Using eye dialect as background knowledge for dialectal variation in Spanish

Introductory phonetics and phonology courses present challenges for the native and non-native speakers of Spanish alike. The different types of phonetic variation seem abstract to the students, particularly if they live in an environment that lacks exposure to many different dialects. Many speakers are only familiar with their mode of speaking Spanish and the non-native speakers may have only had textbook exposure to the differing modes of expression in Spanish or passing anecdotal explanations of regional dialects. Since all language majors need to be literate in the target language and can achieve some level of understanding, depending on the text, they struggle with regional literature because of its lack of orthographic standardization. Regional literature, or “eye dialects” are unique in that the author writes orthographically exactly how the speakers pronounce their words. These regional texts, such as those written by Chilean author Óscar Castro, are extraordinarily useful because they capture graphically the phonetic phenomena characteristic of languages in contact and/or dialectal variations such as elisions, aspirations, vowel harmony, among others. This relationship between the underlying form (normative orthography) and the surface spoken form can be explained by Optimality Theory, for example, which shows how underlying forms are linked directly to their surface representations. The input passes through the ‘Generator’ which produces a series of ‘Candidates’ these candidates pass through the 'Evaluator' to determine which are viable forms. Many students don’t have this ability to process the viable ‘candidates’ from languages in contact or remote regional varieties. In a study conducted by the researcher, exposure to regional literature, dialecto literario, provided them valuable input to enrich their experiences with the language and the multi-dialectal representations in the surface form. The students were able to ‘evaluate’ more types of ‘candidates’ and were, thus, better equipped to understand these phonetic phenomena and were able to understand regional literature.