

Teaching with a Twist: Embracing Appalachian (and Other) Dialects—Y’all Ready for This?

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ABSTRACT

Situated within the Appalachian region, I celebrate dialect diversity within the courses I teach. Appalachian English, a recognized marginalized language variety, is my own dialectical heritage and that of my students. As such, I reinforce the notion that home languages, i.e., dialects, have a place in English language arts instruction in a direct, not peripheral, manner. To build students up in their use of their home languages, to help children see the value in native speech patterns, and to know that no single voice can represent an entire region, engaging in language and culture studies that reinforce the dialect and region in a positive manner is a must. Focusing on books that promote the Appalachian area and people group in a way that is free of stereotypes is central to supporting the acceptance of this marginalized language variety. Additionally, including intentional activities that highlight the richness of language serves to celebrate students’ voices and cultural histories.

KEYWORDS

Appalachian English; marginalized-language variety; dialect acceptance in schools; writing

Growing up poor in the rural South, the Appalachian Mountains were my playground. Traipsing their hills, I learned to appreciate and respect nature. Using empty plastic milk jugs as sleds, my siblings and I discovered the joy of flying down a hard-packed dirt hill at a breakneck speed. It was the closest we ever came to bobsledding. We dug for buried treasures, skipped rocks across ponds, and chased lightin’ bugs (a.k.a., fireflies). Attending a K–12 community school, I knew my teachers, some of them personally; intuitively, I recognized they cared about me as a student and as a person. They held me accountable for my academics and my actions. Teaching holistically, they adopted Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, realizing that education is more than just academics, a lesson I take with me into my own teacher education courses.

Looking back, it may be that my glasses have a rose-colored tint. School was not perfect (nor do I think it needs to be). There was no diversity, at least not in the most commonly viewed terms of race and ethnicity. And, truthfully, there were few socio-economic differences. We were all poor, living paycheck to paycheck or on government assistance. We all spoke the same rich Appalachian dialect, so linguistic variations were, for the most part, nonexistent. Regardless, many of us secretly carried the stigma of speaking hillbilly (a term I overheard a group of non-native well-meaning teachers call our speech). Sensing that speaking in this manner brought with it a degree of pity, I determined to eradicate, or at least hide, my dialectical heritage. As such, I erased ‘youns’ and ‘y’all’ from my conversations, quit saying ‘reckon’ and ‘fixin’ too, and even contemplated calling my grandparents something other than ‘mamaw’ and ‘papaw.’ My new voice was uncomfortable, as if I were wearing someone else’s skin. In essence, I no longer trusted, as Lyon (2014) calls it, my first voice—“the one tuned by the people and place that made [me]” (p.

187). Little did I know then that this was the beginning of my linguistic journey, one that would follow me into adulthood and my own teaching career.

Appalachian English, a recognized marginalized language variety (Clark & Hayward, 2013; Cummings-Lilly & Forrest-Bank, 2019; Siegel, 2006), plays a critical role in shaping the identities and experiences of those of us who call this region home. As such, it is essential to affirm that our home language, i.e., dialect, occupy a central place in English language arts instruction rather than being relegated to the periphery. By fostering an environment where students can appreciate the value of their native speech patterns (and other rich dialects), we can help them understand that no single voice can encapsulate the entirety of a region (Winchester, 2020). This approach necessitates engaging in language and culture studies that positively reinforce one's dialect and its associated heritage. Central to this effort is the selection of literature that portrays the Appalachian people, their language, and their stories in an authentic manner, free from stereotypes (see Table 1 for an Appalachian children's and young adult booklist). It should be noted that although this paper focuses on the Appalachian dialect and culture, the premise discussed can and should be adapted to other linguistic patterns.

Table 1: Appalachian Children's and Young Adult Book List

Title	Author(s)	Copyright	Publisher
<i>Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky</i>	Kathi Appelt & Jean Cannella Schmitzer	2001	Harper Collins Publishers
<i>Ashpet: An Appalachian Tale</i>	Joanne Compton	1994	Holiday House
<i>Knoxville, Tennessee</i>	Nikki Giovanni	1994	Scholastic Trade Publishers
<i>When Uncle Took the Fiddle</i>	Libba Moore Gray	1999	Orchard Books
<i>That Book Woman</i>	Heather Henson	2008	Atheneum Books
<i>Saturdays and Teacakes</i>	Lester Laminack	2004	Peachtree Publishers
<i>With a Hammer for My Heart</i>	George Ella Lyon	2014	The University Press of Kentucky
<i>Molasses Man</i>	Kathy May	2000	Holiday House
<i>A is for Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage</i>	Linda Hager Pack	2002	Harmony House Publishers.
<i>When I Was Young in the Mountains</i>	Cynthia Rylant	1982	Reading Rainbow
<i>The Relatives Came</i>	Cynthia Rylant	1985	Simon and Schuster
<i>Silver Packages</i>	Cynthia Rylant	1997	Orchard Books
<i>Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds</i>	Cynthia Rylant	1998	Harcourt Brace and Company
<i>Affrilachia: Poems</i>	Frank X. Walker	2020	Ohio University Press Distributed Titles
<i>The Serpent King</i>	Jeff Zentner	2016	Crown Books for Young Readers/ Random House

Furthermore, including intentional activities—such as the one described below—that celebrate the richness of language patterns honors students' voices and recognizes their cultural histories. This approach encourages students to explore both their own dialects and the linguistic heritages of others. It also has the potential to engage students in critical thinking, encouraging

them to question their own assumptions and examine how language and culture intersect through an authentic lens. Additionally, the multimodal approach of connecting students' spoken language experiences and cultural backgrounds to written text, along with visual support, improves comprehension, engagement, and literacy development. This is particularly beneficial for students whose dialects differ from the standard form taught in school, as it makes learning more relevant and accessible by affirming their unique linguistic identities. Exploring different linguistic and cultural perspectives, the activity also provides students with a broader lens through which to analyze text, particularly the author's background and intended audience.

Appalachian Language Book

Using an online bookmaker like Bookemon (bookemon.com), students create a book that explores Appalachian vocabulary, phrases, and pronunciations. They build on the language patterns of their life and/or the area, explaining the meaning of the entries. For example, most of us who are native to Appalachia understand that Blackberry Winter is a cold spell that occurs in May, just as the wild blackberry bushes begin to bloom. We also know that we should avoid a polecat or skunk at all costs. In creating the book, students celebrate the region's linguistic richness by highlighting the uniqueness of the dialect and the culture that influences it. The online digital tool allows students to write and illustrate a book they can share with each other, their families, and their community. Beyond this, [Bookemon](http://bookemon.com) also permits students to purchase their books in hard copy, becoming, in essence, a published author. See Table 2 for assignment details and Table 3 for its associated rubric as well as a modified example, i.e., *Rednecks, Hillbillies, and Hicks: Exploring the Language and Culture of a Place*, of the assignment I created at <https://www.bookemon.com/flipread/1040897/rednecks-hillbillies-and-hicks&refid=l8w2p>.

Table 2: Appalachian Language and Culture Book Assignment Details

Assignment Component	Description and Directions
Objective	The goal of this assignment is to research, create, and publish an online book that explores the rich language and culture of the Appalachian region. You will use a digital tool like Bookemon to design and present your findings in an engaging and informative format.
Assignment Overview	Conduct thorough research on various aspects of Appalachian language and culture. Focus on topics such as dialect, folklore, music, art, food, traditions, and contemporary issues facing the region. Utilize credible sources, including books, articles, interviews, and online resources as well as your own personal knowledge or experience with the dialect and culture.
Content Development	Organize your research into coherent sections. Each section should highlight a different aspect of Appalachian culture and/or language. Sections to include: Introduction (overview of Appalachian culture and language), Dialects & Linguistic Features (examples of Appalachian grammar, vocabulary, phrases, and their meanings, etc.), Cultural Characteristics (descriptions and/or illustrations of traits unique to the area). Note: You may include other sections/things of your choice.
Book Creation	Using Bookemon or a similar digital tool, design your online book. Pay attention to layout, visuals, and multimedia elements (such as images, videos, or audio clips) that enhance the reader's experience. Ensure that your book is visually appealing and easy to navigate.
Citations and References	Include a bibliography of your sources at the end of your book. Use a consistent citation style (e.g., APA, MLA) to acknowledge the resources you consulted.

Table 3: Appalachian Language and Culture Book Rubric

Criterion	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)
Content Accuracy	Thoroughly researched, accurate information with credible sources.	Mostly accurate with minor errors; generally credible.	Some inaccuracies; misrepresents key concepts.	Numerous inaccuracies; lacks credible sources.
Cultural Representation	Rich and nuanced portrayal; includes diverse Appalachian perspectives.	Good representation; lacks depth in some areas.	Limited representation; focuses narrowly on culture.	Misrepresents or oversimplifies culture.
Language and Dialect	Deep understanding of language and dialect exhibited with several authentic examples.	Adequate understanding: some authentic examples present.	Limited understanding: few examples or authenticity is questionable.	Little understanding; no authentic examples.
Engagement and Accessibility	Highly engaging; accessible to a wide audience.	Generally engaging; mostly accessible, with some challenging sections.	Somewhat engaging; may be difficult for certain audiences.	Not engaging, confusing, or inaccessible to most readers.
Visual and Multimedia Elements	Excellent use of visuals and multimedia; enhances understanding and engagement.	Good use of visuals and/or multimedia that mostly supports content.	Limited visuals or multimedia and/or visuals that may not enhance understanding.	Little to no visuals or multimedia; detracts from the content.
Organization, Structure & Editing	Well-organized, virtually error-free, clear structure that enhances comprehension and flow.	Acceptable organization, a few errors, some sections are unclear.	Poorly organized, several errors, difficult to follow the main points.	Disorganized, an abundance of errors, lacks coherent structure.
Citations and References	All sources cited correctly in a consistent style; comprehensive bibliography.	Adequate number of sources present, cited correctly and consistently	Limited sources present; several inconsistencies or some missing citations.	Few or no citations; fails to acknowledge sources.

Conclusion

O'Mahoney (2018) reminds us that we need to raise awareness among our educators. By doing so, we can integrate more culturally appropriate instructional practices, including dialect acceptance. "In a society," O'Mahoney argues, "where it is felt that no ethnicity, religion, and gender should be considered better or worse than any others, it follows that a person's language(s) or dialect(s) should likewise not be associated with any kind of stigma" (p. 221). He, of course, is right. Poet Rhina Espaillat (1998), when told by her father to speak "English outside this door, Spanish inside," questioned, "But who can divide the world, the word (*mundo y palabra*) from any child?" (p. 60). Herein lies the most simple and critical answer: No one. Words, languages, cultures, and yes, dialects, are part of who we are; they make us, us. As such, they deserve to be explored and welcomed in the English classroom.

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