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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes ideas expressed in 25 papers from the 1997 Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (Flagstaff, AZ) on teaching indigenous languages and argues that American Indian languages in particular should be maintained through the schools, not at the expense of the learning of English and not simply for archival reasons, but because they are conduits for indigenous cultures that have real value in the modern world. It is proposed that American Indian communities have a hierarchy of needs based on the current health of the corresponding language. The indigenous language requires differential interventions to strengthen and maintain its health. A chart of interventions is provided. For academic success in the language beyond the fourth grade level, students must expand their language knowledge from primary discourse (conversational proficiency) to secondary discourse. Teacher education is critical in this area, as is the value given overtly to the language. No one community or school has the answers to keeping an indigenous language alive, but through sharing successes and learning from failures, their extinction can be averted. Contains 29 references. (MSE)

Strategies for Keeping Indigenous Languages Alive

by Jon Reyhner

Strategies for Keeping Indigenous Languages Alive

a paper presented to the American Association for Applied Linguistics Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington Saturday, March 14, 1998

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This paper is a synthesis of ideas expressed in the 25 papers collected from the 1997 Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium held in Flagstaff, Arizona, and published by Northern Arizona University under the title *Teaching Indigenous Languages* (Reyhner, 1997). Extensive studies have shown that the World's indigenous languages are threatened everywhere, and the situation in the United States, despite the rhetoric of tribal policies and the Native American Languages Act, is no different (Crawford, 1996; Fishman, 1991; Krauss, 1996; Reyhner, 1996).

I don't argue here that American Indian languages in the United States should be kept alive at the expense of learning English; I maintain that worldwide, studies (see for example Ovando & Collier, 1998 and Baker, 1996) have shown that people who so desire can maintain their local language while learning one or more of the so-called international or world languages. However, such bilingualism or multilingualism does not just happen in most cases. Indigenous people who want to keep there language alive must really make an effort to learn what is working in communities and schools to teach each new generation their language. Without concerted effort, almost all, if not all, the indigenous languages of the United States will be dead languages in another century.

I also don't argue for keeping these languages alive just for the sake of just not seeing them disappear, for antiquarian reasons. Rather, I see these languages as conduits for indigenous cultures that have real value in our modern world. Students who are not being passed down their languages and cultures are often not successfully assimilating into the more positive aspects of mainstream culture. Instead, caught between two cultures without a thorough cultural foundation laid in the home, they are often semilingual (not learning their tribal language or English very well) and prone to join gangs to seek the cultural identity and sense of belonging that was denied them along with their ancestral language. Gangs are an attempt by youth to gain a sense of belonging that has been denied them in a world of cultural homogenization, large impersonal schools, and mass marketing. In addition, these culturally lost children who join gangs in their search for identity are more susceptible to the allure of drugs and alcohol and learn the more negative aspects of the mainstream culture through movies, television, and popular music.

Using the 25 papers in *Teaching Indigenous Languages* as a jumping off place, I want to emphasize in this paper the positive steps being taken to effectively teach indigenous languages so that indigenous people who wish to keep their languages alive can get some guidance from some of the efforts being made in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Mexico. I don't focus here on the best ways of teaching English, which I think is also important, because that is not the subject of this paper. However, the same basic texts (see for example Ovando & Collier, 1998 and Baker, 1996) in bilingual education that show the success of educational programs that support indigenous languages also describe numerous studies that indicate that children can learn English better if they first receive a thorough grounding in their indigenous language and that academic success in English does not have be purchased at the price of losing one's ancestral language.

Arapaho efforts

One of the points made again and again by Joshua Fishman and others in presentations at the First and Second Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium held in

Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1994 and 1995 is that schools can only have a limited role in keeping indigenous languages alive (see Cantoni, 1996). The intergenerational transmission of the language in the home from parents to young children is the key to keeping indigenous languages alive. Steve Greymorning's (1997) paper "Going Beyond Words" describes various efforts to teach Arapaho to school children, which had more and more success as the teachers were taught various immersion language teaching methods and spent more classroom time teaching Arapaho, but he concludes by advocating the Maori "philosophy of language from the breast," which emphasizes just such intergenerational language transmission.

The Maori have started language classes for mothers with children 16 to 24 months old. Mothers learn Maori while their babies also learn the sounds and cadences of their tribal language. Veronica Carpenter (1997) paper describes how young children pick up the sounds and rhythms of the language(s) spoken around them and how older children not so exposed to their tribe's language need specific help to pick up sound system that they do not learn at their mother's side.

Infants who are breast fed pick up immunities from childhood diseases, and I maintain that children who learn their indigenous language and culture at their mother's breast pick up immunities from the diseases of modern life that lead our children to joining gangs, abusing drugs and alcohol, and becoming members of a rootless consumer society described by St. Clair (1997) in his paper "The Invisible Doors Between Cultures."

The bulk of Greymorning's paper deals with the attempt to develop real communicative competency in Arapaho in elementary students. The two major elements he puts forth are spending more time teaching the language and using immersion teaching methods where the teachers speak no English. Greymorning's paper accurately focuses on the needs of the Arapaho children he is dealing with, but does not relate what will be done when communicative competency is reached. Will the program stop there or will subject matter teaching as well as reading and writing be introduced?

American Indians, based on the history of Indian-white contact, are often deeply suspicious of all things associated with whites. The fact that Christian missionaries introduced writing systems to indigenous languages in order to translate their Bible and convert Indians from their traditional religions makes reading and writing indigenous languages especially problematic. In addition, as Greymorning indicates, in the hierarchy of needs, reading and writing can wait, because the children cannot even speak the language. In a case such as Rock Point where the students came to school speaking Navajo, reading and writing was less controversial, especially when it was used to read and write about local events, issues, and needs (see Holm & Holm, 1995).

A hierarchy of needs

American Indian communities have a hierarchy of needs based on the current health of the language. In communities such as Greymorning (1997) describes, which are the most predominate, getting the children to just speak the language is the most critical need, but once the children achieve that conversational proficiency, then, unless their are community objections, there is a need to expand that conversational proficiency into a more sophisticated academic proficiency so that students can discuss more abstract higher-level topics. At the Greymorning level no textbooks are needed, just teacher training and teacher guides (see Bennett, 1997, as an example), but at the higher levels textbooks need to be developed first like the ones that de Reuse (1997) and Adley-SantaMaria (1997) describe, and then textbooks need to be written to teach about the history and culture of the group. Such textbooks exist in English for at least some tribes today, but those written in indigenous languages that are more than short pamphlets are practically non-existent. A limited example of content area indigenous language teaching material is described by Jacobs (1997) in her paper "Science Explorers Translation Project."

Depending on how strong the language is, different intervention methods are appropriate to maintain and further strengthen the language. A preliminary list of

suggestions based on the current status of the indigenous language is given in Table 1 below. Ideally children should pick up a conversational proficiency in their indigenous language in their homes before they ever reach school and, if not in their homes, in language nests. If that ideal is reached, then programs such as Greymorning's are unnecessary, and something else needs to be done to help maintain the language in the schools. Since schools are about literacy, one could argue that to do anything with indigenous languages in schools presupposes promoting indigenous language literacy--that literacy is part of the evolution of all languages that are going to survive in the modern world. Scott Palmer (1997) emphasizes the role of the language of the workplace in the survival of indigenous languages, and stopping at conversational proficiency implies that those speaking indigenous languages in the workplace will be relegated to lower paying jobs in the workplace that do not require literacy.

Primary and secondary discourse

For academic success students need to expand their language skills from primary discourse to secondary discourse (Fettes, 1997). Conversational proficiency in an indigenous language that Greymorning (1997) and others promote is great, but it is useful only contextualized situations [the model for this is Asher's (1996) TPR], and does not lead by itself to proficiency in decontextualized situations that abound in school work, especially beginning in fourth grade. Table 2 below gives the various names for the different types of language used in home and school. Primary discourse is associated with face-to-face conversational interaction among members of a speech community while secondary discourse is more abstract and is is needed when dealing with strangers who do not have a set of shared experiences and understandings (Hirsch's "cultural literacy") to interpret what is being said. Secondary discourse has also been associated with dependent clauses that add additional information to speaking and writing, but which also require more language sophistication to understand and use. Some studies of American Indian education have shown Indian students keep up pretty well with their white age-mates until about fourth grade when they start to increasingly fall behind. It can be argued that it is around fourth grade where schools, especially in textbooks, shift from the language one finds in everyday conversational speech to a school language that is not generally used in a community for day-to-day activities. Heredia and Francis (1997) suggest one way to help students enlarge their language competencies to include secondary as well as primary discourse through the use of traditional stories, thus allowing students to be successful in school after fourth grade.

Other aspects of teaching indigenous languages

Teacher education is critical in regard to school programs to teaching indigenous languages. There is a large body of information about second language teaching that applies to teaching indigenous languages (See for example Baker, 1996 and Ovando & Collier, 1998). In particular, Silverthorne (1997), a member of the Montana State Board of Education, deals with the broad overview of education required for a professional indigenous language teacher while McCarty et al. (1997) describe an intensive summer training program for indigenous language teachers.

Another important aspect of any program to support an indigenous languages is to promote the value and importance of the language. Whatever of Fishman's stages an indigenous language is in, there is a need to convince people, indigenous and non-indigenous, that keeping the language alive is important. This need for "marketing" indigenous languages is described in the case of Maori by Rangi Nicholson (1997).

Table 1: Suggestion interventions based on different stages of language endangerment adapted from Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for Threatened Languages

Current Status of Language	Suggested Interventions to Strengthen Language
Stage 8: Only a few elders speak the language.	Implement Hinton's (1991, 1994) "Language Apprentice" Model where fluent elder is teamed one-to-one with young adult who wants to learn and then teach the language. Dispersed, isolated elders can be connected by phone to teach others the language (Taff, 1997)
Stage 7: Only adults beyond child bearing age speak the language.	Establish "Language Nests" (Fleres, 1989; Kamana & Wilson, 1996; Wilson, 1991) where fluent older adults provide pre-school childcare where youngsters are immersed in the indigenous language.
Stage 6: Some intergenerational use of language in home.	Develop places in community where language is encouraged, protected, and used exclusively. Encourage more young couples to speak the indigenous language with and around their young children.
Stage 5. Language is still very much alive and used in community. Often literacy in minority language	Promote voluntary programs in the schools and other community institutions to improve the prestige and use of the language. Use language in local government functions, especially social services. Give recognition to special local efforts through awards, etc.
Stage 4: Language is a required in elementary school.	Improve instructional methods utilizing TPR (Asher, 1996), TPR-Storytelling (Cantoni, in press; Ray & Seely, 1997), and other immersion teaching techniques. Teach reading and writing and higher level language skills (Heredia & Francis, 1997). Develop two-way bilingual programs where appropriate where non-speaking elementary students learn the language and speakers learn an international language. Need to develop indigenous language textbooks to teach literacy and subject matter content.
Stage 3: Language is used in places of business and by employees in less specialized work areas	Promote language by making it the language of work throughout the community (Palmer, 1997)
Stage 2: Language is used by local government and in the mass media in the minority community.	Promote use of written form of language for government and business dealings/records. Promote indigenous language newsletters, newspapers, radio stations, and television stations.
Stage 1: Some language use by higher levels of government and in higher education.	Teach tribal college subject matter classes in the language. Develop an indigenous language oral and written literature through dramatic presentations and publications. Give tribal/national awards for indigenous language publications and other notable efforts to promote indigenous languages.

Table 2: Categorization of language skills required in different settings.

Family/Neighborhood/Community	School/Workplace/Mass Media
Primary Discourse	Secondary Discourse (Fettes, 1997)
Contextualized Language/Context Embedded	Decontextualized Language/Context Reduced
Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills/ Conversational Proficiency	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1996)
Indian English (Leap, 1992)	Standard English

Conclusion

The three "**M**'s" of indigenous language education are **M**ethodology, **M**aterials, and **M**otivation. **M**ethodology deals with what teaching methods we will use at what age levels and stages of language loss, **M**aterials deals with what type of instructional materials and textbooks we will use and what will be the content of our indigenous language curriculum as well as what type of indigenous language materials are generally available in the community, and finally, **M**otivation deals with increasing the prestige (including giving recognition and awards to individuals and groups who make special efforts) and usefulness of the indigenous language in the community and using teaching techniques that students enjoy so they will come back for more indigenous language instruction. Dawn Stiles (1997) concludes from a study of four successful indigenous language programs that successful programs link language and culture, have written teaching materials, and have community support and parental involvement.

No one community or school has all the answers to keeping any indigenous language alive. It is only through sharing successes and learning from failures that the extinction of indigenous languages can be prevented. More needs to be done to create a network of information sharing between indigenous communities. The four previous Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposiums and the two associated publications (Cantoni, 1996; Reyhner, 1997) as well as the upcoming symposium in Louisville, Kentucky, on May 14-16, 1998 are one of many attempts to get the word out about the peril indigenous languages are in and what can be done to revitalize them.[1]

Note: Copies of *Teaching Indigenous Languages* are available from the Educational Service Center of Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education (P.O. Box 5774, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5774: Phone 520 523 2127).

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[1] Two good sources for information on endangered languages are the newsletters of the Foundation for Endangered Languages (Batheaston Villa, 172 Bailbrook Lane, Bath BA1 7AA, England; e-mail nostler@chibcha.demon.co.uk) and Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (c/o Victor Golla, Native American Studies, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA 95521, USA; e-mail gollav@axe.humboldt.edu).

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