

Ebonics and the African-American Student: Why Ebonics Has a Place in the Classroom

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Have you ever observed African-American children when they converse with each other on the train, the bus, or even in the supermarket? They say things like "She be crazy" and "What up wif dat new teacher at school?" Sometimes, it makes a person wonder if they are speaking the same language as many people in the United States: English. Yet, what if indeed these and many other African-American children and adolescents are not communicating in English, but in fact a different language? This different language is Ebonics, a word that has sparked a nationwide debate.

In recent years, Ebonics has become one of the most controversial issues debated in articles, on radio stations, and on television programs. Some people embrace Ebonics while others despise its mere name. What is the reason behind Ebonics obtaining an infamous reputation? It is due to one school district, the Oakland School District, which has decided to utilize Ebonics as a tool in the classroom to help African-American students who are struggling in reading and writing to learn Standard English. As a result, many individuals are outraged as they believe that Ebonics has no place in the classroom, for it is neither a language nor a dialect but only slang. In reviewing this heated debate, my paper will answer the following questions:

1. What is Ebonics and its origin?
2. What is the grammatical and syntactical structure of Ebonics?
3. What has sparked the Oakland School District to use Ebonics in their education system?
4. Why are many people against Oakland using Ebonics in the classroom?
5. How is Ebonics used in the classroom?
6. How has Ebonics helped African-American students in the Oakland School District?
7. How can Ebonics be implemented to help African-American students who are failing Standard English in the New York City Education System?

What is Ebonics and Its Origin?

Many individuals have often wondered where Ebonics derived from and what is responsible for its existence. According to Geneva Smitherman's "Black Language and the Education of Black Children: One Mo Once," Ebonics is the common dialect of West Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans that consists of linguistic and paralinguistic elements that are dissimilar from European dialect (Perez). The term "Ebonics" is ebony and phonics blended together (Todd) in that ebony signifies "black" and phonics signifies the study of sound of words (Smitherman).

The root of Ebonics can be found under the tree of slavery. During that period, African slaves who spoke the same language were separated by plantation owners in order to prevent slaves from communicating among themselves ("African Americans"), for if they were allowed, it would possibly lead to a rebellion against their masters. Once more, slave-owners did not want their slaves to acquire the English language ("African Americans"). Thus, they were never taught how to read and write in English. As the slave-trade in Africa entered into its initial stages, the British slave traders who desired to speak to the Africans created a language called *pidgin* (Graham) which is "simplified mixtures of two or more languages that speakers of different languages could use to communicate with each other" ("African Americans"). According to Mary Berger, a Standard English word "ask" is "ax" in pidgin (qtd. in Graham). As time progressed, pidgin became today's well-known language, Creole ("African Americans"). When African slaves arrived to America, the existing black Americans embraced pidgin. This was the time Ebonics was born.

After the termination of slavery, Ebonics, the train of communication among African-Americans at that time, picked up speed in America. For three centuries, numerous African-Americans used Ebonics in the rural South as a new form of verbal communication (Perez). As time progressed, many African-Americans then began to move to the urban North (Perez). In conversing with relatives and friends, Ebonics used between the two areas (Perez). In certain parts of the urban North, the *de facto* separation of many African-American and white neighborhoods transpired. Due to the fact that there was an evident social distinction between the two groups, the dialect of the African-Americans and whites hardly had any impact on each other.

What is the Grammatical and Syntactical Structure of Ebonics?

Like Standard English, Ebonics has its own grammatical structure and syntax. However, it possesses dissimilar qualities in such areas that make Ebonics truly a class by itself "Ebonics: Rush to Judgment" illustrates this point by providing examples of the pronunciation of common words said in Ebonics. For instance, the words "walking," "with," and "hand" are pronounced as "walkin," "wif," and "han" by the elimination of the last consonant in the word ("Ebonics"). That, in the words of Perez, is considered to be the phonological aspect in Ebonics ("Ebonics") because it focuses on sound patterns. Furthermore, the verb form "to be" lacks conjugation in a sentence so that "She is here" is spoken as "She be here" ("Ebonics"). As Carol Rust points out in "Q&A: Is Ebonics a Good Idea?" the "to be" verb form and another verb are joined to produce a statement representing a continuous action such as "I be going," which is opposite to the Standard English sentence "I am going." Although this is quite different from Standard English, such dialect is a distinctive aspect of African-American culture (Smitherman). Many scholars within the field of linguistics have argued as to whether Ebonics is in fact a dialect, a language, or simply slang ("Ebonics").

What Sparked the Oakland School District to Use Ebonics in their Education System?

In the Oakland School District, educators noticed that their African-American students were failing in the area of English. They believed that the reason behind the students' failure in this subject is that they come from homes and neighborhoods where Ebonics is predominately spoken and when such students attend school, they do not comprehend what the teacher says in the classroom because he or she communicates in Standard English (Rust). As a result, in December 1996, the Oakland School district composed a resolution proclaiming Ebonics to be in fact a second language (Rust). The resolution states that Ebonics is African-Americans' primary language and that such language should be implemented in academic instruction in order to help African-American students understand and learn Standard English (Jackson). After the policy was passed, a new controversy was born as many people from various states questioned if Ebonics can indeed help African-American students learn Standard English (Rust).

Why Are Many people Against the Use of Ebonics in the Classroom?

As soon as the Oakland School District decided to use Ebonics in the classroom to assist African-American students in understanding Standard English, a wave of criticism emerged. This is due to the districts' classification of Ebonics and the media's exaggerated take on the matter. According to Longres and Harding, the Oakland School District's original policy not only declares Ebonics to be a language distinctive from Standard English, but also that Ebonics is genetic in African-Americans due to the district's phrase "genetically based." The district in 1997 revised the policy by stating that Ebonics is in fact an "African Language System deriving from East African and Niger-Congo Languages"(Longres and Harding). The media conveyed the wrong message to the public by stating that Ebonics is being taught in classrooms in that district as a method of substituting Standard English with Ebonics (Longres and Harding). Responding to such allegations, the district claims that Ebonics is solely utilized in the classroom as a new technique aimed for teachers in helping African-American students comprehend and effectively speak and write in Standard English (Rust). The district emphasizes that Ebonics is *not* taught to the students in classrooms (Taylor).

Even though Ebonics is only used as a way to help African-American students improve their performance in English in the classroom and on standardized tests (Longres and Harding), many believe that it should not be present in the classroom for any reason. Rust notes that numerous people think that Ebonics has no place in the classroom because it deserves to be in a social environment only. Leon W. Todd Jr. in "Ebonics is Defective Speech and a Handicap for Black Children" supports such a claim by arguing that Standard English is the foundation of American education, and for teachers to educate African-American students in a form of speech that has always been viewed as inappropriate is not right and disrespectful towards mainstream English. In terms of educators, President Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers argues that teachers will have to make a difficult decision as to instruct African-American students not to use Ebonics in order to succeed in the business world while simultaneously not offending their culture (par. 5). Furthermore, Shanker believes that by African-American students being exposed to Ebonics in the classroom, they will become loyal to their dialect and may begin to rebel against the idea of being taught Standard English (par. 6). Thus, these are the kinds of realistic problems teachers face when using Ebonics in the classroom.

Certainly, the idea of Ebonics present in the learning environment has created tension within the education community. Yet, what if utilizing Ebonics in the classroom is actually working to improve the grades of African-American students? After all, past methods used to help African-Americans improve in reading and writing, which have not considered the use of Ebonics in the classroom to be effective and valuable (Taylor), have not worked (Milloy B01). One question the critics should ask is how Ebonics is used in the classroom?

How Is Ebonics Used in the Classroom?

Ebonics is utilized in the classroom by trained teachers familiar with the dialect in order to assist African-American students to overcome the hurdle of understanding Standard English. Firstly, teachers are instructed in a special program to learn the rules of Ebonics, the culture and history behind the dialect, and effective methods designed for educating individuals who speak Ebonics (Aubry). Secondly, teachers place both Ebonics and Standard English next to each other in a model to compare and contrast the vocabulary, grammar, usage, and pronunciation of the two (Lynch). An example of this technique is evident in "Using Ebonics or Black English as a Bridge to Teaching Standard English" in which students are given some statements in Ebonics and Standard English. The following chart demonstrates the model the students are given, in which "they must indicate their ability to differentiate [the two speeches] by saying "same" or "different"" (Perez).

Standard English	Ebonics
I help my sister	I hep my sister
Theresa talks	Theresa talk

Fig. 1. *The Contrastive Analysis Technique; rpt. in Perez.*

Thirdly, teachers devise an exercise known as a response drill that allows students to consistently negate a statement given to them whether it is in Standard English or Ebonics. To illustrate, I have constructed another chart below.

Teacher	Student
Mary play basketball (Ebonics)	No, she don't (Ebonics)
Mary plays basketball (Standard English)	No, she doesn't (Standard English)

Fig. 2. *The Responsive Drill, rpt. in Perez.*

How Has Ebonics Helped African-American Students in the Oakland School District?

Despite critics who have claimed that Ebonics in the classroom would be disastrous, the Oakland School District has proved them wrong. Regina Wilder's article, "Ebonics is Working: Three Years Later" discusses how after a period of three years of the Oakland School District's use of Ebonics in the classroom, the students' performance in reading and writing has improved. In fact, the article notes that "the students have tested above district averages" in reading and writing skills (Wilder). Moreover, as Courtland Milloy mentions in her article, "Nothing's Funny About Ebonics," once students see and comprehend the differences between Standard English and Ebonics in terms of structure and syntax, they display a great understanding in Standard English, and as a result, decrease their use of Ebonics, which has transpired in the Oakland School District. In addition, bonds are created between teachers and their students on both a professional and personal level (Lynch). In fact, according to research conducted by Stanford University's Program on Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism, "teachers who have information about the characteristics of Ebonics and how to teach such speakers were those of students who gained the most"(qtd. in Aubry) because they can now transform characteristics of their culture into a strength, rather than those characteristics being, as previously, viewed as a weakness (Templeton). Thus, one is forced to admit that Ebonics is indeed helping students learn Standard English. It has proven to be successful to the point in which a "\$1 million two-year grant given by the U.S. Department of Education is geared towards constructing an African American Literacy Culture research project" (Wilder). With the

Oakland School District proving to the nation that Ebonics, a despised form of speech often referred to as slang, can help African-American students learn and communicate in Standard English that will be beneficial towards their future, can Ebonics be implemented in New York City public schools?

How Can Ebonics be Implemented to Help African-American Students Who Are Failing Standard English in the New York City Education System?

Ebonics has shown all its supporters and critics how effective a tool it can be in the classroom. With numerous New York City African-American students who are struggling in the reading and writing department of their education, can Ebonics help them as well? Many people may ask, "Should Ebonics be implemented into the classroom--period?" From my perspective, yes, it should and in agreement with my claim are startling facts mentioned in Charles Baillou's article, "Advocates Say They Want to Use Ebonics to Advance Study of English." In his article, President Ayo Harrington of the United Parents Association states that 120,000 African-American and Latino students are enrolled in special education, and a small percent out of 1.1 million African-American and Latino students enrolled in New York City Public Schools graduate. Furthermore, it is pointed out that the majority of schools that are performing poorly is in African-American communities (Baillou). The article then comments on how Ebonics can be placed in New York City Schools, if it is ever considered. Similar to the Oakland School District, educators must be trained to understand Ebonics and its history, demonstrate respect towards African-American students who speak Ebonics in the classroom, and be instructed on how to use Ebonics as way to teach Standard English (Baillou). However, is Ebonics indeed needed in the classroom of New York City Public Schools? According to New York City Public Schools 2001-2002 Annual School Report, South Shore High School, which predominately consists of African-American students, is performing poorly in English, with only 2.8 percent of its students passing the subject with a score of 85 or higher. Similarly, Jamaica High School's enrollment consists of mainly African-American students that are not excelling in the area of English with only 4.8 percent of the students passing the subject with a score of 85 or higher (New York City). However, Stuyvesant High School, which has predominately white American students, is a school of excellence with

60.4 percent of its students excelling in the area of English with a score of 85 percent or higher (New York City). Thus, one can conclude that if Ebonics is utilized at South Shore and Jamaica High School, the performance in their students' English skill might increase. Unfortunately, many people would not consider the notion and are presently fighting against the idea of Ebonics being placed in New York City classrooms. Yet, the more the issue is argued among parents, educators, and administrators, the more the students continue to fail and not proceed to the next level.

As an English major who has been recently introduced to the issue of Ebonics in the classroom by listening to a radio program and who aspires to teach Secondary English after attending graduate school, this dispute is of great interest and concern from me not only as a future educator but as an African-American. Many children of my race are struggling and failing in school, mostly in the area of reading and writing. Being a teacher means helping those students the best way one can in order for the sake of their well-being and future. Banning the use of Ebonics in classrooms for the reason that it is not a language like Standard English or Spanish is not reason enough to prevent a struggling student to be assisted. When an effective method is not used that would help increase children's test scores in English, the students are the ones who suffer. Every child, regardless of what race, gender, or nationality, deserves the best possible education that is available. If they are denied that, then what is left for a teacher to do?

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