

Revitalizing Indigenous Languages Challenges and Opportunities

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Colonization, mass media—especially radio, movies, and television, and now the Internet—and globalization are killers of local Indigenous languages, with in most parts of the world fewer and fewer children learning to speak them, even though Indigenous communities and youth often express a desired to learn them. This chapter describes what Indigenous organizations and governments are doing to help revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures, especially with the establishment of Indigenous language immersion schools and the preparation of teachers to work in them. It also examines ways social media is being used to promote Indigenous language use and how revitalizing Indigenous languages and cultures promotes students’ mental and physical health, as well as promoting their academic success.

The endangered state of Indigenous languages is not just an issue in the Americas—Basque in Spain and France, Sámi in Scandinavian countries, Tibetan in China, and hundreds of Indigenous languages in India and elsewhere battle to survive against the onslaught of both so-called “world” languages and even national non-world languages. However, across the globe efforts are being made to maintain Indigenous languages. Since World War II the human rights movement has recognized the importance and value of diversity in the world with various United Nations’ initiatives, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Reyhner, 2013, 2023). In fact, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared 2022 to 2032 the decade of Indigenous languages (<https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages>).

Since the 1960s in the United States of America (USA), where the authors of this chapter live, there has been an Indigenous self-determination/sovereignty movement that has strengthened tribal governments, including passing educational policies and laws supporting local Indigenous control of schools and the teaching of tribal languages and cultures (McCoy, 2020; Reyhner & Eder, 2017). These efforts have received some support from the national government. For example, under the administration of president Joseph Biden, the Administration for Native Americans in 2021, with funding from the American Rescue Plan, awarded approximately twenty million dollars to 210 grant recipients, most of which were American Indian tribes working to ensure the survival and continuing vitality of their languages. Moreover, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Bryan Newland (2022, p. 99) in his *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report* included the recommendation to:

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Advance Native language revitalization. Support funding for the expansion and development of programs implementing or supporting Native language revitalization for Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) operated and funded schools, as well as non-BIE schools. Also work to seek funding for the expansion and development of programs outside BIE schools implementing or supporting Native language revitalization, including language immersion schools and community organizations.

This recommendation echoes policies and laws enacted by the Navajo (aka Diné) Nation’s elected government to get all schools serving their children to offer classes in their language, history, and culture. The Navajo Nation is the largest Indigenous group in the USA and its homeland is located in three states—Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah—with a population of almost 400,000 enrolled members (Romero, 2021). Forty years ago the Navajo Nation’s elected Council declared:

The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture, and identity of Navajo students and the culture and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language for the survival of the Nation. Instruction in the Navajo language shall be made available for all grade levels in all schools serving the Navajo Nation. (Navajo Nation, 1984)

A Native American Languages Act (PL 101-477) was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1990 and revised in 2023 to reaffirm the language rights of Indigenous citizens. In it:

The Congress finds that—(1) the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages; (2) special status is accorded Native Americans in the United States, a status that recognizes distinct cultural and political rights, including the right to continue separate identities.

Responding to an unfortunately successful anti-bilingual education “English for the Children” law passed in Arizona, the Navajo Nation’s elected president Kelsey Begaye (2000, p. 4) declared:

preservation of Navajo culture, tradition, and language . . . is the number one guiding principle of the Navajo Nation. . . . The Navajo Way of Life is based on the Navajo language. By tradition, the history of our people and the stories of our people are handed down from one generation to the next through oral communication. Naturally, the true essence and meanings for many Navajo stories, traditions and customs cannot be fully transmitted, understood or communicated as told through non-Navajo languages.

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In 2000 the Navajo Nation's Council's Education Committee adopted the Diné Cultural Content Standards for Students (T'aa Shá Bik'ehgo Diné Ná nítin dóo Íhoo'aah—meaning Diné teaching and learning to create a sunshine like pathway) from kindergarten through college. The standards are:

predicated on the belief that firm grounding of native students in their indigenous cultural heritage and language, is a fundamentally sound pre-requisite to well developed and culturally healthy students.... The standards are basically designed to convey principles and to place values on the meaning of Diné K'ehgo Nitsahakeesgo Bee Iná [Diné way of thinking and living], so that learners will be empowered to comprehend and respect their cultural heritage through self-identity. The pursuance of learning Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhóón [living in balance with all that exist between the universe and earth] encompasses stages of developmental growth that is a pre-requisite for fulfilling and living a complete life. (Office, 2000, p. v)

Part of the Indigenous sovereignty movement in the United States is the establishment of Indigenous controlled schools. The first tribal college in the United States was established in the Navajo Nation in 1969. In 2024 *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education* listed 38 tribal colleges/universities in the United States, which offer coursework in tribal languages and cultures, and Canada has similar colleges. Bradley Shreve (2019, p. xiii), the journal's managing editor, notes: "Tribal colleges and universities collectively are doing more to revitalize North America's Indigenous languages than any other institutions." In Mexico a 2001 amendment to the country's constitution recognized the rights of the Indigenous communities "to preserve and enrich their languages, knowledge, and every element contributing to their culture and identity" was followed by the more comprehensive General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Communities in 2003, where article IV sets Spanish on the same level as Indigenous languages as "national languages" having the same validity, specifically regarding the respect of human rights in the dealings with the justice system (Musselman, 2021, p. x). To help implement this law intercultural universities were established (Marcelín-Alvarado, Collado-Ruano, & Orozco-Malo, 2021), and in 2023 Mexico opened the University of Indigenous Languages of México (Mexico, 2023; Villegas Rodriguez, this volume).

Indigenous Language Immersion

The most successful Indigenous language revitalization programs in the USA have involved immersing children in their Indigenous language, including teaching them a variety of school subjects in that language, including reading, math, science, and social studies (Reyhner & Johnson, 2015; Reyhner, 1990). Two successful Diné language immersion programs in the Navajo Nation were started at Rock Point and Window Rock. In 1987, the Window Rock Unified School

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district opened Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta', a Diné language immersion program to help counter the shift from Diné to English. There, parents choose to enroll their children in the program and sign a contract to reinforce the use of Diné language in their homes. Students get frequent opportunities to communicate in the Diné language in kindergarten and first grade through classroom routines that include a daily talking time with questioning routines and small-group instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics with the support of a Navajo-speaking teacher or para-professional (Holm, Silentman, & Wallace, 2003). During content instruction students are instructed in reading using Navajo texts and a program designed to teach phonemic awareness in the Navajo language. Students use a process writing approach to write, illustrate, and publish their stories in Navajo. This curriculum is based on Arizona state content standards and the Navajo Nation's Diné Cultural Standards (Johnson & Legatz, 2006, Reyhner & Johnson, 2015). Window Rock is part of the National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs (<http://www.ncnalsp.org>) founded in 2014 that advocates for the use of Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in schools serving Indigenous children.

Language nests are another promising immersion approach for language revitalization. They provide a language immersion experience for preschool children, often using Elders as caregivers and started by parents concerned about the loss of Indigenous language and culture that youth were experiencing (see e.g., Francour, 2022). Now a global phenomenon, the first documented language nests began in New Zealand in the 1970s when Samoan and Cook Island women established one, with the Māori soon following them there. Besides immersing children at a very young age in their ancestral language, they also provide working parents with child-care as an added benefit (Chambers, 2015). The success of such programs has led to the establishment of revitalization efforts in urban cities where hundreds of Indigenous families have migrated to for employment and other opportunities. Phoenix, Arizona, is an example of one such effort where parents started Navajo language classes.

For the most severely endangered languages, even the “sleeping” ones that no longer have speakers, there is hope. In California and elsewhere some advocates have sought to learn their ancestral language from records kept by linguists (see e.g., Baldwin, 2022). Where there are only a few speakers, the Master Apprentice (also known as Mentor Apprentice, see Benally and Redsand, this volume) approach has been used successfully where a young person is paired with one of the few remaining fluent Elders with the goal of the young apprentices becoming teachers once they develop some fluency (Hinton, Vera, & Steele, 2002).

Leanne Hinton's 2013 edited book *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* provides personal accounts by language activists of the rewards and struggles involved in their personal language revitalization efforts, including languages that had ceased to be spoken. Languages included are Miami, Wampanoag, Karuk, Yuchi, Mohawk, Maori, Hawaiian, Anishinaabemowin, Irish, Kypriaka, Warlpiri, Kawaiisu, and Scottish Gaelic.

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The contributors emphasize the cultural, social, and identity issues involved in speaking a heritage language.

Teacher Preparation

A major challenge facing efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages in schools is the lack of teachers with preparation to teach them. In 1968 the U.S. Congress passed a Bilingual Education Act, but it was frequently found that there was a lack of teachers prepared to teach bilingually, and even bilingual teachers could be non-supportive of bilingual education (Howard, 1987). In 1979 the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI—<https://aildi.arizona.edu>) began, and it is now located at the University of Arizona and provides summer courses on teaching Indigenous languages (McCarty, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, & Zepeda, 1997; Reyhner, 2011). Since then, similar programs have been developed, including the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILDI—see Blair, Daniels, Buffalo, & Georges, 2021) at the University of Alberta and Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI—<https://nili.uoregon.edu>) at the University of Oregon. Other groups, such as Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (<https://www.aicls.org>) and the Navajo Language Academy offer workshops and training. Some funding for these organizations comes from the United States and Canadian governments. However, this is often grant funding for a few years, rather than a stable source of long-term funding.

Both federally funded U. S. Bureau of Indian Education schools and state funded public schools are required by law to hire state certified teachers. To implement language revitalization efforts in those schools it helps to get universities to cooperate in providing the coursework to prepare teachers to teach in immersion schools. With the help of funding from the U. S. Department of Education, Northern Arizona University, where the authors of this chapter teach, developed a Diné Dual Language Teachers Professional Development Project that worked with Rock Point and Window Rock as part of a consortium of tribal and public schools to provide professional development and a Master's degree in Bilingual Multicultural Education to classroom teachers who spoke Diné (Lockard & Hale, 2013). This project built on a foundation of tribally and university led teacher education projects that certified Diné teachers and school administrators. For example, from 1998 to 2003 the “Learn in Beauty” project prepared bilingual teachers at Northern Arizona University in partnership with an Annenberg foundation based on the success of the Annenberg rural initiative that supports teacher leadership, promotes community engagement, and makes place-based learning the foundation of the curriculum. When the Learn in Beauty professional development project was completed, 100 Diné classroom teachers and curriculum specialists had achieved an M. Ed. in Bilingual Multicultural Education and a Bilingual or ESL state teacher certificate endorsement (Hale & Lockard, 2018). This teacher education program supported Indigenous language sovereignty, culturally responsive education, and the use of contextually and culturally relevant teaching materials.

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In the USA, one source of grant funding for language revitalization, as previously mentioned, is the Administration for Native Americans in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. One of their funded projects is the Alaskan Doyon Languages Online project. Key findings from that project include:

- 10 units created for each of the 5 Dene languages, containing 56 lessons per language.
- 20 teachers trained in how to use the units to teach the languages.
- Over 700 people so far have signed up for the language units. (Administration, 2020)

An open access online training platform was established that can be accessed at <https://doyonfoundation.com/language/doyon-languages-online>.

Overcoming Negative Images

Another challenge to Indigenous language revitalization is the negative self-images that some Indigenous peoples have picked up from racist and ethnocentric colonizers who view them as “savages” speaking “barbarous dialects” whose only hope, at best, for survival is to leave behind their languages and cultures and to assimilate into the colonizers’ “civilized” culture, voluntarily if possible, but forcibly if not. Anthropologist Karen Stocker (2005, pp. 2-3) examined the false dichotomy between remaining Indigenous and becoming educated and joining the modern world in her book entitled *“I Won’t Stay Indian, I’ll Keep Studying”*: *Race, Place, and Discrimination in a Costa Rican High School*. She investigated a challenge shared by Indigenous peoples globally that “the label Indian had connotations of backwardness and even inferior intellect . . . Being Indian automatically set students up for being treated as inferior,” and “for most students from the [Indian] reservation, projecting an Indian identity seemed incompatible with school success” (pp. 2-3).

Becoming educated is important for living in the modern world, but one can learn in the process unhealthy lifestyles—both physical and mental. For example, eating highly processed foods that are extensively advertised in media is less healthy than eating less processed, more traditional Indigenous foods, abetting, among other things, worldwide obesity and diabetes epidemics (Dennis & Robin, 2020). The Navajo Nation in promoting their Diné language and culture is also promoting a balanced and harmonious life-style, as well as passing a “junk food” tax and educational standards requiring teaching their children to view advertisements critically, including those for soft drinks and candy (Navajo, 2022). Furthermore, a 2007 study of 150 First Nations Indigenous villages in British Columbia, Canada, found that villages suffering from more Indigenous language loss (there was no measure of cultural loss available) had a six times higher suicide rate than those villages that were better able to maintain their ancestral languages, and thus their Indigenous cultures, more (Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007). Marshal and Antoine (2023) describe how language revitalization can counteract

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the trauma that colonization has inflicted on Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, a literature review by Whalen, Lewis, Gillson, Alexander, and Nyhan (2022, p. 9) found that “Indigenous language use—regardless of proficiency level—has positive effects on health (see also McCarty, 2021).

Another serious problem for many Indigenous people in the USA is the prevalence of anti-social youth gangs. University of Arizona professor Sheila Nicholas (2010, 2013) found that her Hopi tribal elders view a decline in youth speaking Hopi to be associated with their “unHopi” behavior, leading to gang activity and disrespect of Elders. Richard Littlebear (1999), former president of Dull Knife Memorial [Tribal] College on the Northern Cheyenne Nation in Montana, also discussed the attraction of gangs on Indigenous youth in Indian nations and how an attachment to their tribal language and culture can help them resist joining them.

Part of many, if not all, Indigenous language revitalization efforts is the revitalizing of Indigenous values that provide preparation for living a good life, following the good “Red Road,” and participating in a supportive community. Various studies of Indigenous values usually include what has been called the Indigenous 3Rs: Respect, Reciprocity, and Relationality. This includes respecting others and the land, giving back to others and the land in appreciation for what one receives from them, and recognizing one’s connection to others, especially one’s extended family. From her work with speakers of a severely endangered Indigenous language in Nicaragua, Colette Craig (1992, p. 23) concluded that Indigenous language revitalization is “about issues of self-respect and empowerment, and about reclaiming one’s ethnic identity— issues of human value which cannot necessarily be measured in number of words or phrases learned.” Based on three decades of research on Indigenous student success, Terry Huffman (2018, 2020) found much evidence to support transculturation theory that points to how a strong grounding in a traditional Indigenous culture can help people to deal with and overcome racism, discrimination, and other negative aspects of a dominant culture. One’s sense of identity is critical to mental and physical health (Reyhner, 2017).

One of the bright spots in Indigenous language revitalization is Indigenous student and community interest in learning their language (Morton, 2023). Quintrileo (2020) in her study of the Chedungun language in Chile found that 91% of Pewenche students she surveyed considered their Chedungun language important. Most agreed that it represented their culture and community, and it is the language they identify with. Pewenche teenagers’ responses highlighted the importance of not losing their language (see also Quintrileo & Ferretti, 2023). In the USA a study of seven school-community sites enrolling 1,739 Indigenous students found similar interest. The researchers found that “regardless of their Native-language expertise, most youth valued the NLC [their Native language and culture], viewed this as integral to their identities, and desired to learn their heritage language” (McCarty, 2011, p. 13).

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What Role Can Social Media Serve

Mass media has been a killer of Indigenous languages as radio, television, and now the Internet spread popular culture in English in North America and Spanish in much of Latin America, however today there is some evidence that social media is providing a space for Indigenous languages to prosper. A research team, affiliated with the NETOL-NEW “one mind, one people” Indigenous language research partnership at the University of Victoria in Canada “identified six key themes of social media posts concerning ILR [Indigenous Language Revitalization] and the pandemic, including: 1. language promotion, 2. using Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19, 3. trainings to support ILR, 4. language education, 5. creating and sharing language resources, and 6. information about ILR and COVID-19” (Chew, 2021, p. 239). In Latin America, Mendoza-Mori and Sanchez (2023) report that “many Quechua youth have started to generate digital content around Quechua, Andean culture, and Indigeneity.” They report how Yanira Ccencho Atauje, a kindergarten teacher and Quechua-Spanish educator, launched Musquriy, a Quechua Chanka initiative available on Tiktok (131.9K followers) and Instagram (4316 followers). Social media can be an important place “to share and find inspiration and new ideas, both within and beyond one’s community, to advance Indigenous language work” (Chew, 2021, p. 241). Morgan Cassels (2019, p. 25) found that “[n]ew media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube create new domains for language use. As sites of potential Indigenous language use, they offer opportunities for language revitalization movements.” She found that:

The bottom-up structure of participatory media is well-suited to the goals of Indigenous language revitalization movements, which often exist in conflict with colonial institutions and power structures. New media certainly cannot singlehandedly drive a language revitalization movement; however, these platforms offer an opportunity for self-determination for Indigenous language speakers, learners, and activists. (Cassels, 2019, p. 38)

During the pandemic “[f]acebook users began creating their own videos and spreading the word in Western Mono, Serrano, Comanche, Chickasaw, and other Indigenous languages” (Chew, 2021, p. 149).

Indigenous language teachers have responded to the challenges and successes of social media to create engaging resources for teaching and learning indigenous languages (Galla, 2009, 2016). High school students in Utah under the direction of their teacher Charlotta Lacy developed Diné language content for Duolingo, a game-style language learning tool based online. Lacy found that when “we started implementing the Navajo language into Duolingo, we had the entire class who just jumped in and started putting in words and sentences that they had learned from class and some that had known from being taught at home” (Leavitt, 2018). Nathan Brinklow (2021 p. 244), a Mohawk language activist, further describes the challenges and opportunities in the transition of Indigenous languages to digital spaces:

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The idea of creating space is nothing new for Indigenous peoples who have existed for generations in a hostile milieu that transcends land, politics, language, resources, and religion. The digital spaces being created today differ according to the needs and capacity of communities and their languages, but they all share the goal of normalizing, stabilizing, and revitalizing Indigenous languages.

Social media is seen as an opportunity; an accessible digital space which is used by teachers of Diné language (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). A third-grade teacher in a Diné dual language program developed YouTube and TikTok videos to teach a morning greeting to his students. A former principal at Rock Point High School developed a YouTube channel and scheduled Zoom meetings to teach Diné to adult learners. Another Diné language high school teacher developed animated videos to teach patterned language routines.

Conclusion

Besides eager students, well-prepared teachers, and motivating instructional methods and materials there is a need for what Paul Kroskrity and Margaret Field (2009; Kroskrity, 2009) term “ideological clarification” about the method and goals of Indigenous language revitalization, including examining how various dialects of a language will be dealt with and whether having a writing system is important. Languages can be seen quite differently by different groups and in different places. They can be viewed in different ways—as a treasure, nourishment, property, etc. (see e.g., King, 2009). Field (2009, p. 43) found how “[y]oung [Navajo] adults and adolescents...enthusiastically embrace code mixing and, perhaps less consciously, changes in Navajo grammar.” However, monolingual Navajo speaking elders can be language “purists” who criticize and shame young language learners for this code mixing—with negative effects on their motivation to learn their ancestral language.

Finally, what role do non-Indigenous people, as are two of the authors of this chapter, have in Indigenous language revitalization. Academics, especially linguists and anthropologists can have had a strained relationship with Indigenous peoples as they seek to study their lives and languages (Rice, 2009; Grenoble, 2009). What, if anything, do they have to offer in return for using that study for their career advancement? Ideally, we need cooperative efforts such as Margaret Speas (2009) contributed to the development of a new textbook (Yazzie & Speas, 2009) for teaching the Navajo language and Staff (this volume) describes. Of particular note, Navajo Technical University launched in 2023 a PhD program in Diné Culture and Language Sustainability.

We all need to work together to promote the success of all of our children. Research documents that Indigenous students learn best when they see their culture, language, and experience reflected in the curriculum (Reyhner, 2015; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Children who learn their heritage language in the classroom in strong Indigenous language revitalization programs can learn

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English or Spanish at about the same rate as their peers who are not enrolled in an Indigenous language immersion program (Rosier & Holm, 1980; Wilson & Kamana, 2011; Holm, 2006). We do not want to limit students' employment and other opportunities beyond their local communities as we help them becoming contributing members of their local culture (Sayers, 2023).

Note: A Spanish language version of this chapter is forthcoming under the title *Revitalización de Lenguas Originarias: Desafíos y Oportunidades* in *La Enseñanza de Lenguas y Culturas Originarias: Desafíos y Oportunidades* edited by Cristian Sanhueza, Katherine Diaz, and Elizabeth Quintrileo.

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