Teaching Elementary Students Who Speak Black English Vernacular to Write in Standard English: Effects of Dialect Transformation Practice

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Although nonstandard dialects of English are legitimate forms of spoken language used by many Americans, students in U.S. schools must acquire writing competence using Standard English (SE). Participants in this study were 3rd- and 4th-grade African-American students who exhibited Black English Vernacular (BEV) features in their written work. Six syntactic features differing in BEV and SE were targeted. Students received one of three treatments to increase their use of the SE features in their writing: (1) exposure to SE features in stories; (2) story exposure plus explanation of SE rules; and (3) story exposure, SE rule instruction, and guided practice transforming sentences from BEV to SE features. The third treatment proved most effective in enabling students to translate BEV sentences into SE forms and to employ the targeted SE features in their free writing. Results indicate that having students practice translating nonstandard sentences that typify their own writing and providing corrective feedback are effective for teaching them to use SE forms in their writing. Findings are interpreted to support a social-cognitive view of self-regulated learning.

Although many speakers of American English regard their language as uniform, in actuality, several dialect variations of English are spoken across the United States. Dialect differences typically reflect cultural, regional, and ethnic differences. Dialect differences manifest themselves in various ways: how particular words are pronounced, how sentences are structured grammatically, and which words are chosen to express certain ideas. Examples of dialects other than Standard English are Black English, Hawaiian Creole English, Alaskan English, Chicano English, and a variety of Caribbean English Creoles such as Jamaican English and Bahamian English.

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Linguistic analyses of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the late 1960s and early 1970s established the legitimacy of BEV as a structurally valid and rule-based linguistic system that differs in some ways from Standard English (SE) but is in no way deficient (Burling, 1973; Labov, 1972). Researchers during this period questioned whether BEV usage might be a mediating factor contributing to lower achievement among BEV-speaking students in traditional classrooms (Goodman & Buck, 1973; Rystrom, 1970; Stewart, 1969).

The important role that dialect differences were thought to play in the low achievement of BEV-speaking students came to prominence in the landmark 1977 case of The Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children vs The Ann Arbor School District Board. The suit, filed on behalf of BEV-speaking students, claimed that BEV students had difficulty adapting to SE instruction and that schools “had not taken appropriate actions to overcome the barrier” (Lucas & Borders, 1987, p. 120). The court heard testimony regarding the negative reactions that teachers held toward BEV as well as teachers’ decreased expectations regarding the educability of BEV-speaking students. The court found the Ann Arbor School District guilty of “violating the children’s right to an equal education by neglecting to teach the Standard dialect” (Weems, 1993, p. 75). The court ordered the school district to take remedial action and begin providing specific instruction in SE forms to BEV-speaking students.

Unfortunately, researchers did not achieve much success in their efforts to increase SE proficiency among BEV-speaking students. Several training studies conducted in the 1970s yielded null results (see, for example, Rystrom, 1970; Cullinan, Jaggar, & Strickland, 1974; Mantell, 1974). Harber and Bryen (1976), in their review of the literature on dialect training efforts, concluded that “the language system of these (BEV speaking) children has persisted despite consistent and pervasive attempts to linguistically acculturate speakers of BEV to the use of SE” (p. 390). Taylor (cited in Weems, 1993) argued that “the failure of the nation’s schools to effectively teach SE to nonstandard English speakers can be documented by the low performance of these speakers on a variety of achievement, aptitude and diagnostic tests—in a decrease in the sense of self-worth among the students, lowered teacher expectations, and discipline problems linked directly or indirectly with communications” (p. 80).

The ensuing years were characterized by a noticeable lack of research on dialect-related issues. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in BEV among educational and linguistic researchers. A recent (1995) two-volume special issue of *Linguistics and Education* titled “Africanized English and Education” included articles devoted to a fuller consideration of the linguistic complexities of BEV (e.g., Green, 1995) as well as articles that examined the instructional implications of educating BEV-speaking students.
in traditional SE-speaking classrooms. For example, Rickford and Rickford (1995) argue for the use of dialect readers. These studies, however, seem to be having little impact on instructional technology or educational practices designed to facilitate the acquisition of SE proficiency by BEV-speaking students.

Recent attempts by the Oakland school board to create a program that would sensitize Standard English-speaking teachers to the use of Black English Vernacular or “Ebonics” became a great source of controversy and misunderstanding among parents, teachers, and community leaders. The program grew out of the school board’s frustration with the habitually poor achievement scores of BEV-speaking African-American students. The program was designed to help BEV-speaking students become more proficient in the use of SE forms. The school board’s plan was widely criticized by conservatives and liberals alike, who maintained that recognition of Black English as a unique and valid linguistic form would only handicap BEV-speaking students and interfere with their motivation to acquire proficiency in SE. The national uproar and hysteria diverted people’s attention from the school board’s initial concerns regarding the failure of traditional educational practices to meet the needs of inner-city BEV-speaking elementary school children.

Typically, educators and school personnel have adopted a “hands-off” policy toward the inclusion of dialect instruction in the classroom. In their recent review of the literature, Champion and Bloome (1995) conclude that “the need for a deeper understanding of Africanized English has not lessened over the last 20 years. Although there was important research in the 1960s and 1970s, only a beginning was made in adequately educating speakers of Africanized English. Unfortunately, two decades later we are asking many of the same questions and still searching for answers” (p. 83). Rickford and Rickford (1995) argue that efforts made during the past 2 decades toward “understanding and solving the educational challenges of African-American inner-city youth have been limited” (p. 108).

Why have BEV-speaking students had difficulty benefiting from SE training in previous studies? There is reason to believe that acquiring proficiency in an unfamiliar dialect of one’s own language is not easy. In fact, Stewart (1969) suggests that this may be more difficult than learning a new language altogether. Black English Vernacular is, in many ways, more similar to SE than it is different. Without explicit guidance and practice, learners may have difficulty determining which linguistic forms are common to both SE and BEV and which forms are unique. In addition, BEV-speaking students must contend with negative teacher attitudes toward their dialect. In contrast, foreign language speakers learning English do not have this problem. Foreign languages are accepted by teachers as fully legitimate forms of speech (Johnson, 1971).
The purpose of the present study was to examine how to structure dialect instruction so that it is effective in teaching SE forms to students who use BEV in their writing. Grammatical features that differentiate BEV from SE were targeted. Syntactic features were selected because, unlike phonological features, nonstandard syntactic forms tend to stand out and, as a result, can be stigmatizing (Burling, 1973).

The focus of the present study was on the acquisition of written rather than oral language proficiency. An important goal of education is to help students learn to communicate their ideas in writing. Research has shown that dialect-speaking students experience great difficulties with written assignments as a result of discrepancies between their spoken dialect and the more formalized written forms of SE (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986).

Three instructional approaches were compared for their effectiveness in strengthening BEV-speaking elementary school students’ written syntactic competence with SE forms. The approaches consisted of various components taught singly or in combination: (1) exposure to text (E); (2) exposure to text plus explicit instruction in strategies depicting the rules of Standard English (ES); and (3) exposure to text, SE strategy instruction, and guided practice and feedback in the use of such strategies to transform BEV into SE (ESP). The hypothesis tested was that students who received the full ESP treatment would outperform students receiving only partial treatments, either ES or E, in their knowledge of use of SE in their writing.

Two of the treatments examined in the present study, E and ES, were selected to depict forms of instruction typically adopted by teachers. The E treatment involved exposing students to SE text and instructing them to listen and pay careful attention to grammatical features in the text. The ES treatment involved not only exposing students to text but also informing them about specific targeted syntactic features of SE and showing them how to apply the targeted grammatical rules to specific examples described and illustrated on a worksheet. Both of these treatments typify approaches used in schools to teach SE syntax to students. Some teachers believe that if students are simply exposed to SE forms, they will incorporate them into their writing. Of course, exposure to written SE forms in classrooms is extensive and includes all of the written materials that students read. Other teachers take a further step and provide explicit instruction in how SE is structured and what strategies or rules need to be applied to produce SE forms. However, although teachers may explain SE features, they may never explain how the SE features correspond to and differ from the BEV features used by students in their speech and writing.

The third instructional component was derived from theoretical constructs outlined in the social-cognitive view of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1989). The “guided practice” component involved having students practice applying the SE syntactic strategies to transform sentences from BEV to SE.
and receiving sentence-by-sentence feedback on their accuracy in doing this. According to the social-cognitive perspective, to be self-regulating, students need to have a clearly defined point of reference against which they can self-observe, self-judge, and self-react. A point of reference may consist of strategies, that is, “systematic plans that help learners encode information and perform a task” (Zimmerman & Pons, 1992). In the present study, the explicit statement of strategies consisted of the rules for producing the six features of SE. These were included in both the ES and the ESP treatments. They provided the set of standards that students could use to monitor, evaluate, and correct their writing.¹ In contrast, these standards remained implicit and unstated for students who were simply exposed to stories in the E treatment.

According to theories of self-regulated learning, however, simply instructing students in strategies and rules is not sufficient for maximal learning to occur. Students may acquire strategies involving SE features but fail to apply these strategies spontaneously in their writing. According to social-cognitive theorists, another component is needed for instruction to be fully effective. This component involves providing students with an opportunity to practice and receive corrective, enactive feedback on their use of the strategies in their writing. The opportunity for guided practice provides learners with the conditional knowledge that allows them to implement the strategies to improve performance (Paris et al., 1984). In the present study, ESP students were given sentences that included BEV features and they practiced transforming these sentences into SE features and were given feedback on the correct way of doing this after each attempt. Students were told that the SE features typified the kinds of problems that appeared in their writing and needed attention.

The social-cognitive view of self-regulated academic learning also emphasizes the central role that self-efficacy beliefs play in student motivation and performance. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as a person’s “judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (p. 391). Academically, such beliefs have been found to influence a student’s choice of activities and goals, the effort he or she will expend on a task, and his or her persistence in the face of obstacles and difficulties (Schunk, 1984). Zimmerman (1992) has argued that to enhance academic achievement one needs to structure a student’s

¹ In the present article the concepts of “correct grammatical features” and “correct responses” should be interpreted descriptively in the narrow sense to apply to written language and to denote that an instance of writing conforms to SE grammatical rules. It should not be interpreted evaluatively to mean that SE forms of speech are correct grammar and BEV forms are incorrect. As we have pointed out, both SE and BEV are dialects with differing grammatical forms, but both dialects are legitimate forms of spoken language.
academic experience in a way that increases his or her sense of academic self-efficacy. In the present study, the opportunity for guided practice and successful enactive mastery performance was expected to provide students in the ESP condition with important information regarding their own ability to successfully utilize the strategies taught to improve performance. It was hypothesized that this information would lead to positive reevaluations of student self-efficacy perceptions regarding future performance on similar tasks. To test this hypothesis, self-efficacy ratings were obtained from students before and after training.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants were 89 African-American BEV-speaking 3rd- and 4th-grade elementary school students from two Northeastern U.S. cities with sizeable populations of African-American residents (42% Blacks in City A, 32% Blacks in City B) and residents below the poverty level (71% in City A, 28% in City B). Writing achievement levels of students in the schools studied were low, as indicated by the percentage of students scoring at or above the state’s writing standard (13–15% in the two City A schools, 24% in the City B school). Participants in the study ranged from 8 to 10 years in age. Forty-eight of the students were female, 41 students were male. These students were selected from a larger sample of students who participated in the study (N = 265). The students whose responses were analyzed in the present study were those whose ethnic group was identified as African-American on school classroom lists and who exhibited BEV syntactic forms in their written responses on a pretreatment translation task (see below). We did not examine the students’ speech directly but inferred that participants spoke BEV based on their ethnic identity and their use of BEV in their writing.

**Materials and Procedures**

Twelve intact 3rd- and 4th-grade elementary school classes were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions. Four different classes, one 3rd-grade class and three 4th-grade classes, contributed students to each of the three treatment groups. Although entire classes received the training and subsequent testing, inclusion in our study was limited to African-American students who exhibited BEV syntactic forms in at least 25% of their responses on a pretreatment task in which students translated BEV forms into SE forms. The numbers of BEV students participating in the three conditions are listed below with the number of 3rd-graders listed first followed by the number of 4th-graders from each class:

- E (Exposure) = 4, 9, 10, 6 students
- ES (Exposure and strategies) = 7, 10, 9, 3 students
- ESP (Exposure, strategies, and practice) = 6, 8, 11, 6 students.

Students were trained and tested as a group in their classroom. Training and testing were conducted by classroom teachers. Prior to the study, the researcher met with the teachers. To justify the particular syntactic forms to be taught, he explained that in the samples of student writings he inspected, he had observed that certain syntactic errors recurred consistently. He pointed out that these syntactic forms were difficult for inner-city students to acquire because the written forms differed from common spoken forms used by students at home or with their friends. He presented a rationale for the particular treatment condition to be taught and then explained the specific procedures to be followed.
Because our focus was on developing SE writing competence rather than drawing attention to and labeling writing incompetence and its possible origins, we did not link the targeted features to any particular dialect or ethnic group in our discussions with classroom teachers. By avoiding mention of BEV, we eliminated any chance that teachers would associate lower writing achievement with any ethnic group or would refer to ethnic groups in presenting the instruction to their classes. The teachers all agreed that the targeted features were problematic for several of their students, but none commented on or appeared to recognize that the nonstandard forms being translated into SE forms were features of BEV.

The researcher was present during all training and testing sessions to verify that procedures were administered correctly. Training took place over two sessions totaling about 60 min. During the first session, students completed the pretreatment translation task and the pretreatment self-efficacy measure. This session lasted approximately 15 min and was identical across all treatment groups. During the second session students participated in one or another of the experimental treatments and then completed a second self-efficacy measure, three posttest measures, followed by a third self-efficacy measure. This session lasted approximately 35–45 min. The two sessions were approximately 1 week apart.

Instruction was focused on the six syntactic features listed in Table 1. Although disagreement exists regarding the specific forms characterizing BEV syntax, the features selected for the present study were those commonly cited by educators and linguists as differentiating BEV from SE (e.g., Labov, 1972; Riessman, 1976; Washington & Craig, 1994; Wyatt, 1995). In addition, preliminary inspection of samples of BEV-speaking student writings in classroom
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assignments revealed that BEV alterations of the six targeted syntactic features were common, so these were the features that were taught.

Included in pretests, training procedures, and posttests were instructions directing students to rewrite sentences in their “correct grammatical” form or to write a paragraph or answer questions using “correct grammatical” forms. Students understood this to refer to written grammatical forms that were consistent with the rules that had been taught, illustrated, and practiced in the classroom.

Translation tasks (pretest and posttest): To assess students’ knowledge of the six SE syntactic forms prior to treatment, students were asked to translate five sentences written with BEV syntax into their corresponding SE forms. Students were told that the printed sentences contained a variety of written grammatical errors. They were asked to rewrite the sentences using correct written grammatical forms. The sentences, adapted from Baratz (1969), were constructed to include at least two instances of each of the six BEV features illustrated in Table 1 (see Appendix A). The sentences were printed on a sheet of paper, and students rewrote the sentences on lines beneath each sentence. They were given 15 min to complete the task.

To assess the impact of dialect training on students’ acquisition of the six SE syntactic forms, students were asked to complete a second sentence translation task that was identical to the pretest except that the sentences were different (see Appendix B). Students were given 15 min to complete the posttest translation task.

Self-efficacy ratings (pretest and posttest): Students’ self-efficacy perceptions for writing sentences and stories using SE grammatical forms were assessed with a writing self-efficacy measure adapted from Shell, Murphy, & Bruning (1989). Students were asked to rate the degree of confidence they felt regarding their ability to write sentences and stories using correct grammatical forms. They were given 11 values to choose from on a scale beginning with 0, indicating no confidence, and increasing in intervals of 10 up to 100, indicating complete confidence. Self-efficacy ratings were obtained at three points in the study: prior to instruction, following instruction but prior to the completion of outcome measures, and following the completion of all outcome measures. The same procedures were used in all three cases.

Comprehension questions (posttest only). In addition to sentence translations, students were asked to respond in writing to three short-answer questions assessing students’ comprehension of the short stories read aloud by the teachers to the students during training: (1) Describe Ollie’s family, (2) Why was Jennifer called “Jennifer the Cheat?”, and (3) Why did Jennifer start to cry toward the end of the story? Students were given 8 min to write their answers. The purpose of the comprehension questions was to elicit additional writing samples to assess the impact of dialect training on students’ use of the targeted SE syntactic forms.

Story writing task (posttest only). Students were asked to “describe a make-believe trip you took with two of your friends to an ice-hockey game last year for your friend’s birthday.” The topic was created to maximize the likelihood that students would use the targeted SE features in their writings, for example, the necessity of selecting an indefinite article preceding a vowel in referring to “an” versus “a” ice-hockey game, the necessity of using the past tense to refer to events occurring “last year.” Students were given 12 min to complete the story-writing task. The stories and comprehension responses were scored for the percentage of opportunities in which students used the targeted SE syntactic forms.

Training procedures. Training was conducted during a second session that followed the pretest session by 7–10 days. Students in the “exposure only” (E) group began the second session by completing the self-efficacy measure. Teachers told students that they would be reading aloud two short stories titled “Ollie” and “Jennifer the Cheat.” Students were asked to pay careful attention to the grammatical forms used in the stories. They were told that following the readings they would be asked to respond in writing to brief questions based on the content of the stories. The stories were adapted with minor modifications from those written in 1970 by the staff of the Educational Study Center in Washington, DC. The stories contained
TABLE 2
SE Syntactic Forms and Number of Occurrences in the Two Stories That Students Heard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&quot;Ollie&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Jennifer the Cheat&quot;</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person singular</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite article</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb agreement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

numeros examples of the six targeted syntactic features being taught. The number of instances of each feature is reported in Table 2. Students listened to stories rather than read them or followed along in a text. This ensured that slow as well as fast readers were exposed to all of the targeted syntactic forms and that students received the information they needed to answer the comprehension questions.

Following the oral readings, students responded in writing to the three comprehension questions. They were reminded to use complete sentences in all of their responses. Following the readings, students completed the posttest translation task, the story writing task, and a third self-efficacy measure.

Students in the "exposure plus strategy instruction" (ES) condition began the second session by reviewing a worksheet that provided specific information about the six targeted syntactic features described in Table 1. The worksheet was distributed to each student and reviewed in class. Teachers began the review by mentioning that the features covered were those that many students were having trouble with in their writing. Teachers went on to explain that the forms were difficult for students to learn because they differed from the way the features were sometimes used when speaking at home or with one’s friends. The teachers reviewed the six syntactic features, one feature at a time. The review began with a statement about the syntactic category followed by a brief description of the syntactic rule. Students were then shown how to apply the targeted grammatical rules to specific examples illustrated on the worksheet (see Appendix C). Following the worksheet review, students completed the second self-efficacy measure. Teachers then read aloud the two short stories and students responded in writing to the three comprehension questions. Instructions and procedures were the same as those given to the E group. Following the comprehension questions, students completed the posttest translation task, the story-writing task, and a third self-efficacy measure.

Students in the "exposure, strategy instruction, and practice" (ESP) group began the second session with a review of the worksheet rules described above. Procedures were the same as those administered to the ES group. Following this, ESP students were given an opportunity to practice the worksheet rules by translating a seven-sentence paragraph written with BEV syntax into its equivalent SE form. Students rewrote the sentences, one at a time, after which the teacher orally reviewed how to transform the sentence into SE syntax. The practice materials were constructed to include at least two examples of each of the six targeted features (see Appendix D). Following the guided practice, students completed the self-efficacy measures and posttreatment tasks.

The hypothesis tested was that students who received all three instructional components—exposure to stories written in SE, explicit instruction in strategies to produce SE forms, and guided practice in transforming BEV features into SE features—would acquire greater SE
writing proficiency and also greater self-efficacy expectations regarding their ability to write in SE than students who received only one or two of these instructional components.

RESULTS

Sample sizes, means, and standard deviations on pretest and posttest measures for students in the three treatment conditions are presented in Table 3. Analyses of variance of pretest scores revealed no significant differences among treatment conditions on either the translation task, $F(2, 81) = 0.42, p > .05$, or the self-efficacy measure, $F(2, 81) = 0.79, p > .05$, indicating that the groups did not differ in their knowledge of targeted SE forms prior to treatment. These analyses were repeated with classrooms rather than students as the unit of observation. Results were identical, with $F(2, 9) < 1$, in both cases.

Recall that students were selected to participate in the study because they displayed difficulty translating BEV syntax into SE on pretests. From translation pretest means in Table 3 it is evident that these students translated only a few syntactic forms in SE, confirming the selection process. Across the three treatment conditions, students were able to translate only 32% of the BEV forms into SE forms ($E = 29\%, ES = 31\%, ESP = 35\%)$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
<th>Mean Performance and Standard Deviations on Pretests and Posttests as a Function of Training Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent measures</td>
<td>Training condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Translation (12 Max)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttests</td>
<td>Translation (12 Max)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing production</td>
<td>SE forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Length (words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy ratings (0–100)</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 29 Exposure (E) students, 29 Exposure/Strategy (ES) students, and 31 Exposure/Strategy/Practice (ESP) students. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

$^a$ Refers to the percentage of opportunities that were written in SE syntax (i.e., SE forms divided by opportunities).
Posttest Translation Scores

To assess the effects of training on students’ ability to translate sentences containing BEV syntax into SE forms, difference scores were calculated by subtracting pretest from posttest translation scores. Although use of gain scores has been questioned, in a recent article Maris (1998) showed that, under certain conditions which were met in our study, this procedure is as acceptable as the covariance adjustment procedure. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of treatment group, $F(2, 81) = 18.74, p < .001$, indicating that the treatment groups differed in their improvement translating BEV syntax into SE. Tukey pairwise comparisons showed that students in the ESP condition made significantly greater gains from pretest to posttest ($p < .001$) than students in the ES and E conditions, which did not differ from each other ($p > .05$).

These analyses were repeated with classrooms rather than students as the unit of observation. A main effect of treatment was detected; $F(2, 9) = 4.80, p < .05$. Post hoc $t$ tests revealed the same pattern of differences among means ($p < .05$). These findings indicate the superiority of the treatment that provided students with exposure to text, clearly defined syntactic rules, and guided practice in the use of those rules (ESP). This training enabled students to translate BEV sentences into SE syntax with greater proficiency than training in only one or two of these instructional components. Results are displayed in Fig. 1. Interestingly, students who received explicit instruction in the syntactic rules but did not have the opportunity to practice those rules fared no better than students who were not given the rules at all. This reveals that there is little value in explaining linguistic structures to students...
TABLE 4
Mean Performance on the Posttest Translation Task for Each SE Syntactic Form as a Function of Treatment Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic form</th>
<th>E group (N = 29)</th>
<th>ES group (N = 29)</th>
<th>ESP group (N = 31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possessive “s”</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense “ed”</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person singular</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural “s”</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite article</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject–verb agreement</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The maximum score in each cell was 2.

if students do not also practice using the information. Difficulties translating BEV sentences into SE syntax persisted for students in the ES and E conditions. Their posttest translation scores showed virtually no improvement over their pretest translation performance (see Fig. 1). By contrast, students in the ESP condition showed significant improvement from pretest to posttest. Table 4 reports the mean number of times that students translated each syntactic feature on the posttest. Comparison of means across treatment groups for each feature reveals that the overall pattern of differences detected in the analysis of students (i.e., ESP > ES and E) was also apparent for five of the six syntactic categories utilized in the study. These results show that treatment effects were not limited to only a few forms but influenced acquisition of most of the forms similarly.

Scores of individual students were checked across the three conditions to determine how many exhibited “passing” levels of performance on the posttest (i.e., ≥65% translated into SE). A passing level of 65% was selected because it reflects the typical pass/fail criterion applied to test scores in most schools. Results revealed clear disparities in performance: 42% of ESP students versus 14% of ES students versus 17% of E students met this criterion. These findings offer further evidence that the ESP treatment was especially effective in teaching students to write in SE.

**Posttest Writing Tasks**

To analyze performance on the two free-writing tasks, the numbers of times that students wrote the six targeted features in SE in their comprehension and story-writing responses were counted and combined. This number was compared to the total number of locations where these features should have been used. The number of SE productions was divided by the number of opportunities, yielding a percentage of opportunities where SE syntactic forms were used. Mean values are reported in Table 3. A Shapiro–Wilk Test
of Normality revealed that the distribution of percentage scores did not deviate from normality, $SE = 0.92$, $p < .001$. An ANOVA was then applied to the percentage of SE scores. Results revealed a significant main effect of treatment, $F(2, 86) = 3.56, p < .05$, indicating that the treatment groups differed in their ability to write sentences and stories using SE syntax. A post hoc planned comparison revealed that the scores of students in the ESP condition exceeded the combined average scores of students in the ES and E conditions, $F = 7.12, p < .01$. Mean values are displayed in Fig. 2. The analysis was repeated with classrooms rather than students as the unit of observation. A main effect of treatment was detected, $F(2, 9) = 4.21, p = .05$. Post hoc $t$ tests confirmed the pattern of differences among means ($p \leq .05$).

One might question whether differences favoring the ESP group occurred because the groups were not equal in their writing skill prior to the treatment. Although a writing pretest was not given to demonstrate equivalence directly, there is little reason to believe that the groups differed. Assignment of classes to conditions was random. On another measure of writing, the translation pretest, the groups did not differ.

Individual scores were checked across the three conditions to determine what proportion of students exhibited “passing” levels of performance (i.e., $\geq 65\%$) in their writings. Results, once again, revealed clear disparities: 81% of ESP students versus 55% of ES students versus 33% of E students. Surprisingly, over 80% of the students who received the ESP treatment displayed competence in writing the targeted SE forms following the training procedure. It is noteworthy that this high rate of success occurred in a writing
task that was not practiced directly during the training procedure. ESP students practiced translating sentences rather than composing sentences during training. Thus, results of the present study show that knowledge of SE forms acquired during ESP training exhibited far transfer as well as near transfer to unpracticed as well as practiced writing tasks.

If one compares the proportions of students achieving a passing criterion in the free-writing and the translation tasks, it is apparent that nearly twice as many students exhibited passing scores in the writing task as in the translation task. This may have occurred because students were free to use or avoid using syntactic forms in their response writing but not in translating sentences. Students who were dubious about certain syntactic features might simply have found other ways to express their ideas without having to use these forms.

To determine whether the treatment groups differed in terms of the length of the stories they wrote, we counted the number of words. Mean values are reported in Table 3. An ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of treatment group, $F(2, 86) = 6.76, p < .01$. Tukey pairwise comparisons indicated that stories written by students in the ES condition were significantly shorter ($p < .05$) than stories written by students in the ESP and E groups which did not differ in length ($p > .05$). Repetition of the analysis with classes as the unit of observation fell short of significance, $F(2, 9) = 1.67, p > .05$, possibly because of low power. One interesting explanation for this tentative trend in the data can be offered. Students in the ES condition were sensitized to SE features that were problematic for them yet they were not given sufficient practice to learn the features. As a result, they may have avoided use of these forms in their writing, and this caused them to write shorter stories than the other two groups.

We also counted and compared the mean number of times that students created opportunities for using the targeted SE forms in their writings. Mean values are reported in Table 3. An ANOVA revealed a main effect of treatment condition, $F(2, 86) = 4.45, p < .01$. Tukey post hoc comparisons showed that stories written by students in the ES condition contained significantly fewer opportunities for use of targeted SE features than stories written by students in the ESP condition ($p < .01$). Repetition of the analysis with classes as the unit of observation fell short of significance, $F(2, 9) = 1.40, p > .05$. Although our conclusion is rendered tentative by this, the trend in the data suggests that students in the ES condition were actively inhibiting their use of targeted SE syntactic forms in their writings both by writing less and by avoiding expressions requiring the use of targeted SE features. Perhaps their awareness of the features combined with their lack of practice using those features in their writing made ES students more cautious and less fluent. By contrast, students receiving the E treatment had little cause to avoid use of the targeted forms because they were not made aware of the
forms being studied. The ESP groups had less cause to avoid forms because training had improved their competence at using the forms appropriately.

Taken together, these findings indicate that providing students with exposure to SE syntax, information about SE syntactic rules, and an opportunity to practice and monitor the application of SE rules in their writing enhanced their ability to use SE forms. ESP students produced nearly twice as many SE translations as the other two groups and showed greater mastery of SE syntax in their free writing.

**Self-Efficacy Ratings**

Students’ rated the degree of confidence they felt in their ability to write sentences and stories using “correct grammatical,” that is, SE forms. Mean values revealing pre- and posttest self-efficacy ratings are reported in Table 3 and illustrated in Fig. 3. A two-way ANOVA was conducted with Treatment (E versus ES versus ESP) and Time of Test (Pre versus Post 1 versus Post 2) as the independent variables. None of the effects was significant (all \( ps > .05 \)). Results were nonsignificant when the analysis was repeated with classes as the unit of observation. This reveals that student self-efficacy ratings did not differ across treatment groups.

From the means in Table 3, it is apparent that students’ pretest self-efficacy ratings were unrealistically high, ranging from 73 to 83% across the three treatment conditions. In fact, 76% of the students gave themselves pretest self-efficacy ratings of 80% or higher, despite very low scores on the SE
proficiency pretest. In other words, students in the present study had a paradoxical mix of poor performance and high self-efficacy perceptions.

Interestingly, although students in the ESP condition had the highest pretest self-efficacy scores, their posttreatment self-efficacy ratings were the lowest of the three treatment groups. Whereas E and ES students showed a consistent increase in self-efficacy ratings over time, ESP students showed a drop in self-efficacy ratings following their participation in the experimental treatment (see Fig. 3). Individual scores were examined across the three conditions to determine the proportion of students whose self-efficacy ratings decreased from pretest levels following their participation in one of the experimental treatments. Results revealed a clear disparity, with 41% of ESP students exhibiting a drop in self-efficacy ratings versus 12% of ES students versus 26% of E students. Chi-square analyses revealed that this disparity was significant, \( X^2(2) = 6.31, p < .05 \). It may be that providing ESP students with an opportunity to practice and monitor their use of SE forms in their writing resulted in a more realistic, albeit decreased, sense of their writing self-efficacy than was manifested in the ratings of ES and E students. Also, it may be that negative feedback revealing the presence of writing “errors” during the practice period eroded students’ self-confidence. In any event, these results do not support our hypothesis that self-efficacy ratings would be highest among the ESP-trained students following training.

Each treatment condition included one class of 3rd-graders and three classes of 4th-graders. To determine whether 3rd-graders performed any differently from 4th-graders, ANOVAs were repeated with students as the unit of observation and grade as an independent variable. In none of the analyses did Grade exert any significant main effects or interactions (all \( ps > .05 \)), indicating that grade composition of the groups was unimportant.

**DISCUSSION**

To summarize, the purpose of this study was to compare three training procedures designed to teach elementary students to use six Standard English syntactic forms in their writing. The students were those who exhibited Black English Vernacular forms in their written work. In the Exposure-only (E) condition, students listened to stories that included multiple instances of the six SE forms. In the Exposure/Strategies (ES) condition, story listening was combined with a procedure in which the teacher labeled and illustrated use of the six SE forms while students viewed these on a worksheet. In the Exposure/Strategies/Practice (ESP) condition, the two above procedures were combined with a procedure in which students practiced translating sentences from BEV to SE and then received feedback from the teacher on their accuracy. Effects of the treatments were assessed with measures of students’ ability to translate BEV sentences into SE sentences and their ability to use SE forms in their free writing. Students’ confidence in their ability to write
using “correct grammatical” or SE forms was assessed with a self-efficacy measure.

Results revealed that the ESP treatment was more effective in teaching students to write using SE forms than either of the other two treatments (E and ES), where performances did not differ. ESP instruction enabled students to translate BEV sentences into SE forms more effectively, and it enabled students to employ the targeted SE forms in their free writing to a greater extent. Superior performance in the free-writing task is noteworthy because this was not a task that students practiced during training.

Not only was mean performance of the ESP group superior to mean performance of the other groups but also a greater proportion of ESP students attained a passing criterion of success defined as 65% use of SE forms in the translation and free-writing tasks. In fact, most of the ESP students, 81% displayed this level of competence in their free writing, in contrast to 33% of the E students and 55% of the ES students.

Exposing BEV-speaking students to SE syntactic structures in the context of stories, without any explanation, was not sufficient to effect change. This is not surprising given that these students had had much exposure to SE forms in their reading and listening experiences prior to the experiment yet they had not adopted the forms in their writing. Likewise, providing students with rules and instances of SE syntax fared no better as an instructional procedure. This shows that effective assimilation of rules is not simply a matter of telling students the rules. However, having students practice the rules and giving them sentence-by-sentence feedback on the use of those rules did benefit students’ writing.

Bandura (1993) regards such enactive mastery experiences as the most influential source of efficacy information for students. Mastery experiences provide learners with essential information about the strategies that work and about their own ability to implement the strategies to maximize their performance. It is likely that the combination of exposure, strategies, and practice in the present study allowed students to see that the acquisition of new dialect forms was a strategically controllable process that they were capable of mastering. This was particularly important for BEV-speaking elementary students given their pretreatment difficulties with SE syntax.

In addition to the acquisition of SE syntactic forms, it was hypothesized that students receiving the ESP treatment would exhibit more positive self-efficacy expectations regarding their ability to write using SE syntax than would students in the E or ES conditions. Previous research (e.g. Schunk & Rice, 1987; Schunk & Swartz, 1993) has shown that instructional interventions based on the social-cognitive model result in improved academic performance and increased self-efficacy perceptions. These studies typically involve students who exhibit poor academic performance and low self-efficacy perceptions prior to the instructional intervention. Our students, however,
exhibited somewhat different pretest characteristics. They had a paradoxical mix of poor performance and high self-efficacy perceptions. The students had difficulty with written SE syntax, as evidenced by mean pretest SE proficiency scores of only 32%. However, they exhibited very high pretest self-efficacy perceptions regarding their ability to use SE forms in their writings, as evidenced by mean pretest self-efficacy ratings of 80%. The performance/self-efficacy disparity may reflect a general tendency on the part of elementary school students to overstate their competence (Paris & Byrnes, 1989). Also, the disparity may have arisen because of BEV-speaking students’ difficulty distinguishing which of the BEV forms they speak are consistent with SE and which BEV forms are different from SE. This lack of awareness may contribute to unrealistically high self-efficacy ratings.

The performance/self-efficacy disparity may also be artifactual. As noted earlier, BEV and SE dialects have many more forms in common than in contrast. Otherwise they would not be variant dialects of the same language but rather different languages. High self-efficacy ratings observed in the present study may indicate a valid belief on the part of BEV students that they are competent writers of Standard English because most of the features of SE also characterize BEV, and these students speak their dialect fluently. The low SE performance in our study arose because we assessed students’ knowledge of only six syntactic forms that differ in SE and BEV and that are difficult for BEV speakers. We did not test students’ competence with a representative sample of SE structures. If we had, their performance might have come much closer to their self-efficacy ratings. Also, we did not ask students to rate their self-efficacy in using the six targeted syntactic forms but rather to rate their confidence in their overall ability to write using SE syntax. Thus, the disparity may have been produced by the properties of our test of SE and our limited notion of SE competence, involving features that distinguish SE from BEV, not features shared by the two dialects.

In the present study, students’ self-efficacy ratings were high both before and after training. However, interestingly, a decrease in self-efficacy ratings was observed among students in the ESP condition following the practice/feedback portion of the intervention. This contrasted with students in the E and ES conditions, whose ratings increased from pretest to posttest. One interpretation is that providing ESP students with an opportunity to practice and receive corrective feedback on their use of SE forms in their writing made them more aware of inadequacies and less self-confident in their control of SE forms. Rather than being a negative consequence of training, the drop in self-efficacy perceptions by ESP students may represent an important step in the self-regulation process. It may signal an awareness that remedial actions are needed to improve one’s SE writing skills and may indicate when students are receptive to assistance in this regard. This issue awaits further study.
The intervention approach studied here provided a simple, straightforward, and effective method of helping BEV-speaking elementary school students increase their writing proficiency in some features of SE syntax. In our study, the training procedures were implemented easily by 3rd- and 4th-grade elementary school teachers located in typical inner-city classrooms. The researcher spent about 30 min explaining to teachers the rationale for the training and the specific materials and procedures that would be involved. The procedures were clearly defined and easy to administer. In fact, in a follow-up visit, one of the participating teachers told the researcher that after the experiment she had adopted the guided practice and feedback training procedure as part of her regular writing instruction because she saw that it improved the quality of students’ writing.

As noted earlier, “dialect training” experiments conducted in the 1970s were largely ineffective at increasing SE proficiency in students. These efforts typically consisted of drill and practice substitution exercises (e.g., Rystrom, 1970) or involved a heavy emphasis on oral language skills (e.g. Cullinan et al., 1974). The present study differed from previous efforts in that it combined various instructional components derived from social-cognitive learning theory. In addition, the present study made use of written rather than orally presented materials in the ES and ESP conditions. Written materials allow students to review and freely examine the dialect forms to be learned. In contrast, oral forms are far more ephemeral. Speech operates rapidly and automatically and hence may be less amenable to change as a result of self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Various limitations of the study need to be recognized. From the means in Table 3 it is evident that although training procedures improved ESP students’ use of SE forms in their writing, students’ reliance on BEV forms was not completely eliminated. This serves as an important reminder that learning a new dialect is complicated and takes time. Students must learn not only which syntactic features occur in the new dialect but also which contexts are appropriate for their application. The present study utilized a very limited intervention package lasting about 45 min. Further research is needed to determine whether more extensive and repeated use of the procedures would result in increased achievement. Also, instruction was limited to six forms. It is not clear whether findings would generalize to other more complex syntactic forms such as double negatives or to phonological and lexical forms as well. Additionally, the outcome measures were administered immediately following dialect training. It is not clear whether the performance differences that were observed would be maintained over time. These remain questions for further research.

Some might find fault with the design of our study, which involved training students on relatively few syntactic features and then testing them immediately after training. This may have heightened ESP students’ awareness of
the responses we were looking for on our posttests and thus caused them to pay closer attention to SE forms in their writing. Although this may have happened, we do not consider it a flaw. Getting students to monitor their writing behavior in this way constitutes an important accomplishment and is very likely essential as a first step in teaching students to write in Standard English. How else can writers be expected to change their writing habits? First they must become conscious of a small number of features distinguishing SE from their own nonstandard forms, and they must pay attention to and make deliberate use of these features as they express their ideas in writing. With practice, use of the features should gradually become automatic, and other features can be introduced. Additional research is needed to examine these possibilities.

Present findings have particular relevance to the teaching of SE forms in the classroom. They reveal that simply exposing students to instances of SE forms in their reading, listening, and writing is not likely to promote learning. Likewise, drawing students’ attention to rules governing SE features makes little contribution to learning unless the students also practice using the rules. The type of rule application and practice found effective in the present study involved giving students sentences containing BEV features that they exhibited in their own writing and teaching them to transform the sentences into the corresponding SE features through guided practice with feedback. Very likely this practice proved effective because it clarified for students the link between features in their own nonstandard writing and features in SE and how the two forms were similar and different.

Teachers can also apply this approach generally to any nonstandard grammatical forms proving troublesome for their students. The procedure involves several steps: identifying the nonstandard forms exhibited by the students, writing several sentences containing varied examples of the nonstandard forms, explaining the SE rules and having students practice transforming the nonstandard sentences into SE while providing corrective feedback, and then having the students practice using the forms in their free writing accompanied by corrective feedback. Such a procedure is easy to utilize in classrooms. It is amenable to whole-group instruction as was done in the present study. The procedure allows teachers to focus their attention directly on student writing problems and to bypass the controversies and hysteria that attention to “dialect” might otherwise bring forth. We highly recommend that elementary teachers explore the value of this approach in their writing instruction.

APPENDIX A
Pretest Translation Task and Answer Key

Directions to students: Please rewrite the following sentences in their correct grammatical form:
1. My aunt use to live in Baltimore with my three cousin but last year she move to New York.
2. Deborah like to play with the girl that sit next to her at school.
3. I have an aunt and uncle that work in an office in New York.
4. My two brother ate until they was so full that I thought they was going to burst.
5. Gloria’s friend has a pet hamster at home. Her hamster name is Harry.

Answer Key: Words requiring translation are underlined. The expected markers are coded as a–f and listed below. The words in the actual tests were not underlined.

a. Past tense (N = 2)
b. Possessive (N = 2)
c. Plural (N = 2)
d. Third-person singular (N = 2)
e. Indefinite article (N = 2)
f. Verb agreement (N = 2)

APPENDIX B
Posttest Translation Task and Answer Key

Directions to students: Please translate the following sentences into their correct grammatical form:

1. My brother sit in the front row so that he can hear everything the teacher say.
2. John and his brother was going to spend the ten dollar John got for his birthday on some baseball cards.
3. Last Sunday, I ask Tom if he want to go see an ice-hockey game with me and my two cousin.
4. John teacher gave him a note about an open-house school meeting to give to his mother.
5. John don’t mind being late for school because he don’t like to go to Mrs. Johnson music class.

Answer Key: Words requiring translation are underlined. The expected markers are coded as a–f and listed below. The words in the actual tests were not underlined. Only the first occurrence of verb agreement (i.e., “John don’t . . .”’) in sentence 5 was scored.

a. Past tense (N = 2)
b. Possessive (N = 2)
c. Plural (N = 2)
d. Third-person singular (N = 2)
e. Indefinite article \((N = 2)\)

f. Verb agreement \((N = 2)\)

**APPENDIX C**

**Worksheet**

1. Possessive ‘‘s’’
    
    John’s brother
    The clown’s hat

2. Past tense ‘‘ed’’
    
    He walked home.
    The cow jumped over the moon.

3. Third-person present tense ‘‘s’’
    
    The boy eats.
    John writes.

4. Plural ‘‘s’’
    
    Five cents
    Two books

5. Articles (a/an)
    
    An apple/A pear
    An alligator/A bear

6. Subject–verb agreement
    
    They were (plural)/He was (singular)
    They have (plural)/He has (singular)
    They don’t (plural)/He doesn’t (singular)

**APPENDIX D**

**Sentences to Practice Worksheet Rules and Answer Key**

Directions to Students: Please rewrite the following sentences in their correct grammatical form:

1. A boy name Lester live down the street from his friend Ollie. Lester is six year old.
2. Lester like to play hide and seek at a old schoolhouse with Ollie and his two brother.
3. Ollie brothers was hiding together in a closet in the classroom.
4. Lester friend Ollie got into a fight with a older boy at school.
5. Ollie don’t like getting into fights. He promise that it wouldn’t happen again.

Answer Key

1. A boy named Lester lives down the street from his friend Ollie. Lester is six years old.
2. Lester likes to play hide and seek at an old schoolhouse with Ollie and his two brothers.
3. Ollie’s brothers were hiding together in a closet in the classroom.
4. Lester’s friend Ollie got into a fight with an older boy at school.
5. Ollie doesn’t like getting into fights. He promised that it wouldn’t happen again.

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