

Teaches Inupiaq at SJC

Eskimo students at Sheldon Jackson College are now learning to read and write the language they have always spoken.

Inupiaq 120, a two-credit class for students who speak Inupiaq but want to learn to read and write the language, is being offered for the first time this semester.

"Our language binds us together," said Dora Ventle, an SJC student and instructor of the course. "In the past our language has been oral, now we have to start writing what we have passed orally," she said.

Mrs. Ventle said she is hopeful that classes such as hers will provide the impetus for similar classes in the villages. "Hopefully the SJC students can take their learning into the towns and plan a curriculum for teaching the reading and writing," she said.

The class is informal. Students come to class with cups of coffee; talking and laughing, speaking in Inupiaq. The class members are from Barrow, Noorvik and Pt. Hope and many of them have known each other for a long time.

Sometimes the introduction of new words will create a ripple of excitement among class members as they recognize a word they have only spoken.

Students began the class by learning the alphabet — 24 letters including three vowels — and singing an alphabet song. They progressed next to the sound system, using a chart to learn sound combinations and spelling rules. The chart also helps students learn spellings for Inupiaq words which vary slightly in pronunciation and spelling in the different villages.

The class will also read Inupiaq material and write their own compositions. "When the students begin to read and write, that will be the fun time," said Mrs. Ventle.

Originally from Barrow, Mrs. Ventle graduated from Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka and worked in California before returning to Alaska last summer. She spent the January interim semester at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks studying with linguists to prepare for this class.

Another Barrow resident, Harry Kaleak, is an assistant teacher for the class. Edie Rose, SJC psychology teacher, is the advisor.