Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: In the state of Missouri, approximately 4.5% of students in schools are classified as English learners. Although this is half of the national average, it's a growing population and it presents unique challenges for teachers and others in the education system. I'm Nicki Donnelson, and today my guest is Dr. Andrea Hellman, assistant professor of English at Missouri State University. She tells us about the current population of English learners in the region, a mix of both immigrants and resettled refugees.

Andrea Hellman: We are getting people who are relocating from refugee camps in Kenya and Thailand, and a lot of people are not aware that, for example, other refugees who are relocating from Thai refugee camps are coming from a country of Burma or Myanmar and that is the most diverse region of the globe. So, in those refugee camps, people are represented who speak nearly 100 languages.

Nicki Donnelson: Hellman explains how this affects the make up of the region.

Andrea Hellman: I've been working in this field in Missouri for about 10 years now, and during those 10 years I've seen some dramatic changes. People come in, they integrate, they resettle, they learn English, and then we see another wave of people who need our help. The people we are getting here speak various dialects of Karen and Karenni. It's an entirely new population, for example, for the district of Monett, who's receiving them. We also have people who are coming from Somalia, who are working in meat plants in McDonald County, for example. We also have people who were previously working in meat plants but now they are resettling in more urban areas, like in Springfield. We have people receiving people from the Democratic Republic of Congo who were in refugee camps in Rwanda. So, our population of English learners is very diverse, and of course recently we've also seen a rise in unaccompanied minors, for example children who are resettling in foster care or with families who are supporting them.

Nicki Donnelson: For a community or a school district, the greatest challenge is learning about the new population, she says.

Andrea Hellman: What brings them here? What are their strengths? Where do they need our support? When we are dealing with individuals who are resettling from refugee camps, the first thing they need is the very basics. The supportive, non-threatening environment where they feel that they can come into our school and feel safe and they can be ready to learn. They also need some basic necessities. A lot of the resettled refugees have jobs. The reason why they are coming here is employment opportunities, mainly around the Walmart meat industries, but not the kind of jobs that help them integrate with others in the community because they don't see very many of the local population in the same workplaces where they are working. The challenge is to welcome them. To make them feel safe, make them feel comfortable. Make sure that we connect them to those resources in the community that are there to serve them. A lot of them find lots of support in the local churches.

Nicki Donnelson: Teaching English as a second language, or TESL, is one of Hellman's passions. Four years ago, Hellman was awarded a federal grant from the US Department of Education for improving English language teaching in the Ozarks. The goal, to create a program that will support in service teachers who are interested in becoming specialists for English learners in the Springfield public schools, Monett, Neosho, and McDonald County school districts. Now these teachers are working toward an ELL endorsement, a 30 credit credential, and even participate in a masters of science in interdisciplinary studies in English language teaching and literacy education.

Andrea Hellman: The teachers benefit from participating in our program, and we also benefit in that we are able to create a cadre of teachers who are driven by the heart, who are in it for these students that they really believe in, and who have the heart and the willingness to engage the families of these newcomers in various projects in the school so that they can contribute to the school community and hopefully integrate.

Nicki Donnelson: This program focuses on empowering teachers who wish to deepen their engagement with language minority families in order to further the academic achievement of the children. Ultimately, the goal is to help ensure that all students learn how to listen, speak, read, and write at grade level.

Andrea Hellman: The important thing is for us to pull together as a community and to carry on welcoming people as we've always done.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Andrea Hellman. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the office of university communications at 417-836-6397.