

Schools - Language Acquisition Session Summary

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Participants consisted of approximately twenty-five teachers and administrators representing a variety of school districts and tribes from Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and the Southwest. The presenters represented programs serving students who are developing existing language capabilities in their non-English mother tongue as well as students acquiring the target language whose mother-tongue is English. This session focused on programs for students in the latter category; however, discussion was not limited exclusively to such programs, since presenters of necessity discussed the entire scope of their efforts.

Kayenta Public Schools

Helen Rosier, of the Kayenta Public Schools in Arizona, began by introducing herself in the traditional Navajo way by describing her background in terms of clan relationships. She then led into a description of the transitional bilingual program that began in 1990 and the immersion program that began in 1994. Some years ago the primary focus across the Navajo Nation was transition from Navajo to English. With fewer and fewer students entering school dominant in Navajo, progressively more attention is being focused on the acquisition of Navajo. The immersion program serves both English and Navajo dominant students. Although only recently instituted, the Kayenta immersion program is a well-organized attempt to address language issues through public education.

The program begins in kindergarten with ninety percent of the time spent on instruction by means of the Navajo language. By grade three, approximately fifty percent of instructional time will be devoted to instruction in Navajo and fifty percent in English. One successive grade will be added to the program each year as students advance. Planning for the program involved many language activists and community members. The program model at Fort Defiance, Arizona, along with advice from those who instituted that program, contributed significantly to the design of the Kayenta program.

Recruitment of students is a significant, ongoing component of the program. After an interview of approximately one hour during which time the program is explained and questions answered, parents sign a letter of commitment. Concern on the part of parents that their children will not learn English as quickly or as well as their peers instructed in English remains an issue that must be constantly addressed. Of course, some parents elect not to have their children participate in the program primarily for that reason; however, enrollment is increasing as parents better understand the program and its benefits.

Staff development began in earnest during the summer of 1994 and has been an ongoing process. The emphasis is on making speakers of Navajo excellent language teachers as well.

¹The session was held on May 5, 1995, and was moderated by Gary D. McLean. The discussant was Richard Littlebear.

The program emphasizes cognitively demanding tasks. The curriculum is child-centered and expands into progressively wider domains of the family, the community, and beyond. A variety of assessment strategies are employed including use of the Window Rock Oral Proficiency Test, the Idea Proficiency Test as a measure of oral English, and Navajo versions of the Arizona Student Assessment Program.

Fort Defiance Public Schools

Lettie Nave described the bilingual program at Fort Defiance, Arizona. It started approximately ten years ago and is well-known throughout the Navajo Nation. As indicated in the discussion of the Kayenta program, the Fort Defiance model has influenced the design of programs in other school districts.

She has been a primary advocate, program planner, and teacher for many years. The school operates two programs. The first is an immersion program that is comprehensive in terms of use of Navajo and requires a commitment from the parents. The second program emphasizes oral Navajo, which is taught for a short period of time each day. The second option is, of course, far less comprehensive than the first, but meets Arizona mandates concerning instruction in a second language. Auxiliary classes exist twice per month for parents who attend with their children in order to extend the curriculum to the home.

Thematic units are a commonly employed instructional practice. Inadequate supplies of Navajo instructional materials are an ongoing problem. Teachers continue to reuse old materials and make new ones. Lettie Nave ended her presentation with a well received Total Physical Response lesson.

Tuba City Public Schools

Louise Scott and Cindy Joe described Tuba City's Two-Way, Navajo-English bilingual program. They play key roles in the design and implementation of the program. Louise Scott began the presentation by sharing with the audience her experiences in a boarding school and in school in Flagstaff, the challenges of achieving in an English-speaking environment, personal regret for not passing the Navajo language on to her children (reflecting a widespread fear of language loss among Navajo people), and concern that language loss began with her generation.

Many staff members remember Tuba City when the majority of the students entering kindergarten each year spoke Navajo. Now only a small percentage exhibit any degree of facility with the language. These students are critical to the Two-Way program. In Two-Way programs, students are ideally mixed — fifty percent speakers of the first language (L1) and fifty percent speakers of the second language (L2). Fifty percent of the instruction each day is provided in each language. An imbalance occurs in the Tuba City program owing to a lack of Navajo speakers. However, a healthy mix of Navajo speakers and English speakers exists in the two classes that comprise the Two-Way program. The program calls for a Navajo-speaking teacher and an English-speaking teacher to

each spend approximately fifty percent of their time with each group, enhancing both languages in an immersion setting.

Most students are part of the Navajo-as-a-Second-Language (NSL) program. This program is less comprehensive in terms of Navajo language development. While the Two-Way program may be desirable for all students, insufficient numbers of Navajo-speaking students make this an impossibility.

In both the Two-Way and the NSL programs, whole-language activities are widely used. They include many hands-on experiences, book-making, and intensive oral language development. The program is being extended one successive grade each year, and program quality is gradually improving.

Concern remains among many parents that time spent in Navajo activities will hinder English academic development. However, according to scores on Arizona Student Assessment Program measurements, English academics have improved since the Navajo programs came into existence. Likewise, parental involvement is increasing, adult Navajo classes have developed, and the awareness of fundamental issues related to language shift is increasing throughout the community.

Louise Scott exhibited two bumper stickers seen in the Tuba City area as the presentation neared completion. The first states, "Have you spoken Navajo to your child today?" The second reads, "Diné Bizaad Shilnili," which roughly translates to Treasure Diné Language — an important value for speakers of each endangered language represented at the Symposium.

Inuvik Programs

Pauline Gordon presented most of this component of the program. Her presentation included a videotape that helped participants understand the geographic and climatic extremes that have shaped the cultures of the far north and was enriched by traditional gift-giving as well as the distribution of educational materials produced in Inuvik.

While the Diné, Inuit and Yup'ik languages of Northern Canada and Alaska have benefited by isolation, language loss is nevertheless occurring. Of the three language groups in the Inuvik area, only some twenty-five percent of the people are fluent speakers.

Based on Gordon's presentation, schools and communities in the Northwest Territories seem more advanced than many communities in the continental United States in terms of inter-tribal collaboration, use of satellite communication systems, development of educational materials, and so forth.

Curriculum is mandated in the Northwest Territories, and funding for language and cultural instruction is fixed by the government. However, existing governmental financial support and local creativity have resulted in attractive, creative instructional materials published in local languages. Such materials reflect a fusion of the knowledge of elders, the creativity of teachers, and advanced production techniques. Music, dance, and art are important components of instructional programs.

Discussion

Time remaining for discussion was limited. However, a brief discussion was held concerning such issues as assessment, the positive and negative impact of higher level governmental decisions on indigenous languages, and the difficulties of adapting local languages to contemporary challenges.