

Rich in dialect diversity

USC Upstate professor takes aim at language-specific prejudice

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Listen up, y'all.

University of South Carolina Upstate English professor David Marlow and student research assistant George Reed are in the process of developing a complete set of lesson plans addressing dialect diversity in South Carolina, which they hope eventually will

be integrated into eighth-grade social studies and English curriculums statewide.

The goal of the program, which builds off a similar one developed at North Carolina State University and adapts it to fit South Carolina history and state education standards, is to give a historical perspective of the numerous South Carolina dialects

as well as discourage what Marlow calls language-specific "bigotry and prejudice."

"We sometimes like to ignore this type of discrimination, and yet it is out there," Marlow said during a presentation of his project at the recent SC Upstate Research Symposium in Spartanburg. "The discrimination is subconscious, and unfortunately, it's reinforced in our schools. Kids get the messages that they are not smart."

The project is supported by the USC Upstate Office of Sponsored Awards and Student Support and the

USC Magellan Scholarship program. Marlow now hopes to find an additional funding source to provide stipends to teachers around the state who choose to pilot the program for one year.

Based on the teachers' feedback, Marlow would then post his team's multimedia materials to the Web to become available for any South Carolina teacher to use.

Marlow's project intrigued Spartanburg District 4 Superintendent Rallie Liston, a native South Carolinian whose own family history includes various dialects from the foot of Glassy Mountain to the Lowcountry near Charleston.

"I find what he's doing interesting and fascinating personally, and worth exploring," Liston said. "Does that mean we're going to offer it in our schools? It's enough to wet my whistle to want to learn more about it."

Extensive history

Six historical periods are being targeted to fit the social studies history for South Carolina, Marlow said. They are:

- ◆ Pre-colonization, which explores Native American languages, specifically Cherokee.
- ◆ Early settlement, which targets dialects in the Lowcountry.

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Marlow

DIALECT

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◆ Slavery/Civil War, including the Gullah creole language.

◆ Industrialization, a period when factory workers came down from North Carolina, bringing with them their Appalachia dialect.

◆ Modern settlement, which brings the influence of various immigrants.

◆ Current urban life, which addresses African-American English.

"Dialect and language is an art form in many cases, and many of the dialect differences are just absolutely beautiful to hear," Liston said. "As a native South Carolinian, it would be sad to lose those and not recognize the dialect differences across this state, to not make it so that it's part of our history."

The initial plan is to create 12 cross-curricular lessons, one for each of the six social studies periods and then embedding linguistically diverse lessons in the English curriculum for all six.

"We want to engage the students," Marlow said. "We want to have some presentation about this topic in a historical context, but also let the students discover what the rules are and practice it in writing. We want to reinforce heritage so that you can take pride in where you come from and develop that self-esteem, which we hope will maximize academic success."

By the end of the program, Marlow would like students to be able to "code switch," or transition between proper standard English and whatever dialect they were born with. Marlow's team thinks that will enhance students' chances for success in future academic and career goals while "still feeling comfortable within their own skin when they're in their own community."

An eye-opener

Marlow added that African-American dialect seems to draw the most prejudice. After a recent presentation he gave about dialect diversity to a group of college education majors from around the state, Marlow said one black student approached him and thanked him for his message.

"In all my years of education," Marlow

A national treasure

The Dictionary of American Regional English, founded by the late English professor Frederic Cassidy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is nearing completion of its final volume of text.

The book, widely praised by authors and scholars as a national treasure, chronicles words and phrases used in specific regions of the country throughout American history. A two-year, \$295,000 federal grant from the National Science Foundation will help the volume get published next year and allow the dictionary to prepare to go online.

Here are some examples from the South:

Flying ginny: A merry-go-round

Calling hogs: Snoring

Flannel cakes: Pancakes

Mulligrubs: A condition of despondency or ill temper

Parrot-toed: Having feet that turn inward

Railroad daisy: A black-eyed Susan flower

recalled the student saying, "no one has ever told me that my dialect is OK."

Liston agreed with Marlow that the proposed curriculum will be an eye-opener for teachers as well, and that discouraging discrimination by students begins with them. The two local educators said making an adolescent student feel unintelligent and inferior could have seriously negative repercussions for that student's educational future.

"People certainly mistake dialect with intelligence sometimes," Liston said. "Here's what we have to be careful of from an educational perspective: that we don't judge students by their dialect or by the way that they dress because then we don't allow them to grow. When we make judgments early on about the students based on how they look or how they sound, then we can dumb them down for life."

"So I think the greater thing here, beyond historical perspective and art form of dialect, is for teachers not to judge that student and call them ignorant. We need to model standard English and validate (students') strengths and teach them, as opposed to judging them."

South Carolina teachers and administrators interested in piloting Marlow's program, or wanting more information, can e-mail him at dmalow@uscupstate.edu.