

Basics of Language Revitalization

Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium 2009

Indigenous Languages Across the Generations—Strengthening Families & Communities

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I. What is the status of Indigenous languages?

The status of a language is measured by the number of children who are fluent speakers. If children are not currently being brought up in the language as their first language, the language will die within a generation.

- We are projected to lose half of the world's languages in the next fifty years and 90% in a century.
- UNESCO estimates that one language is lost every 2 weeks on average.
- Only 17 of the 154 Native American languages still spoken today are expected to survive the next 10 years. These 17 are projected to fall silent within a generation or two. That is, *unless* something is done about it.
- About 97% of the world's 6,800 languages are spoken by only 4% of the world's population
- The American Southwest & Oklahoma was recently identified as one of the five worst spots on the planet where languages are being lost (Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages).

II. What does it take to revitalize a language?

The only effective means to revitalize a language is to create new fluent speakers in a natural learning environment, such as through immersion programs, language nests, or master-apprentice teams. An endangered language does not come back from the edge of extinction without significant funding and dedication. Immersion programs require curriculum, trained teachers, facilities, parent support, assistance from speakers, transportation, and technical resources. We are working against centuries of direct assault on Indigenous languages and powerful structures that keep these languages in decline. Despite these challenges, communities are effectively revitalizing their languages as we speak!

III. What can we do? (Helpful ideas to get us started...)

- Set up an **immersion program** or immersion school for children
- Become a part of a **Master-Apprentice** language team
- **Colleges and Universities** can create language revitalization disciplines to train young people in the practical aspects of language revitalization
- Instead of **Study Abroad** programs, Native students can return home to learn their languages
- **High Schools** can sponsor a local Native American language revitalization program
- **Foundations and Organizations** can put Native American language revitalization in their central grant-making sectors
- **Tribal gaming funds** can be redirected to programs to create new fluent speakers
- **Governments** can pass legislation to promote language learning and revitalization
- The **Media** can highlight the real possibility of revitalizing languages with very few speakers, instead of spreading hopeless stories of language loss
- Create **multi-media** programs and resources in Indigenous languages
- **Visit speakers** in their homes; order recordings if speakers live too far away to visit
- Get **children** involved in revitalizing their language from birth

¹ Some content drawn from Sauk Language Department materials developed by Jacob Manatowa-Bailey

- **Donate** time, money, or other resources to revitalization programs

In all cases, these proactive strategies go against the inertia created by historic oppression and current inattention paid to Indigenous languages.

IV. So what is the difference?

Language Enrichment	Language Immersion
Provides exposure, not fluency	Creates fluent speakers
Examples: language camps, community classes, study sessions, cultural activities, songs, community projects	Examples: Master-Apprentice programs, language nests, immersion schools where no English is spoken
Language enrichment activities will not revitalize a language on their own but they are <i>a part</i> of an overall language revitalization program	It is an environment in which the target language is the only language used for all means of communication. Immersion will effectively revitalize a language that currently has no child speakers.
May serve a larger population than language immersion programs alone	Language immersion usually begins with a small group of children. It can be expanded to other age groups
Creates an environment where the heritage language is heard, seen, shared, and valued	Requires more time, energy, and resources to develop than enrichment programs
Responds to the interests of Tribal members who won't be directly involved in an immersion setting	Requires consistent student attendance to produce fluency

V. What are the benefits of Immersion?

- As the president of the NIEA said in recent testimony in support of Native language instruction for the No Child Left Behind national legislation:
 “National studies on language learning and educational achievement indicate the more language learning, the higher the academic achievement. Native language immersion programs provide a proven method to enable Native students to achieve academically in the areas of math, reading, and science as well as in other content areas.”
- Hawaiian immersion students consistently outperform public school students on academic achievement tests including scoring higher in English.
- In Minneapolis, children being taught a half day in Ojibway language literally scored twice as high on standardized tests based on English language than the kids from the same housing area attending the same school but studying only in English language.
- After introduction of Choctaw language programs for Native children in Alabama the local school jumped from 68% drop-out rate to 93% graduation rate in six years.
- Children in immersion programs have greater emotional and mental health than those learning in English-only schools; they also have higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity.
- Indigenous children who attend public school have to face an environment that is indifferent or hostile to their Indigenous identity. Public schools are designed to teach children how to be Americans. Immersion schools are designed to teach children how to be members of their own Tribal Nations by surrounding them in the language, history, and culture of their community.
- Family and community support for immersion programs is integral to the students' success. Family members are encouraged to attend language classes and adult programs to reinforce their child's learning.