

The Jicarilla Apache Language Summer Day Camp

Maureen Olson

The Jicarilla Apache Language Summer Day Camp (JALSDC) was created to meet the needs of young Jicarilla Apache language speakers at the Dulce Elementary School (DES). At the school, students were learning vocabulary, but they were not gaining the ability to speak the Jicarilla Apache language. Combining the language immersion teaching model with a camping experience seemed like a wonderful way to improve fluency.

A fluent Jicarilla speaker, I learned to speak, read, and write English in Kindergarten. I received a BA in Elementary Education from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado in 1985. In 1994, I obtained an MA in Education from the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque, and in 1998, I received an Educational Administration license from UNM.

Presently, I teach the Jicarilla Apache language and co-ordinate the Bilingual Multicultural Program (BMP) at Dulce Elementary School. The BMP program is funded, evaluated, and assessed by the New Mexico State Department of Education. A majority of the students in the program know some Jicarilla Apache words; however, not one has the ability to converse in the Jicarilla Apache language. In addition to teaching the indigenous language, the program emphasizes raising the self-esteem and keeping the affective filter lowered for the DES students.

JALSDC Description

Initially, the camp targeted boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 11. The camp day began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m. The maximum number of campers accommodated during each session was 24. Fluent adult Jicarilla Apache speakers were recruited from various community departments, and volunteers were also found to show and demonstrate different arts and animals. My role in the camp was as camp director.

The four-day sessions were not scheduled according to fixed time increments. Instead, a range of activities was planned for each day. This allowed for flexibility when volunteer presenters were late or did not show. Thanks to the flexible schedule, many activities were completed. A downpour on Thursday afternoon of the second session was the exception. The flannel leather bags planned for that afternoon were sewn Friday morning.

A typical day began with a 220-yard jog or walk around a dirt road followed by breakfast. The day's schedule was reviewed, and a morning activity was completed before lunch preparations began. After lunch, campers helped with the clean up. After a short free time period, the afternoon activities began. Presentations and demonstrations were mostly given in English.

Several strategies were employed to allow for language input. For example, the five counsellors who were fluent Jicarilla Apache speakers were given questions to wear around their necks written in Jicarilla Apache. They would ask the campers the same question whenever they had an opportunity. Also,

Indigenous Languages Across the Community

campers introduced themselves in Jicarilla. Non-Jicarilla speaking camp counsellors modelled the words the campers were learning, and fluent Jicarilla speakers gave simple commands and asked simple questions in Jicarilla Apache.

Money for the camp was obtained from the Johnson O'Malley funds. A proposal was approved to provide two meals per day for 15 children and to provide art supplies for the whole camp. Utensils, pots, and pans belonging to the Jicarilla Apache Culture Center were borrowed for the duration of the camp. Firewood, water, and tepee set up were provided by the Jicarilla Apache Tribal Service Department, which also gave assistance.

A resolution was written giving permission to conduct the language camp with Jicarilla resources and assistance. Camp counsellors were recruited from Jicarilla Apache Tribal Departments. The Head Start bus, bus driver, and a Head Start teacher also gave assistance. Walking field trips to culturally relevant Jicarilla Apache Tribal Departments were also taken. For example, the campers visited Game and Fish, Museum and Arts and Crafts, and the Culture Center.

The exit test was conducted in Jicarilla. It was a simple recall of several items found in camp. The results indicated that those students who had some Jicarilla Apache spoken in the home were able to recall the most items. Students who participated in the Bilingual Multicultural Program at DES during the year were at different levels of word recall. Those who remembered the fewest words had the least amount of exposure to the Jicarilla Apache language.

JALSDC Analysis

Several problems arose during the camp, which will be addressed more completely at the year 2000 camp session. Without training, the counsellors did not fully understand their roles. They spoke English to the campers even when they could have used the Jicarilla Apache language to give comprehensible input to keep up language repetition. Some linguistic concepts they tried to teach were not easily grasped by novice speakers. Also, the camp counsellors did not help compose the list of vocabulary words that were to be taught.

There were some serendipitous highlights. The JALSDC sessions were held at the community fair grounds, which meant that grassy fields and a rodeo arena with a grand stand were available for free time playing areas. An unplanned activity, which quickly became a favourite among both boys and girls, was learning to swing and hit a golf ball. Many of the boys, sweating heavily, remained out in the hot sun hitting golf balls. Campers who arrived as quiet young people looking for a place to sit left with energy to spare and a suntan.

JALSDC Future Camps

Arranging a time and place for collaborative meetings that address how best to provide a true immersion environment may clear up the confusion experienced by Jicarilla Apache speaking camp counsellors. Providing instruction and training to camp counsellors and presenters about language acquisition and second language learning will be helpful.

The Jicarilla Apache Language Summer Day Camp

The adults providing language input became frustrated with the slow progress of the campers, and many did not persevere. The problem may have been that the counsellors' expectations were too high. Also, some of the Jicarilla-speaking presenters felt that they were talking to themselves during their presentations because the campers did not understand much Jicarilla.

Male camp counsellors will be recruited for future language camps because all the camp counsellors were women, although some presenters were men. Reviving the Jicarilla Apache language is a task for the entire community and not a gender-exclusive endeavour.