

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION STRATEGIES IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SCHOOLS IN NORTHWEST AREA OF THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The expansion of globalization and the demand to establish one lingua franca for international communication has brought a significant impact on the decline of local languages around the globe. This issue calls for language revitalization programs so that all the Indigenous languages can be passed on to the younger generations. This small-sample-qualitative study describes the strategies used by Indigenous language schools in the Northwest area of the United States and further elaborates on the unique elements of those strategies. Five websites covering the information on Indigenous language school programs in Kalispell, Inghelium, Spokane, Browning, and Arlee were analyzed. In general, schools emphasize the relationality between elders, community, and educational institutions to preserve the language successfully. In addition, technology was utilized to help younger generations access materials more easily. This connection was built through creating listening materials by recording and transcribing the remaining fluent speakers, recording songs and lullabies, introducing Indigenous languages through storybooks, and launching mobile-friendly language apps.

Keywords: indigenous language, language loss, language revitalization

Introduction

The expansion of globalization and the demand to establish one lingua franca for international communication has brought a significant impact on the decline of local languages around the globe. Moseley (2010) believed that 2,473 of the Indigenous languages are currently facing a state of language endangerment. Harmon and Loh (2010) mentioned that 210 Indigenous languages are still spoken in the USA and Canada. However, only 34 of those languages were spoken by speakers across generations. If there is no sufficient effort to pass those languages to the younger generations, at least half of the world's languages may no longer exist or be recognized (Austin and Sallabank, 2011; Fishman, 1996; Krauss, 1992).

Despite the challenges, numerous efforts have been made to address this language loss issue in the past few years. The most common effort to undertake is establishing Indigenous language immersion programs and language schools for students across ages. For example, Begay (2013) documented that immersion language programs were initiated in the Ft. Defiance, Arizona, to facilitate

kindergarten and first-grade students seeking to learn the Navajo language. Further, she mentioned that a Hawaiian language immersion program, Ka Papahana Kaiapuni Hawai'i, also helps students in grades one through five learn the Indigenous language. Other programs to preserve languages have also been developed beyond the school-wide area, and many of them are started by and for the Indigenous community. In Indonesia, for example, the Indigenous language literacy training project was started by a village-based embroidery group attended by a group of mothers. Language learning, thus, is community-led and emphasize learning through mentoring and social networking (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016)

The growth of the language revitalization programs sparked my interest in observing and understanding the strategies employed to preserve the Indigenous languages. As part of the community in Montana, I am interested in exploring the Indigenous language school programs in Montana in particular and in cities in the Northwest area of the United States in general. The research questions guiding this study are 1) How do Indigenous language schools in the Northwest area of the US foster language revitalization? What are some strategies implemented in the schools? And 2) What are the unique features and critical elements of Indigenous language schools that foster the language and cultural revitalization in the Northwest area of the US?

Literature Review

Beliefs in Language Learning and Use

The history of Indian boarding schools in the United States, which began in the 17th century, has brought detrimental effects on the existence of Indigenous languages (Galla, 2018). The quote: “kill the Indian, save the man” has caused generational trauma and discouraged people from passing the language to the younger generations. “Linguistic shame and guilt have also settled upon some youth, as well as on adults who often deny, hide, and suppress their Native identities, and are made to feel inferior because of their linguistic and cultural capital” (Galla, 2018, p. 3). They lost their rights to celebrate the uniqueness of their linguistic heritage and culture. In a world where English plays a prominent role as a lingua franca, the Indigenous people are forced to learn and speak English in the mainstream education system. No wonder there has been a rapid decline of Indigenous language speakers since then.

While bilingualism could be one of the ways to create harmony, wherein people could maintain the Indigenous language and at the same time learn English, many government policies do not support this possibility to happen. The enactment of Proposition 227 in 1998 in California, for example, is a manifestation of English domination. This proposition has sharply reduced the amount of time that students spend in a bilingual setting, favoring the ‘English first’ principle (Kamenetz, 2016). Moreover, numerous studies that have not been designed well exacerbated this issue. Contradictive findings between past and current studies have created what Kamenetz (2016) referred to as a culture war, separating scholars into two opposite beliefs: bilingualism creates confusion, vs. bilingualism gives lifetime benefits for cognition.

Studies in the first half of the twentieth century documented that monolingual children outperform bilingual ones cognitively. This finding perpetuates the belief

that bilingualism creates confusion for children, not to mention verbal development issues. Switching between two languages is considered overwhelming since the brain has its limitations. This belief has made schools and educators more convinced to focus students' attention on learning English. Fortunately, thorough reviews and meta-analysis studies revealed that studies in the first half of the twentieth century mostly involved participants from socially disadvantaged groups. Thus, the result revealed the association between socioeconomic status and cognitive performance instead of the correlation between bilingualism and cognition. More recent studies are designed more thoroughly and consider the effect of confounding variables. Therefore, participants from both the treatment and control groups have equal variability of socio-economic status and demography. Hence, more modern research proved that bilinguals outperform their monolingual peers in their cognition and encourages our society to introduce more than one language to students. The findings of those studies give some hope for the advancement of Indigenous language education and immersion programs at schools and eliminate the doubt to teach children more than one language since early stages.

Language Revitalization

Language is used by a linguistic community, a group of people who interact using a similar linguistic form & social norm that govern the system and forms (Gumperz, 1964). It is undeniable that the number of speakers in a linguistic community influences the persistence and existence of a language. Languages that do not survive revolutionary might experience an extinction or a language loss (Edward, 2012). When the speakers of a particular language keep declining and the efforts to revitalize the language are not made, there is a high probability that the language will not survive or be recognized by the younger generations. This issue calls for language revitalization.

Language revitalization is defined as “the development of programs that result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community and bringing it back into full use in all walks of life” (Hinton, 2001, p. 45). One of the targets of language revitalization programs is to increase the number of fluent speakers across generations. Numerous studies mentioned that in the past few years, even though fluent speakers have declined, the language revitalization programs have contributed to the significant increase of language learners. For example, in British Columbia, there are only 4,132 First Nations fluent speakers (3% of the population). However, through the language revitalization program, 13,997 language learners (10.2%) are expected to be fluent speakers (First People Cultural Council, 2018). More specifically, First People Cultural Council (2018) divided language users into four categories, which are fluent speakers, semi-speakers, silent speakers, and language learners. Semi speakers usually could understand and speak the language in daily life situations, even though they might experience some difficulties. On the other hand, Silent speakers could understand the language when they listen to it but have lower speaking skill mastery. It is expected that the revitalization programs could bring back the full use of Indigenous languages in the community by enhancing the language acquisition from learners to fluent speakers.

The establishment of “language nests, immersion schools, state and federal language policies, and committed family members and educators” (Galla, 2018, p.

4) in the past few years have promoted the use of Indigenous language in academic settings, workplace, and media. It is worth noting that the level of language vitality is determined by the number of speakers and the domain of language use. As proposed by First People Cultural Council (2018), it is essential to measure how much a language is used in determining its vitality.

Language Resources

First People Cultural Council (2018) defines language resources as “any kind of documentation, recordings, curriculum materials, computer-based resources, books and archives that are available in the language.” The aspect of relationality plays a pivotal role in maintaining and enhancing language resources. Positive collaboration between elders/culture bearers and educators, for example, is essential in establishing recordings and transcription of the Indigenous languages. Many stories and other cultural aspects are passed on across generations in verbal forms. Building a healthy relationship with elders and knowledge holders and incorporating their voices into learning resources would be the most appropriate strategies for providing authentic learning resources or materials.

Technology is often incorporated into the teaching and learning process in this digital era. Numerous Indigenous language schools have initiated efforts to archive language learning resources on websites or learning apps. Galla (2018) mentioned that the use of technology in Indigenous language revitalization could be a double-edged sword. The technology could support language revitalization and broaden the language domains if appropriately used. On the other hand, the misuse of technology could perpetuate colonization in Indigenous education. In his article, *Decolonizing Technology*, Meighan (2021) posits that the most fundamental issue that must be considered when incorporating technology in Indigenous Language revitalization programs is “identifying which or whose knowledge system is being enacted. Who created the website? What is its purpose? How is data being shared or stored online?” (p. 398).

Methods

A qualitative approach was implemented in the study to address the research problems. Creswell (2007) and Leedy and Ormrod (2005) explain that a qualitative approach was typically used to answer the questions about the nature of phenomena, with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena. The results yielded from a qualitative analysis are descriptive (Merriam, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, this study aimed to describe the strategies used by Indigenous language schools in the Northwest area of the United States and further elaborate on the unique elements of those strategies. This study was carried out by analyzing the approaches and teaching materials descriptively in each language school.

In brief, the researcher selected several Indigenous language school websites that provide the information needed. A thorough analysis was conducted by selecting the classroom activities, materials, and curriculums listed on the websites to address the first and second research problems. There were five websites analyzed, which covered the area of Kalispell, Inchelium, Spokane, Browning, and Arlee.

Findings and Discussion

“There is no handbook on saving your tribal language, so you figure it out.” This fascinating quote was found in one of the Indigenous language immersion schools I analyzed. This quote manifests place-based education that highly values the relationality between learning and the land where the community lives. Place-based education is not rigid. It is flexible, and no one specific ‘prescription’ will fit into all tribal language revitalization efforts. Hence, this section will present numerous language resources and strategies used in five Indigenous language immersion schools in Western are of the United States.

The use of storybooks to teach language and culture

Human brains can remember stories and anecdotes better than mere lists of sentences or paragraphs that have no connection with them. Therefore, Indigenous people have long been using stories and humor to teach lessons, cultural and moral values, and many other cultural aspects within the respective community. To preserve this storytelling tradition, all language schools observed in this study implement storytelling as one of the strategies to teach Indigenous languages. The collection of the stories was archived on the websites to be accessible outside classroom settings. The stories on the websites were presented in different ways. For example, Spokane Tribe Language and Culture Immersion School website presented fifteen stories written in the Spokane language with its English translation. The unique feature of the storytelling section is that each story was equipped with a recording of the story in Spokane Language. In every corner of each paragraph, web visitors could find a play button that can be played whenever they are interested in listening to the recording of the stories. More interestingly, some illustrations, which seem to be hand drawings, were presented to help readers visualize the story's setting and characters.

Similarly, the Salish language immersion program website in Kalispel also presents fifteen stories in their Kalispel Story I curriculum. The stories presented on this website seem to be made for in-class activities. Several worksheets follow up each story to enable students to obtain hands-on practice. The stories were equipped with illustrations, vocabulary-building activities, a summary of language expressions, and numerous games such as crosswords and matching to review the words and expressions learned from the stories. The unique activity on this website is creating sequence pictures. Teachers or educators could download and cut the drawings and ask students to rearrange the stories following the chronological order of the story they read before doing the sequence pictures activity. Unlike the Spokane Tribe Language websites, the Kalispel Salish Language immersion website does not present the recording of the stories.

The two websites above enable visitors to access and download the stories. On the other hand, the other websites only presented the audio recording of the stories. Inchelium Language School, for example, does not list the stories for the language school but mentions the story gatherings activity under the “Language House” section. In brief, even though stories were presented in different ways, all those five language websites highly value storytelling as one of the teaching strategies in language revitalization programs. This fact aligns with Cain’s (2019) statement that most Native American communities have been utilizing storytelling to share their cultural wisdom and teach the younger generations how to navigate their paths.

The use of lullabies to preserve the language and create the school-family connection

Miyashita and Shoe (2009) argue that people tend to retain phrases more quickly when they memorize them with a melody. Similarly, as stated by Rainey and Larsen (2002), people who learn “a new list of words sung with melody experienced greater ease in relearning them after a week than people who learned it without music” (in Miyashita and Shoe, 2009, p. 184). The findings of those studies suggested that songs could facilitate word and phrase memorization and retention. The use of songs and lullabies will be engaging and meaningful for both students and families. Introducing songs and lullabies could be done both at school and at home, enhancing the possibility for a continuous learning process for young learners.

However, songs and lullabies in language learning could not be found in all five websites observed in this study. Only three (Piegan Institute, Spokane Tribe Language and Culture, and Kalispel Salish language immersions) out of the five websites employed songs and lullabies in their language learning resources. Piegan Institute is probably the only website that provides the lullabies initially from the Indigenous community of Blackfoot. The other two websites provide English songs such as Baa Baa Black Sheep, I’m A Little Tea Pot, Three blind Mice, etc. They are English songs that are sung in the Salish language. All songs are provided in the form of YouTube videos with some illustrations and transcription in the Salish language. From my observation, there were no worksheets or post activities presented on the websites.

On the other hand, Piegan Institute has started the project to archive the remaining Blackfoot lullabies. This project was conducted by Mizuki Miyashita, a linguistic professor at the University of Montana, and Shirlee Crow Shoe, an educator at Piegan Institute. This project was started in 2007 and was conducted by interviewing six elders from the Blackfoot community. They successfully documented five Blackfoot lullabies and expected these lullabies to be used as learning resources. The target of the learning materials is not limited to preschool and kindergarten students but also parents with infants. One of the unique features of the Blackfoot songs is that they mostly talk about animal characters such as coyotes, moose, elk, and crow (Miyashita & Shoe, 2009). Similar to stories, lullabies are used to build the connection between parents, especially mothers and children. Lullabies and songs also resemble a particular community's cultural beliefs and values. Thus, they can be utilized to transfer language and cultural perspectives. As Hawes (1974) asserts, understanding songs and lullabies could give listeners information about how Blackfoot speakers or parents educate children.

The recording of interviews with elders

One aspect that could support language revitalization's success is creating a connection between academic institutions and the elders or cultural bearers. One of the efforts that could be done is involving elders and knowledge holders in the curriculum making and learning resources establishment. Additionally, as

mentioned earlier, the decline of fluent speakers calls for the urgency of language preservation through interviews with fluent speakers in the hope that they can be the model for language learners.

Language learning always requires inputs in the form of both listening and reading. The proponents of the audiolingual learning method believe that adults learn naturally when they listen and receive input, similar to babies. They would then undergo a decoding process and produce speech upon receiving inputs. Audio or video recordings of an interview with elders will be valuable input. Those recordings are authentic materials that can be an accurate model of speech. In addition to the linguistic benefits, interviewing elders would help learners attain cultural knowledge from the experts.

Out of the five language immersion websites observed in the study, only one immersion school records the interview with the fluent speakers. Incheilium Language and Culture immersion school started the interview project in 2018 and ended it in 2020. The school received the grant to conduct an interview with fluent speakers and transcribe the interview result in Okanagan Salish Language. More than 100 recordings were documented. All of them were divided into three different terms. The immersion students conducted some interviews in the fall and some in the summer. These interview recordings range from a simple short interviews conducted by students at Incheilium Tribal Childcare to the complex ones conducted by adult learners at Incheilium Language House. Students were asked to prepare and pre-write questions before the immersion interview sessions. The interviews' topics ranged from personal issues, such as families, work, etc., to complex ones, such as historical and cultural values. The website mentions that due to the few remaining speakers of fluent speakers in the south end of our territory, they "have been recording speakers from the northern end of our territories, up into the southern interior region of British Columbia, Canada." (Incheilium Language and Culture Association, n.d.)

The last sections of interviews were conducted by Hellen Toulou, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes Arrow Lakes Band. Hellen conducted the interviews with Dr. Mattina, a linguist of the Okanagan language, from 1968 to 1970. This interview yielded recordings about local historical values. This three-year interview program resulted in nineteen recordings in total.

The use of technology

Technology is another facilitative tool that can support the language revitalization effort. Some examples of technology use are the establishment of online dictionaries. Two (Spokane Tribe Language and Culture and The Piegan Institute) out of five websites provide online dictionaries. Web visitors could quickly go to the "resources" section and click the online dictionary to access this facility.

Another example of incorporating technology in the immersion program is the online tutoring program provided by the Kalispel Salish language immersion website. The tutoring program is conducted via Adobe Shockwave Plugin and requires the Windows Media Xtra. The Kalispel Salish program is the most advanced compared to the other immersion programs in terms of technology. In addition to online tutoring software, this school offers Salish Font and Keyboard compatible with both Windows and Macintosh. This school also creates a mobile-

friendly Kalispel Language App that can be downloaded through Apple App Store and Google Play.

Conclusion

The rapid decline of Indigenous languages around the globe calls for the urgency of language revitalization programs. Numerous community-led programs have been started informally among the Indigenous people. Numerous immersion schools have also been established to save and preserve those endangered languages. Five websites covering the information on Indigenous language school programs in Kalispell, Inchelium, Spokane, Browning, and Arlee were analyzed in this study. It is expected that this study could provide an overview of numerous possible strategies that can be implemented to enhance language education in academic and non-academic settings (e.g., in families, community, etc.)

In general, this study found that schools emphasize the relationality between elders, Indigenous knowledge holders, and educational institutions to preserve the language successfully. The tentative conclusion from this small sample is that the Indigenous language immersion programs promote language through storytelling, songs and lullabies, interview recordings with elders and fluent speakers, and technological tools. Among all strategies, storytelling is the only activity offered in all of the website samples observed in this study. Future studies could explore more detailed strategies used in other areas of the United States. Additionally, it is worth noting that numerous websites might also provide home-based Indigenous language learning strategies. Future studies in this field could yield beneficial and practical strategies for learning activities outside the school setting.

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