

Exploring Students' Perceptions of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in English Learning Contexts at University

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ABSTRACT

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a rule-governed variety of English that remains marginalized in many EFL classrooms, where Standard English dominates instruction. In Indonesia, students are increasingly exposed to AAVE through digital media, yet little is known about their perceptions of this variety. This study explored students' perceptions of AAVE in English learning contexts at Tadulako University. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving three eighth-semester English Education students. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major themes: students' initial impressions and emotional responses to AAVE, their views on its legitimacy and role in English education, and the influence of digital media on their perceptions and language use. Overall, the participants perceived AAVE as a legitimate and culturally meaningful variety of English while recognizing Standard English as more appropriate for formal academic settings. Although the findings provide in-depth insights into students' perceptions, the small sample size limits the transferability of the results to broader EFL contexts. Nevertheless, this study highlights the importance of introducing diverse English varieties in EFL classrooms to promote linguistic awareness, cultural understanding, and inclusive language education.

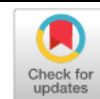
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INTRODUCTION

English has developed into a global language that is used by diverse communities around the world. As English spreads across different social and cultural contexts, it has developed into multiple varieties, each with its own linguistic characteristics and cultural background. This diversity is reflected in the concept of World Englishes, which recognizes that no single variety of English can represent all English speakers (Kachru, 1992). Although Standard English continues to be the dominant variety in education, many other English varieties are widely used in everyday communication and deserve recognition as legitimate forms of the language.

One important variety is African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a systematic and rule-governed variety of English widely spoken in many African American communities in the United States. Although AAVE is often mistakenly regarded as slang or nonstandard English, linguistic research has demonstrated that it possesses its own consistent grammatical, phonological, and lexical system (Green, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2007). Despite this linguistic legitimacy, AAVE continues to be subject to misunderstanding and social stigma because it differs from Standard English. As a result, learners may develop inaccurate perceptions of AAVE and other non-standard English varieties, reinforcing linguistic prejudice and limiting their understanding of the diversity of English used in different cultural and social contexts.

The increasing influence of digital media has also changed the way English is learned and experienced (Benson, 2011; Godwin-Jones, 2018). Social media platforms, streaming services, online videos, films, and music expose English learners to authentic language varieties that are rarely introduced in formal classrooms (Reinhardt, 2019). Among these varieties, AAVE has become particularly visible through rap music, movies, YouTube, TikTok, and other online content. Consequently, many English learners encounter AAVE outside school long before they receive any formal explanation about its linguistic features or cultural background. This situation creates a gap between the English taught in classrooms and the English learners experience in their daily lives.

In Indonesia, English instruction continues to emphasize Standard English as the primary model for learning. While this approach provides students with an important foundation for academic and professional communication, it often leaves little room for discussions of other English varieties (Jenkins, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). As a result, students may encounter AAVE through media without understanding that it is a legitimate variety of English with its own linguistic system. Examining students' perceptions of AAVE is therefore important because language attitudes influence how learners understand language diversity, interpret authentic communication, and interact with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Garrett, 2010).

Previous studies have examined AAVE from different perspectives. Several studies have focused on its linguistic characteristics and use in media. For example, Yannuar et al. (2023) examined the use of AAVE in the songs of Indonesian rapper Ramengvrl, while Pangestika and Supeno (2023) analyzed AAVE features in *The Help* novel. Other studies have explored how Indonesian learners are exposed to or acquire AAVE through media and environmental influences (Arifin & Dewi, 2023; Aryani, 2020). These studies demonstrate that AAVE is increasingly present in Indonesian contexts and that exposure through media plays an important role in familiarizing learners with the variety. However, relatively little attention has been given to how Indonesian university students perceive AAVE within English learning contexts, particularly from a qualitative perspective. Most previous studies have emphasized linguistic analysis or language use rather than learners' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences.

To address this gap, the present study explores students' perceptions of AAVE in English learning contexts at Tadulako University. Specifically, it investigates students' initial impressions and emotional responses toward AAVE, their views on AAVE as a legitimate variety of English and its place in education, and the role of media exposure in shaping their perceptions and personal use of AAVE. By examining these issues, this study contributes to the growing discussion of World Englishes and language attitudes in Indonesian EFL contexts while providing insights that may support more inclusive approaches to English language teaching.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions of AAVE in English learning contexts at Tadulako University. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' opinions, experiences, and interpretations rather than to measure variables quantitatively. As Creswell and Poth (2016) explain, qualitative research enables researchers to explore how individuals understand and make meaning of their experiences within a particular context.

The study focused on describing how students perceive AAVE after being introduced to examples of its linguistic features and exploring the factors that shape those perceptions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their views freely while ensuring that all research questions were addressed. The interview data were then analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed

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by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. This approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns across participants' responses and organize them into meaningful themes.

Respondents

The participants in this study were three eighth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, consisting of two female students and one male student, aged between 21 and 23 years. All participants had completed most of their English language courses and demonstrated an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency based on their academic progress in the program. They were selected through purposive sampling because they met the predetermined inclusion criteria, including substantial exposure to English through formal coursework and digital media, as well as their willingness to participate in the study. These characteristics enabled the participants to provide rich, relevant, and reflective insights into their perceptions of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in English learning contexts.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions of AAVE, including their initial impressions, views on its legitimacy and use in education, and the influence of media exposure on their understanding and personal use of AAVE. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions when necessary, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences and opinions while ensuring that the discussion remained focused on the research objectives.

To provide a common basis for discussion, the researcher also used to prompt materials containing examples of AAVE features, including habitual 'be', copula absence, and double negatives. These examples were presented before the interview questions to ensure that all participants had a similar understanding of the language variety being discussed. The combination of the interview guide and prompting materials enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and relevant information regarding the participants' perceptions of AAVE.

Procedures

The researcher first selected three participants using purposive sampling based on the predetermined criteria. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent to participate and to have the interviews recorded. They were then presented with prompting materials containing examples of AAVE, including several of its common linguistic features, to provide a shared basis for the discussion.

Following the introduction of the prompting materials, each participant took part in an individual semi-structured interview. The interviews explored their initial impressions of AAVE, their views on its legitimacy and place in English education, and the role of media exposure in shaping their perceptions and personal use of the variety. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data before generating initial codes from meaningful segments related to the research objectives. The codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader categories to identify recurring patterns across participants' responses. These patterns were refined into themes representing students' perceptions of AAVE, and the themes were subsequently interpreted and supported

with representative quotations from the interview transcripts to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Initial Impressions and Emotional Responses toward AAVE

Before being introduced to the prompting materials, all three participants associated AAVE with slang, informal English, or internet language. However, after examining examples of AAVE features, they recognized that AAVE follows consistent grammatical patterns rather than being random or incorrect language.

A common pattern across the interviews was the participants' realization that AAVE is a systematic variety of English. Participant 1 explained that he had initially assumed AAVE was *"just random slang made up carelessly,"* but later realized that it has *"consistent patterns and rules within it."* Likewise, Participant 2 admitted that he had previously viewed AAVE as *"only slang or informal English,"* but came to understand that it *"has its own grammar rules and patterns"* and is *"a real variety of English spoken by many African Americans."* Participant 3 shared a similar experience, explaining that he first thought AAVE was *"just a casual expression that people use for entertainment only"* before recognizing it as *"a real language with its own grammar."*

The participants also expressed positive emotional responses after learning about AAVE. Participant 1 described AAVE as making conversations feel *"more alive and expressive,"* while Participant 2 explained that understanding AAVE helped him enjoy songs, movies, and online conversations because he could better understand the expressions people used. Participant 3 viewed AAVE as *"more natural and fuller of personality"* and added that it *"carries cultural identity, like specific cultural identity."*

Overall, the interviews indicate that the participants' initial perceptions changed after they were introduced to examples of AAVE. They came to recognize AAVE as a rule-governed variety of English and expressed positive emotional responses toward its linguistic and cultural characteristics.

Students' Views on AAVE Legitimacy and Its Place in Education

Across the interviews, all three participants viewed AAVE as a legitimate variety of English despite acknowledging that it differs from Standard English. Rather than considering these differences as errors, they regarded AAVE as a language variety with its own grammatical system. The participants also expressed support for introducing AAVE into university English classrooms while recognizing that Standard English remains more appropriate for formal academic contexts.

A shared pattern among the participants was the belief that differences from Standard English do not make AAVE incorrect. Participant 1 explained that *"AAVE has its own rules, grammar, and vocabulary, and as long as there is a clear system behind AAVE, there is no reason to consider it incorrect."* Similarly, Participant 2 described AAVE as *"a correct variety of English"* because it *"follows its own grammar rules"* and should be respected as *"another way of using English."* Participant 3 expressed a comparable opinion, stating that *"it is more accurate to say that AAVE is different rather than wrong,"* emphasizing that every language variety has its own linguistic system.

The participants also agreed that AAVE could be discussed in university English classrooms. Participant 1 believed that English students should understand that English is *"not just the default version or Standard English"* and compared different English varieties to *"a different way to tie shoelaces,"* where the goal is the same even though the method differs. Participant 2 suggested that learning about AAVE could help students better understand movies, songs, and social media while still recognizing the importance of using Standard English in formal situations. Participant 3 added that many students are already exposed to AAVE through media but may mistakenly assume that it is *"broken English."* He explained that discussing AAVE in class could help students understand that it has *"its own rules and history."*

Overall, the participants recognized AAVE as a legitimate variety of English and supported its inclusion in university English classrooms as a way to broaden students' understanding of English language diversity. At the same time, they consistently distinguished between the use of AAVE in informal communication and the use of Standard English in formal academic settings.

The Role of Media Exposure in Shaping Students' Perceptions and Personal Use of AAVE

Another common pattern across the interviews was the important role of media in introducing participants to AAVE. All three participants reported that they encountered AAVE primarily through social media, rap music, YouTube, films, and other online content rather than through formal English instruction. Although they were familiar with many AAVE expressions, they were not always aware that these expressions belonged to a distinct variety of English until they were introduced to the prompting materials.

The participants described media as their main source of exposure to AAVE. Participant 1 explained that he only became aware of AAVE after frequently using Instagram, where he often encountered certain words and expressions without realizing that they were part of a specific English variety. He also stated that AAVE mainly influenced the way he used English in casual conversations rather than his overall language learning. Similarly, Participant 2 identified rap songs and social media comments as his primary sources of exposure, explaining that he had often heard AAVE expressions before understanding their meanings. Participant 3 shared a comparable experience, describing how movies, music, and African American YouTubers and streamers exposed him to AAVE from an early stage of his English learning.

The participants also reported that media exposure helped them become familiar with AAVE vocabulary and expressions. Participant 2 explained that he can now understand words such as "*finna*," "*bet*," and "*no cap*," which he had frequently encountered online. Likewise, Participant 3 noted that repeated exposure enabled him to understand these expressions naturally without translating them into Indonesian. Despite this familiarity, all three participants emphasized that they use AAVE only in informal situations. They reported continuing to use Standard English in academic speaking and writing while occasionally using AAVE expressions in casual communication with friends.

Overall, the interviews indicate that media played a significant role in shaping participants' familiarity with AAVE and influenced both their understanding and limited personal use of the variety. At the same time, the participants consistently distinguished between informal and formal contexts, viewing Standard English as more appropriate for academic communication while recognizing AAVE as part of everyday English use.

Discussion

One of the most notable findings of this study is the shift in students' perceptions of AAVE after they were introduced to authentic examples of the variety. Before the interviews, the participants generally associated AAVE with slang or informal English, but this perception changed once they recognized that AAVE follows systematic grammatical patterns. This finding supports Garrett (2010) Language Attitudes Theory, which argues that language attitudes are not fixed but are shaped through experience and exposure. The participants' changing perceptions demonstrate that even limited exposure to authentic linguistic features can influence how learners evaluate a language variety. At the same time, their initial assumptions reflect the influence of Standard English ideology within the Indonesian EFL context. As explained by Fairclough (2014), ideas about "correct" English are socially constructed through educational and social practices rather than determined solely by linguistic evidence. Since English teaching in Indonesia primarily emphasizes Standard English, it is understandable that students initially regarded AAVE as informal or incorrect. These findings are consistent with Arifin and Dewi (2023), who reported positive attitudes toward AAVE among Indonesian learners, but the present study extends their work by demonstrating how participants' perceptions developed after they were introduced to

authentic examples of AAVE. The findings also support Aryani (2020), whose study showed that exposure outside formal education contributes to familiarity with AAVE.

Another important finding is that the participants came to recognize AAVE as a legitimate variety of English rather than an incorrect form. Instead of evaluating AAVE against the norms of Standard English, they viewed it as a variety with its own grammatical system and acknowledged that linguistic differences do not necessarily indicate incorrectness. This perspective reflects the principles of World Englishers (Kachru, 1992), which emphasize that English consists of multiple legitimate varieties rather than a single standard form. The participants also demonstrated an emerging awareness that negative perceptions of AAVE are influenced by social attitudes and educational practices instead of linguistic facts, which is consistent with Fairclough (2014) concept of Critical Language Awareness. Furthermore, the participants expressed support for introducing discussions of AAVE into university English classrooms while maintaining that Standard English remains appropriate for formal academic communication. This suggests that they viewed knowledge of AAVE as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, Standard English. These findings complement Yannuar et al. (2023), who demonstrated the presence of AAVE in Indonesian popular culture, and Pangestika and Supeno (2023), who examined AAVE in a literary context. However, the present study contributes a different perspective by focusing on how Indonesian university students interpret and evaluate AAVE within English learning. The findings also provide a different perspective from Suryanjan et al. (2024), who suggested that AAVE grammar may confuse Indonesian learners. In this study, the participants recognized AAVE as a systematic variety once they received sufficient explanation and examples.

The findings also highlight the significant role of media in shaping students' perceptions of AAVE. All participants reported that they encountered AAVE primarily through social media, music, films, and other online platforms rather than through formal English instruction. This pattern reinforces Garrett (2010) view that repeated exposure influences language attitudes and familiarity with language varieties. At the same time, it reveals a gap between students' real-world language experiences and classroom instruction. Although participants regularly encountered AAVE outside the classroom, none had previously learned about it in formal English courses. This suggests that English language teaching may not fully reflect the linguistic diversity students experience through contemporary media. Despite their positive perceptions, the participants consistently distinguished between informal and formal language use, indicating that they understood the importance of using Standard English in academic contexts while recognizing AAVE as appropriate for casual communication. This finding reflects the concept of code-switching (Wheeler & Swords, 2006), in which speakers select different language varieties according to the communicative context. Similar patterns of media exposure have been reported by Arifin and Dewi (2023) and Aryani (2020), while Yannuar et al. (2023) also demonstrated the growing presence of AAVE in Indonesian popular culture. The present study extends these findings by showing that media exposure not only increases familiarity with AAVE but also shapes students' perceptions of its legitimacy and influences their awareness of when different varieties of English are appropriately used.

Overall, the findings suggest that exposure plays a central role in shaping students' perceptions of AAVE. As participants became more familiar with its grammatical patterns and cultural background, they moved beyond viewing AAVE as merely slang and instead recognized it as a legitimate variety of English. This development highlights the value of introducing students to diverse English varieties within higher education. Doing so may help foster greater linguistic awareness, encourage more critical perspectives on language variation, and better prepare students for the diversity of English they encounter in contemporary global communication. The findings of the present study have several pedagogical implications. Since listening anxiety was not significantly correlated with listening achievement, improving students' listening performance should not focus solely on reducing listening anxiety. English lecturers are encouraged to provide learning activities that strengthen students' vocabulary knowledge, language proficiency, and listening strategies while maintaining a supportive classroom environment that promotes active participation and

confidence. Such an approach may contribute more effectively to improving students' listening achievement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored students' perceptions of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in English learning contexts at Tadulako University and found that participants viewed AAVE as a legitimate, rule-governed, and culturally meaningful variety of English. Although they initially associated AAVE with slang or informal speech, their understanding developed after being introduced to its linguistic features, leading them to recognize its grammatical legitimacy while continuing to regard Standard English as appropriate for formal academic communication. The findings also highlight the important role of digital media in increasing students' exposure to AAVE and shaping more informed attitudes toward linguistic diversity. These results suggest that incorporating discussions of World Englishes and non-standard English varieties into English language education can foster greater linguistic awareness, reduce language-related misconceptions, and promote more inclusive perspectives on English as a global language. While the findings are based on a small sample from a single university and are therefore not intended to be transferable to all EFL contexts, they provide valuable insights that can inform future research on students' perceptions of linguistic diversity in English language education.

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