Target Audience: A level English Language and Language/Literature Students

Curriculum Focus: Varieties of English

Aims:
To introduce students to Black English, its development, features and usage.
To enhance students’ key skills and study skills: use of internet, note-making, research skills and oral contributions.

Objectives:
• Students should be able to recognise that Black English is a valid dialect of English.
• Students should understand how Creoles develop.
• Students should be able to recognise the effects of using Black English in Literature.
• Students should be able to identify features of syntax, morphology, lexis etc in this variety of English and to transfer the concepts to analysis of other varieties.

First session
• Challenge students’ assumptions with handout 1 and use as the basis for discussion.
• Follow up with handout 2, which gives background information. Students should use this information as the basis of a diagram of their own showing how Black English developed.

Second Session
• Handout 3 on major distinguishing features.
• In pairs, work on a poem which uses black English (for example ‘Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising’ by Fred D’Aguiar).
• Students could be shown the poem first and asked to extrapolate some features, then given the handout.

Third Session
• Open debate about use of Black English in society.
• Students could use internet to search for other information and debate on the topic.

Outcomes:
• Students’ own diagram on development of Black English.
• Oral contribution to discussion on Black English in Society and students own research, perhaps presenting papers in pairs (Key Skills possibilities) on aspects of the topic, such as speech usage, poets who use Black English such as Grace Nichols, Val Bloom, Benjamin Zephaniah, John Agard etc.

Assessment:
• Stylistic analysis of chosen poem from session 2.
Handout 1

1) … there are differences in varieties of English which sometimes correlate with ethnicity.

2) … the speech of a socially subordinate group will always be interpreted as inadequate by comparison with the socially dominant group.

3) There are political, economic and cultural pressures on all Black writers to write in a European language … .

4) Students should be made conscious of the symbolic importance of Creole to form bonds of cultural identity and its historic functions of resistance and subversion.

5) The resulting ‘pidgins’ maintained African grammatical structures but emerged with European lexical items, usually associated with business and trade.

6) The schools transmit, for example, the notion, passed off as truth, that culture is white, male and middle-class.

7) All of us, whether we realise it or not, are dialect speakers. (Oxford English Programme 1992)

8) Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. (Salman Rushdie)

9) Yet now perhaps this idea that everyone should share a single, monolithic heritage has started to adapt and change; slowly, sometimes painfully, sometimes with great joy, we are developing a multicultural heritage, or multicultures.

10) The study of literature and language could be an opportunity to understand and encourage an even more open multicultural society.

Quotations 1–3 are taken from the essay ‘Black Children are Verbally Deprived’ by Walt Wofram printed in Language Myths (Penguin 1998), copyright ©Walt Wofram

Quotations 4–6 are taken from Teaching Black Literature by Suzanne Scafe (Virago 1989), copyright ©Suzanne Scafe

Quotations 9 & 10 are from Doing English by Robert Eaglestone (Routledge 2000), copyright ©Robert Eaglestone
Creoles and Nation Language

Between the Seventeenth and the Nineteenth centuries, approximately four million Africans were taken to the Caribbean as slaves. Slave traders deliberately mixed slaves up so that there were few together who spoke the same language or came from the same tribe. This was to prevent plotting and conspiracy. The only common language was that of their oppressors, whether they were French, British or Dutch. As a result of this, new languages, called pidgins, were created. The slaves used these pidgins to communicate. These languages have a limited vocabulary, a simple grammatical structure and a narrow range of functions. They have their own rules and are creative adaptations of languages to serve a practical purpose, for example, trading is the main purpose behind Chinook Jargon used by the American Indians when trading with North West USA. Pidgins cease to exist when the original purpose disappears. Sometimes, a pidgin becomes the first language of the next generation, when it can no longer be called a pidgin. Sometimes the pidgin is lost; for example, pidgin English appeared during the Vietnam war and disappeared after the war was over.

Once this pidgin form becomes the first language of the next generation, it is called a Creole. Creoles are distinct languages with their own rules. English has always had different dialects, though as people travel further from their native towns, some of the differences have been eroded. At one time, Bill Bryson says in Mother Tongue, it was possible to travel twenty miles outside London and be unable to understand the local dialect. However, since people travel more and there has been increasing globalisation, these Creoles are used widely and have played their part in enriching English, just as the influence of Old French and Old Norse enriched it in the past. In the 1950s, many people emigrated to England from the West Indies in pursuit of work; their children and grandchildren continue to live in England as British citizens, often speaking and writing in Black English by choice. The Creoles differ, depending where its speakers originate; thus Jamaican Creole is different to Guyanan Creole. Patois is another, less technical term, for Creole.

Creole is often used by writers for effect, when the choice of Standard English is also at their disposal. Edward Braithwaite coined the term Nation Language. This term is used particularly when referring to Creole employed in Literature. There is always a reason for this, an authorial choice. When encountering Nation Language in a literary text, the reader should question why it has been used just as one would analyse the layers of language in a Shakespeare play, in order to develop ideas about authorial purpose.

It is important to realise that there are many varieties of Black English as well as different registers. For the purposes of study, however, it is possible to make some generalisations about its features.
Handout 3 - Distinguishing Features of Black English

Grammar (Morphology and syntax)
1) Plural endings are not always indicated.
2) Apostrophe ‘s’ is not used to show possession e.g. ‘This girl dress’ rather than ‘this girl’s dress’.
3) Black English sometimes misses out is e.g. ‘He very good looking’.
4) Personal pronoun used instead of possessive pronoun e.g. ‘she child’ instead of ‘her child’.
5) Adjectives are used as adverbs and the ‘ly’ ending is rarely used.
6) Passive verbs are not used e.g. ‘de grass cut’ compared to ‘the grass has been cut’ in SE.
7) Double negatives are used for emphasis c.f. Middle English.
8) ‘ed’ ending of verbs is not always used.
9) ‘be’ is used for continuous present e.g. ‘They be always fightin’.
10) ‘Been’ is used for remote past ‘I been see dat movie’ means ‘I saw that film a long time ago’.

Lexis
1) ‘fe’ is used instead of ‘to’ when using the infinitive form of the verb.
2) words are often imaginative and metaphoric – not dissimilar to the kennings of the Anglo-Saxons:
   - dollsup to describe a girl who is wearing make-up
   - brassface shameless audacity
   - mamaguy flattery
   - pickney child
   - bu’n bu’n the burnt food that sticks to the bottom of a cooking pot
   - hard ears stubborn
   - peelhead bald man

   However, the vocabulary can change quickly, as slang does.
3) Another factor is that words are spelt as they are pronounced. Standardised spelling is not imposed. This helps the reader to ‘hear’ the accent.
4) ‘Like to’ is used to mean ‘almost’, perhaps in the sense of ‘likely to’.

Phonology
1) In Black English, unlike Standard English where the stress falls on the first syllable of a word, all syllables are accented equally. This gives speech a very different rhythm and affects the rhythm of poetry, for example. However, there is sometimes a heavy stress on the first syllable of disyllabic words such as ‘police’ and ‘define’.
2) Word-initial letter ‘th’ is often replaced by ‘d’ and final ‘th’ is often replaced by ‘f’.
3) ‘L’ is often absent from word-final clusters with labials e.g. ‘hep’ replaces ‘help’.
4) Word-final clusters are reduced e.g. ‘tes’ instead of ‘test’.
5) ‘R’ is not usually pronounced i.e. the language is non-rhotic.
6) In Jamaican English, there is no distinction between [a] and [o], so pat and pot rhyme.