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Ebonics succeeds where traditional methods do not

BY JOHN R. RICKFORD

THE Oakland School Board's decision to take Ebonics into account in teaching standard English to African-American (and other) students deserves commendation rather than the misinterpretation and vilification it has received.

Another view

While existing methods of teaching English work for white and middle-class children, they fail miserably for working-class African-American children.

Building on their linguistic skills, white and middle-class students improve from year to year. Working-class African-Americans, for whom there is a bigger gap between home and school language, do worse every year they're in school.

The Oakland decision highlights the fact that most African-American kids come to school speaking a highly structured and systematic language, African-American Vernacular English or Ebonics (which is not the same as slang).

It is possible to compare and contrast the features of Ebonics and standard English, and shortcut the process of helping Ebonics speakers master standard English.

Studies from over three decades, both in this country and abroad, show that teaching methods that take vernacular dialects into account in teach-

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For instance, Hanni Taylor, in a 1989 book entitled "Standard English, Black English and Bidialectalism," reported on an experiment involving the standard English writing of inner-city university students from Chicago. With the experimental group, he raised students' awareness of the differences between Ebonics and standard English through contrastive analysis and tailored pattern practice drills. With the control group, he followed "traditional English department techniques."

After three months, students in the experimental group showed a 59 percent reduction in the use of Ebonics in their standard English writing, while the control group showed a slight increase in Ebonics use.

Other studies have shown similar results for the teaching of reading. Students at all levels who are taught by methods that take the dialect into account show dramatic improvement in their skills in reading and writing.

The Oakland School Board is innovating in the light of linguistic and educational evidence. Using existing methods represents, if I may turn the words of the Rev. Jesse Jackson on their head, an "unacceptable surrender, bordering on disgrace."

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