 2011 and 2012. During my Ed.S. program, I have taken the opportunity to advance this research in multiple courses and in various forms. In EDIS 5025 (“Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment”), I based my individualized course projects in lesson planning, curriculum design, and assessment on AAE, including creating detailed lesson plans on two of the variety’s most salient grammatical features (copula deletion and habitual *be*). In EDIS 5422 (“Cross-Cultural Education for Diverse Learners”), I largely constructed my “multicultural toolkit” around issues related to language variation in English with an emphasis on culturally sustaining pedagogies and AAE. In EDIS 5423 (“English Linguistics”), I selected language variation in English and a critical discussion of “Standard” English as the optional elements of my final presentation. However, it was in EDIS 7842 (“Teaching English Language Learners: Theory, Policy, and Practice”), my most recent course in the Ed.S. program, in which I delved most deeply into the subject. My approximately 10,000-word term paper, entitled “Supporting Haitian Students in Miami’s Urban Schools through Culturally Sustaining Language Policies,” examined the complex relationships among AAE, Haitian Creole, and so-called “Standard” English in the lives of Miami’s Haitian multilingual learners at school, at home, and in the community. I therefore believe that the development of this short course on AAE for our institution’s faculty is a fitting and appropriate culmination of my work in the Ed.S. degree program (and one that I will also thoroughly enjoy).

## **Access to Resources**

The participants in this training (faculty members at our language institution) take part in regularly-scheduled professional development activities hosted by our organization, so this short course on AAE can be incorporated into our existing professional development program. Most of our faculty teach for 16 hours per week and have at least 2 hours per week of paid planning time built into their schedules, so they will be able to use some of that time to review and reflect on the course content between modules.

I have fashioned the course content using published materials on AAE as well as open-source authentic materials that realistically depict AAE in its spoken and written forms, as well as its literary register as expressed in the music of Hip-Hop, which represents a large corpus of diverse and often exquisite poetry. Two seminal works on AAE (Green, 2012, and Mufwene et al., 2021) will form the basis of the core linguistic content. The course content will also be informed by my educational background in linguistics and language education (including the Ed.S. program) as well as my personal experiences with AAE and its speakers.

## **Considerations for Diversity**

Two axes of diversity are particularly relevant to this professional development course: diversity among its participants and diversity among speakers of AAE. Because our faculty have varying educational backgrounds and levels of knowledge of AAE, the overarching goal of this short course will be to provide participants with an overview of, and basic grounding in, the fundamentals of AAE, not to develop specialized knowledge of the variety (given the time constraints of the training program, this would not be possible in any case). Linguistic theory will be kept to a minimum, with the focus on the place of AAE within American society and among varieties of American English, a description of the core linguistic features of AAE and

how they differ from those of SE, and how participants can leverage their new knowledge in the classroom to effectively answer students' questions about AAE. In order to gauge participants' existing knowledge and adapt the course content as necessary, pre-assessment and post-assessment instruments will be utilized in each instructional module.

Diversity among speakers of AAE and within AAE itself will also be taken into consideration. Three significant aspects of diversity in this respect will be addressed during the short course: differences in the speech of males and females, generational differences in language use, and regional variation within AAE (including a significant divide between rural Southern and urban variants).

### III. Project Goals

After completing this five-module short-course on African-American English (AAE), participants will:

1. Know that African-American English (AAE) is a full-fledged, rule-governed variety of American English spoken primarily, but not exclusively, by African-Americans throughout the United States.
2. Understand the role of "Standard" English (SE), AAE, and other English varieties in school, the surrounding community, and American society.
3. Learn about competing theories to account for the origin of AAE, which is still a matter of debate.
4. Know that AAE and other varieties of American English, including SE, differ in all linguistic domains: phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical/semantic, and pragmatic.

5. Acquire foundational knowledge of how AAE is distinctive in each linguistic domain with sufficient detail to be able to describe the most significant differences between AAE and SE.
6. Increase their comprehension of AAE in its spoken and written forms.
7. Develop the skills necessary to appropriately, sensitively, and effectively answer students' questions about AAE and its use in the surrounding community.

#### IV. Storyboard/Outline

##### Delivery method

The delivery method of the project will be online synchronous for the presentation and discussion component, with in-person pair and small group work for the individual research project and study group components, respectively. Each module's pre-reading assignment will be completed individually as an out-of-class individual component after participants have completed the module's pre-assessment.

##### Storyboard

Module	Objectives	Instructional Engagement and Activities	Materials/Resources
Module 1 Title: <i>What is African-American English (AAE)?</i>	After completing Module 1, participants will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Be able to define African-American English (AAE)</li> <li>2. Know the names that have been used to describe this variety of English and why naming and framing are important</li> <li>3. Understand the social construct of "Standard"</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-assessment: 10 minutes</li> <li>2. Reading: 60 minutes</li> <li>3. Presentation and discussion (including exit ticket): 120 minutes               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <b>Activity 1.1:</b> Standard American English (20 minutes)</li> <li>b. <b>Activity 1.2:</b> What is AAE and who speaks it (20 minutes)</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reading: <i>African American English: A Linguistic Introduction</i> (Green, 2002), Introduction (pages 1-11)</li> <li>2. <a href="#">Standard American English</a> (University of Puget Sound)</li> <li>3. <a href="#">What is AAL and Who Speaks It?</a> (University of Oregon)</li> <li>4. <a href="#">How did AAL Develop?</a> (University of Oregon)</li> </ol>



	<p>English and problems related to that construct</p> <p>4. Learn about competing theories to account for the origin of AAE</p> <p>5. Become familiar with other varieties of American English</p> <p>6. Know who speaks/uses AAE and where it is spoken/used</p> <p>7. Be able to explain why it is important for ESL instructors to know about AAE</p>	<p>c. <b>Activity 1.3:</b> How did AAE develop? (20 minutes)</p> <p>4. Individual research project: 60 minutes</p> <p>5. Study group discussion: 60 minutes</p> <p>6. Post-assessment: 10 minutes</p>	
<p>Module 2 Title: <i>The Pronunciation of African-American English (AAE)</i></p>	<p>After completing Module 2, participants will:</p> <p>1. Refresh their understanding of the terms <i>phonetics</i> and <i>phonology</i></p> <p>2. Learn about how the vowel sounds of AAE differ from those of SE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monophthongization of /aɪ/ and /ɔɪ/</li> <li>• Lowering of /ɪ/ before /ŋ/</li> <li>• Lack of “happy tensing”</li> <li>• Merger of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasal consonants</li> </ul> <p>3. Learn about how the consonant sounds of AAE differ from those of SE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound patterns and <i>th</i></li> <li>• Deletion of syllable-final /r/(including social and regional variation)</li> </ul>	<p>1. Pre-assessment: 10 minutes</p> <p>2. Reading: 120 minutes</p> <p>3. Presentation and discussion (including exit ticket): 180 minutes</p> <p>a. <b>Activity 2.1:</b> Overview of African-American English (20 minutes)</p> <p>b. <b>Activity 2.2:</b> Final consonant sounds and homophony in AAE (20 minutes)</p> <p>c. <b>Activity 2.3:</b> <i>Stunt 101 (Part 1)</i> (30 minutes)</p> <p>4. Individual research project: 60-90 minutes</p> <p>5. Study group discussion: 60-90 minutes</p> <p>6. Post-assessment: 10 minutes</p>	<p>1. Reading: <i>African American English: A Linguistic Introduction</i> (Green, 2002), Chapter 4 “Phonology of AAE” (pages 106-132)</p> <p>2. Video: <a href="#">African American Vernacular English</a></p> <p>3. <a href="#">Final Consonant Sounds and Homophony in AAE</a></p> <p>4. <a href="#">Stunt 101 (Song by G-Unit)</a></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocalization of /l/</li> <li>• Initial <i>thr-</i></li> <li>• Initial <i>skr-</i></li> </ul> <p>4. Understand the most salient phonological processes in AAE that distinguish it from SE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final consonant sounds and consonant cluster reduction</li> <li>• Homophony in AAE due to consonant cluster reduction</li> <li>• Weakening/loss of word-final fricatives</li> </ul>		
<p>Module 3 Title: <i>The Grammar of African-American English</i></p>	<p>After completing Module 3, participants will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Refresh their understanding of the terms <i>morphology</i> and <i>syntax</i></li> <li>2. Learn how the morphology of AAE differs from that of SE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verb paradigms and invariant 3rd person singular verb forms</li> <li>• Possessive pronouns</li> <li>• Lack of possessive marker 's</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Learn how the syntax of AAE differs from that of SE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative concord</li> <li>• Word order in wh-questions</li> <li>• Copula deletion/zero copula</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Understand the distinctive verb system of AAE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Auxiliary verbs in AAE and SE</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-assessment: 10 minutes</li> <li>2. Reading: 180 minutes</li> <li>3. Presentation and discussion (including exit ticket): 180 minutes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <b>Activity 3.1:</b> Zero copula in AAE (20 minutes)</li> <li>b. <b>Activity 3.2:</b> How the habitual be works in AAE (20 minutes)</li> <li>c. <b>Activity 3.3:</b> The many forms of <i>finna</i> (10 minutes)</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Individual research project: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>5. Study group discussion: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>6. Post-assessment: 10 minutes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reading: <i>African American English: A Linguistic Introduction</i> (Green, 2002), Chapter 2 “Verbal Markers in AAE” (pages 34-75) and Chapter 3 “Syntactic and Morphosyntactic Properties in AAE” (pages 76-105)</li> <li>2. <a href="#">Video: AAVE Basics: Zero Copula</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">Video: How the Habitual Be Works</a> in AAE</li> <li>4. <a href="#">Short video on finna</a></li> </ol>

	<p>(including double modals)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aspectual markers <i>been</i> and <i>done</i></li> <li>• Habitual <i>be</i></li> <li>• Preterite <i>had</i></li> <li>• Preverbal markers <i>finna</i>, <i>boutta</i> and <i>tryna</i></li> </ul>		
<p>Module 4 Title: <i>Lexicon and Meaning in African-American English (AAE)</i></p>	<p>After completing Module 4, participants will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Refresh their understanding of the terms <i>lexicon</i> and <i>semantics</i></li> <li>2. Understand the most significant differences in the lexicons of AAE and SE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Words that exist in both AAE and SE but have different meanings</li> <li>• Words that exist in AAE but not in SE</li> <li>• Content words (nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives) in AAE</li> <li>• Ways of adding new words to the lexicon in AAE</li> <li>• Review of function words and verbal markers in AAE</li> <li>• Differences in past tense verb forms in AAE and SE</li> <li>• Slang in AAE</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-assessment: 10 minutes</li> <li>2. Reading: 90 minutes</li> <li>3. Presentation and discussion (including exit ticket): 150 minutes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <b>Activity 4.1:</b> Exploring the use of <i>done</i> in AAE (20 minutes)</li> <li>b. <b>Activity 4.2:</b> How speakers of AAE use <i>stay</i> (20 minutes)</li> <li>c. <b>Activity 4.3:</b> <i>Stunt 101</i> (Part 2) (20 minutes)</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Individual research project: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>5. Study group discussion: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>6. Post-assessment: 10 minutes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reading: <i>African American English: A Linguistic Introduction</i> (Green, 2002), Chapter 1 “Lexicons and Meaning” (pages 12-33)</li> <li>2. Video: <a href="#">Done (AAVE Understanding Native Speech)</a></li> <li>3. Video: <a href="#">How we use “stay” in AAVE</a></li> <li>4. <a href="#">Stunt 101 (Song by G-Unit)</a></li> </ol>
<p>Module 5 Title: <i>African-American English (AAE) in Use</i></p>	<p>After completing Module 5, participants will:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-assessment: 10 minutes</li> <li>2. Reading: 90 minutes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reading: <i>African American English: A Linguistic Introduction</i> (Green, 2002), Chapter 8 “Approaches,</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand the concepts of <i>bidialectalism</i>, <i>code-switching</i>, and <i>diglossia</i> in the context of AAE and SE</li> <li>2. Explore attitudes toward AAE as a legitimate language variety, including in employment and education</li> <li>3. Know how the Great Migration diffused AAE throughout the United States</li> <li>4. Be able to identify parts of Miami where AAE is the predominant variety of English</li> <li>5. Acquire and practice strategies for applying their new knowledge of AAE to answer ESL students' questions about AAE in an appropriate, effective, and sensitive way</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Presentation and discussion (including exit ticket): 150 minutes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <b>Activity 5.1:</b> How much does it cost you in wages if you “sound Black?” (20 minutes)</li> <li>b. <b>Activity 5.2:</b> The Great Migration (20 minutes)</li> <li>c. <b>Activity 5.3:</b> Answering students' questions about AAE (two 15-minute blocks)</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Individual research project: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>5. Study group discussion: 60-90 minutes</li> <li>6. Post-assessment: 10 minutes</li> <li>7. Final course evaluation: 15 minutes</li> </ol>	<p>Attitudes and Education” (pages 216-243)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. <a href="#">How Much Does It Cost You in Wages if You “Sound Black?”</a> (Freakonomics)</li> <li>3. <a href="#">The Great Migration</a> (History Channel)</li> </ol>
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#### V. Formative and Summative Assessments/Evaluations

Each of the five modules in this short course on African-American English will include three forms of assessment: a pre-assessment, multiple formative assessments, and a summative assessment. There is also a final course evaluation survey which participants will be asked to complete at the end of module 5. The pre-assessment and post-assessment for each module are the same instrument, which is intentional as it allows for greater reliability and promotes the “testing as teaching” approach to assessment. This design will give participants a tangible sense of progress as they can compare their performance on the assessment at the beginning and end of each module while eliminating any test form (test-retest) reliability issues.

## **Pre-learning Assessments**

Each module begins with a pre-assessment that measures participants' existing knowledge of the principal learning outcomes of the module. The assessment instrument used for each module follows the same structure and format: a ten item, selected-response quiz. Each item is clearly linked to one or more of the stated learning outcomes for the corresponding module and has five responses, only one of which is credited. I will use the results of the pre-assessment to help differentiate instruction and determine what material, if any, should be treated as review for the group or subsets of the group.

## **Formative Evaluation**

Multiple forms of formative assessment are infused throughout each module to gauge participants' progress as well as to solicit their feedback. Each module features an exit ticket that participants will complete at the end of the presentation and discussion session (that is, the live, direct instruction portion of each module), immediately before they are dismissed. The exit tickets follow a common design. They include only three questions, the first of which is always linked to some specific and important content taught during the module. The second question on each exit ticket requires reflection on the part of the participant, while the third question gives participants the chance to indicate what material requires clarification or further elaboration. By analyzing the results of the exit tickets, I will be able to differentiate instruction as appropriate and reinforce the learning content as necessary.

Within each module is also embedded an independent research project that participants can elect to complete individually or with a partner. During the research project, participants will have the chance to take a deep dive into an aspect of the learning content for that module that particularly resonated with them. Participants will have the option of demonstrating their

learning in narrative format, by creating a one-page poster, or displaying their learning in a graphic organizer. Analyzing participants' performance on each module's independent research project will give me insights into their levels of motivation, interest in the subject matter, and the depth of their learning.

At the conclusion of each module, participants will complete the same instrument that was used as the module pre-assessment to measure the degree to which they have attained the module's stated learning objectives. This post-assessment will be used both formatively (to evaluate each participant's learning progress) and summatively (to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction during that module).

### **Summative Evaluation**

I will evaluate the effectiveness of my project by analyzing participants' performance on each module's post-assessment as well as their responses on the final course evaluation using the questionnaire available at <https://richardmcdorman.com/final-course-evaluation>. A link to this final course evaluation can be found on the project's main page as well as on the page for module 5.

In designing this course evaluation, I have followed the principles of course evaluations recommended by the University of Wisconsin's "Best Practices and Sample Questions for Course Evaluation Surveys," available at <https://assessment.wisc.edu/best-practices-and-sample-questions-for-course-evaluation-surveys/>. I have followed these evidence-based principles and strategies in order to achieve a high response rate and obtain more effective feedback. Many of the questions on the final course evaluation survey have been taken directly from the University of Wisconsin's question bank, and I have given appropriate attribution to the University of Wisconsin at the bottom of the questionnaire.

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*Note:* I did not use any form of artificial intelligence in the creation of this project.

Honor pledge: [On my honor as a student, I pledge that I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment.](#) – *Richard E. McDorman*