Can the Mentor-Apprentice Approach Produce Diné Fluent Speakers?

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This paper describes the Diné Language Teachers Association (DLTA) Diné language revitalization pilot project, using the Mentor-Apprentice Program (MAP) approach for adult and young adult Diné people. The project utilized a natural but structured approach to learning or increasing fluency in the heritage language in the home and community through one-on-one, in-person or distance sessions. After carefully considering several approaches to implementing a Diné bizaad revitalization project and after doing a significant review of the literature regarding other indigenous language revitalization programs, DLTA made a decision to use a Kellogg Foundation grant to conduct a pilot test of two different but similar approaches—the Mentor-Apprentice approach and the Language at Home approach, which is another form of the Mentor-Apprentice idea. It was an approach that had not been used by the Diné tribal organizations and was also new to DLTA. We will introduce MAP in a Diné language context and discuss the implementation and make recommendations for use by more Diné language programs or community activities.

We often hear Diné people, young and old, state that Diné bizaad and, through it, the cultural beliefs, and practices that it imparts, is valuable because it is our identity. It makes us who we are. We have pride in the teachings, the beliefs, and the traditional songs and stories that provide us the foundation for being a Diné person. When we listen to Diné bizaad, it makes us feel good. It brings us home. When we listen to a Diné song, it moves us to cry, to laugh or just to be silent in awe. Then why is it that we no longer speak to each other in our beautiful, complex and rich language? Why do we not subscribe to the fact that the power is in Diné bizaad, in yoołgai saad, dootł'izhí saad, diichiłí saad and baashzhinii saad as the Diné practitioners and cultural teachers have told us? The Diné people need to connect to the abstract and highly complex thinking involved in the philosophy of the Diné people. However, these conceptual ideas can only be completely comprehended and appreciated if one can understand and speak Diné bizaad. Can we truly call ourselves Diné and live a life as Diné without grabbing and holding on to these gifts of language and culture handed down to us from our Diné ancestors? Yes, we face many types of monsters—among them poverty, broken families, addiction, western religions, and racism—that distract us from becoming whole Diné people, strong in our language development, strong in our foundation, knowledgeable in our cultural teachings and practices and speaking with each other through our jokes, our laughter, our teachings and singing together. And who is going to suffer the most? Our children, our

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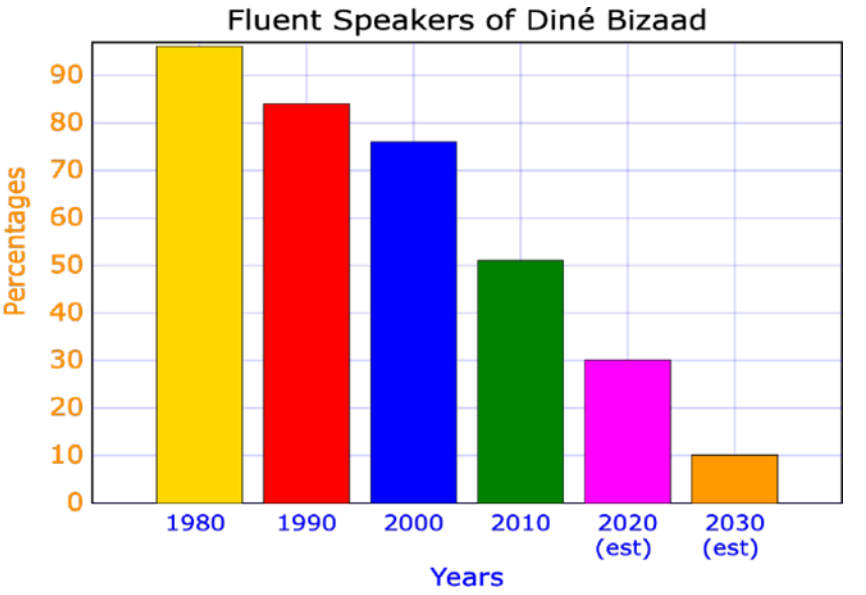
grandchildren, and great grandchildren. They are the future of the Diné people. We need to immerse them in our love of Diné bizaad and our culture so they can be strong and resilient in their self-identity. Our mission is "Nihizaad doo baa Dáádidiikah da," "We will not leave our language behind." Even KGAK radio station in Gallup says, "Diné bizaad nizhóní," in their broadcasts. Diné bizaad is beautiful, and we must keep it alive.

The State of Diné Bizaad

Because Diné bizaad has a larger pool of speakers than any other US indigenous language, it has also had more staying power than many other languages. However, owing especially to past damaging assimilationist US Government policies, including the prohibition of the use of the language in schools, widespread enforced boarding school attendance, relocation programs, the increase of paved roads, and the widespread availability of English language media, the use of Diné bizaad and the number of fluent speakers is in rapid decline. According to a report in the *Navajo Times* (Denetclaw, 2017), there were at the time 171,000 people (out of a population of 300,000) who were fluent speakers—only 57% of Diné people. In 1980, however, 93% spoke the language fluently. By 1990, the percentage of fluent speakers had dropped to 84%. Ten years later, it had decreased to 76%. Thus, from 1980 to 2000, each decade showed a decrease of just under 10% in fluent Diné speakers. Suddenly, between 2000 and 2010, there was a drop of 25%. Based on this rate of decline, it has been estimated that by 2020, the number of fluent speakers fell to 30% and that it could fall to 10% by 2030, which is only seven years away from this writing.



Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennigm, 2024), an annual reference publication that provides statistics on the living languages of the world, refers to Diné bizaad as "at risk." Recently, members of the DLTA reflected on a scale used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to determine language usage. As the DLTA members discussed their observations of their families and communities, they felt that the picture of Diné bizaad usage falls between levels 7 (shifting) and 8a (dying). In Level 7 languages, the child- bearing generation can use the language among themselves but does not normally transmit it to their children. The DLTA members agreed that only some of the child-bearing generation use the language among themselves and largely do not use it with their children. In Level 8a languages, the only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation. "Active" is the key word here, and the DLTA members felt that Level 8a describes a broad spectrum within the Navajo Nation. UNESCO rates Level 7 languages as "definitely endangered" and Level 8a languages as "severely endangered."

Why Learning Diné Bizaad in School Does Not Translate to Everyday Use

Today's Diné children have the privilege of learning their Diné heritage language in schools. Many schools on and off the Navajo Reservation provide Navajo Heritage Language classes to our Diné children. Despite the availability of Navajo Heritage Language classes, the majority of Diné children are not becoming fluent speakers and/or are not using Diné bizaad with family members at home or in their communities. There are several reasons for this. Some reasons are owing to problems inherent in the way Navajo Heritage Language classes are delivered and at times also with attitudes of the Heritage Language teachers' colleagues:

1. There are often not enough Heritage Language teachers to accommodate interested students.
2. Class sizes may be too large to effectively teach students.
3. Sometimes there are no assigned classrooms and teachers end up teaching in hallways, gyms, and other unsuitable spaces.
4. In some models, the Heritage Language teacher floats to regular classrooms where there may be disruptions from the regular classroom teacher.
5. The most intense focus needs to be with elementary students, but that is where dedicated classrooms are often nonexistent.
6. In elementary schools, Heritage Language classes may only be 30-45 minutes long, which is not enough time to help children become fluent.
7. The primary purpose of Heritage Language classes is to teach Diné bizaad and secondarily to support the learning of other subjects, but non-Heritage Language teachers often want their subjects to be made a priority.
8. Non-Heritage Language teachers are often lacking in understanding regarding what the Heritage Language teachers are endeavoring to

accomplish; they are in need of education regarding the important influence that competence in Diné bizaad has on students' self-identity, self-awareness, and performance throughout the school curriculum.

9. Some non-Heritage Language teachers are actually opposed to the teaching of Diné bizaad, which has many negative effects.
10. Administrative support is often severely lacking.
11. When Diné students reach high school, where Navajo Heritage Language classes are electives, they are faced with a wide variety of appealing electives to choose from, and instruction in Diné bizaad is not always their first choice.

The above reasons suggest that the teaching of Diné bizaad to Diné students, while it is widely available, is relegated to being a second-class subject. Despite all these obstacles, the impact of Diné bizaad teachers is of benefit to the students and the parents (Sells, 2020). For some, it may be their only exposure to learning their language and culture. The parents in the Sells study credited the school immersion programs with "exposing and giving their children the opportunity to speak Navajo." One parent thought that Diné bizaad taught at school may elaborate on what is being taught at home. It is not known how many parents are teaching the language at home, but it is important for the "kids to know who they are and where they come from so it's important for schools to teach the language too" (p. 114). One parent shared how learning Diné bizaad and culture at school helped her son. She said he learned a lot in the immersion class, taking part in different events like song and dance and was motivated to put a lot of effort into it. She noted that it really helped with his shyness and personal development. He can introduce himself in Navajo, sing songs in Navajo, and even learned to dance and, along with his class, performed for other schools (p. 101). Another parent shared that the immersion programs teach cultural information that parents are not able to teach, such as ceremonies (p. 121). For example, she didn't know much about the shoe game; her son knew more than she did, and he learned it at school. Other supportive comments emphasized that the language and culture are an important part of the Navajo people, and it helps their children have a better understanding of the Navajo way of life, connecting to the holy people and the surrounding environment, while maintaining balance (p. 114). Another parent shared her own personal experience of learning in school. "If it weren't for the school she went to, she said she would not be able to understand or would not be able to speak it, but because she learned some Navajo in school, she is able to speak it a little bit" (p. 121). In conclusion, all groups agreed that Diné bizaad should be taught both at school and at home because many parents rely on family members who can speak the language fluently, and they also rely on Diné bizaad teachers in the schools because they are trained to teach specialized content (p. 121). Diné bizaad teachers are to be commended for doing their jobs under overwhelming odds.

Mentor-Apprentice Program (MAP)

The mentor-apprentice approach is an immersion strategy that mimics the natural process of first-language acquisition as much as possible. The watchword here was, NO ENGLISH—except in the very initial stages when learners needed to be introduced to survival phrases that would allow them to make requests for information in Diné bizaad, such as "How do you say…". The Diné Four Directions Learning Model was recommended for planning learning sessions, and an important concept was that the learning process, as with first-language acquisition, could take place anywhere at any time. Our first task, which grew organically out of the literature review, was to write a training handbook for a pilot project. The handbook was written mostly by Louise Benally and Anna Redsand, with materials contributions made by Veda Glover and with editing done by the entire team by Zoom.

The Mentor-Apprentice Program (MAP) was originally developed by and for some of the California tribes, which are in severe jeopardy of completely losing their languages, many of them having only a few people who can still speak the language; most often, speakers are elderly grandparents. The primary ingredient of MAP is access to a fluent native speaker, who is called the mentor. The mentor, which we call Diné bizaad neiinitinígíí or simply na'nitinígíí, works with an individual, the apprentice or Diné bizaad yíhooł'aahígíí or simply íhooł'aahígíí, who wants to learn his or her native language. They do not have to be members of the same household. The teaching-learning interaction takes place in a home and in the community or even remotely by Zoom, phone, or other applications, not in a classroom. The two individuals work out a schedule to meet at least five hours a week. The number one rule in the interaction is NO ENGLISH. During their first week or weeks of meetings, the na'nitinígíí teaches the íhooł'aahígíí "survival" language. The íhooł'aahígíí will learn phrases or sentences that will help them keep on learning the language so that the seemingly impossible task of learning Diné bizaad can be achieved. During these survival language lessons some English will be used. Some survival phrases to be learned are language related to questioning and requesting, such as "Ha'át'íish át'é?" (What is this?) or "Ánáádi'ní" (Say it again.) etc. In addition, íhooł'aahígíí will learn language associated with ádéíihojílzįįh, or introductions, so the team can establish their kinship relationship through their family and clans and learn a little about each other. The Diné bizaad yíhooł'aahígíí determines what he or she wants to learn, and the na'nitinígíí, in collaboration with the íhooł'aahígíí, will devise a method to teach the language associated with that topic. They will work together on the language topics and on planning the activities to learn them. How much language is introduced and used depends on how well the learner progresses in using the language consistently in his or her everyday life. Commitment by the participants is crucial. Not everything always goes according to plan, so na'nitinígíí and íhooł'aahígíí must learn to adapt and adjust their plans whenever necessary. Each team will be served by an áká'análwo'ígíí (coach), who is an experienced educator.

Planning Immersion Activities

In 1989-1990 the late Dr. Herbert Benally provided an invaluable resource to our knowledge of the Diné Philosophy of Learning in the development of a Substance Abuse Prevention Curriculum at the Diné Division of Education. It was called the Beauty Way Curriculum. In thinking about a "lesson plan" the Four Directions Philosophy of Learning that he taught fits so nicely with the MAP approach, which involves planning and outcomes, and uses the Four Directions to provide a much-needed structure. The one and only goal is to learn to speak Diné bizaad, beginning at the apprentice's level of understanding and speaking. The Diné Philosophy of Learning provides a road map for implementation. using a visual depicting the inside of a hogan in which the four directions provide the framework. After a period of time, this structure becomes a natural process in Diné MAP activities.

The MAP participants start out with the East Direction, the opening, which is associated with Nitsáhákees (Thinking, Contemplation), in which the apprentice decides the topic(s) to learn and discusses it (them) with the mentor. Then they move toward the South Direction, which is associated with planning (nahat'á), where they decide what strategies to use. Then to West Direction, which is associated with Life (Iiná), and this is the most important—living the language, using and practicing it in everyday life. And finally, to the North Direction (Sihasin,) associated with Reflection, in which they look back on their sessions and discuss whether they did well with staying in the language, whether it is becoming more natural, how well the lessons helped, and how they can be improved upon. The model is a good tool for guiding the language learning process. A reproducible, blank model was provided to participants.

Reflections from Two Apprentices

One of our apprentices, James McKenzie, who has had the most successful experience with his mentor, shared this information at the Indigenous Teacher Education Conference at Northern Arizona University in 2022. His feedback provides a great summary of the tremendous benefits of the methodology:

1. MAP offered increased exposure to the language and intensive practice, resulting in accelerated learning.
2. The intensive one-to-one exchange (both input and output) provided crucial opportunities to hear the language (input), resulting in output through practice, which made understanding one another clearer as time went on.
3. The process involves a lot of relationship-building, so that his mentor, bimá (his clan mother) and he have gotten much closer during the experience.
4. The one-to-one setting is a low-stakes situation. He says that a lot of times learners must deal with an intimidating affective filter,

especially in groups, but this setting allows for having an affective filter that provides a safe situation for learning a language.

5. Staying in Dine bizaad is crucial. It is essential to use as little English as possible.
6. The apprentice has agency, and their motivation, and commitment is crucial:
   a. Apprentices drive the learning topics.
   b. Apprentices must ask questions and request clarification and not drop what they don't understand. They can't afford to let time pass and question later.
   c. The method allows the apprentice to learn and identify high-use language.
7. Recording the sessions was a huge help. It provided unlimited listening and review opportunities and allowed the learner to go back to recordings, to go over again and again the language he had learned. He says it is up to the apprentice to make that time for repeated listening, which helps make the learning stick.
8. Use of visuals was also helpful, especially for remaining in Diné bizaad, not switching to English.
9. Review and practice outside of sessions is crucial. Developing a habit of using the language, practicing constantly makes a huge difference.
10. The reflection stage is a key to improvement. The use of the Four Directions model employed by DLTA facilitates discussion and planning for going forward.
11. "Supportive feedback:" In the literature, there is a concept called "corrective feedback." James had learned other languages and from that experience, he realized that he really needs feedback, which may not be the same for everyone. He has benefited most from "supportive feedback" and the MAP model, using the Four Directions structure recommended by DLTA, allows that to occur.
12. It is important to have fun and laugh.

Another apprentice, Kasei Storer, offered what she had learned:

1. The pandemic taught us that it was possible for MAP teams to work on language learning even when they lived at a distance from each other. This opened up some creative responses, but of course, it was not the same as learning in amásání baghan (grandmother's home).
2. All mentors had experience as Diné language teachers, which was an asset in many ways, but led to sessions that were often more like classroom sessions (relying on written materials vs. aural/oral learning, as recommended in the literature). This did also consider individual student learning styles, which was positive, but the issue of natural vs. classroom-style approaches needs to be addressed

further. There were also several effective hands-on lessons, such as washing dishes and making taa'niil (corn meal mush).

3. Scheduling time when mentors and mentees could get together, since most did not live with each other, was the biggest logistical problem. It was hard to shift from the school model to the home model and remember that learning could take place in the car, in a phone call while driving (hands-free, of course!), on the phone while preparing a meal, etc.—just the way we would if speaking English while doing other tasks.
4. One of the other biggest challenges is to get away from using English, when we are surrounded by it all day, every day, but NO ENGLISH is integral to the MAP process, as soon as survival phrases have been learned in Diné bizaad. This problem was not unique to our teams but was commonly experienced by other Indigenous teams as shown in the literature.
5. There was a point when we realized that the teams' motivation seemed to be lagging, owing to various difficulties, including the aforementioned scheduling obstacles. The team started sending out "yéigo" (expression to try harder, keep at it) emails to the teams.

What We Learned from the Pilot Test

1. Scheduling time to meet, whether in person or remotely was the biggest difficulty participants encountered and required creativity.
2. Because scheduling was difficult, it would be best in the next phase to only work with two-member teams, rather than whole families, where scheduling became even more difficult, so the decision was made that in Stage #2, we would continue with only MAP, not the family teams, which were based on the Language At Home variation of MAP.
3. The assumption that mentors who were experienced teachers could hold the dual function of mentor and coach did not always work well. Even experienced teachers needed the support of a coach to help troubleshoot and problem-solve early on and provide encouragement if teams were to succeed. A coach did not necessarily have to be fluent in Diné bizaad, although that would be ideal; however, their main function was to provide encouragement and help problem-solve solutions to obstacles. With other Indigenous users of the MAP approach, the coach was often an experienced educator, but the mentor was the one who was fluent in the language. The second group of participants taught the DLTA staff even more clearly how much life events impact people who truly wish to teach and learn the language in this natural method and how necessary it is to have a coach as part of each team, as only two of the teams were able to complete this phase of the project.
4. The hoped-for exponential expansion of the MAP approach has not yet reached its potential. However, in recent weeks the continued presenta-

tion of the method in conferences and social media is paying off, and this natural means of learning Diné bizaad is gaining more and more traction. Using social media with a redesigned flyer has allowed the project to reach more Diné people in our 2023 recruitment. In fact, the response was so overwhelming that we had to stop the requests as we could not possibly work with at least 70 teams with the staff and budget limitations.

Recommendations for Future Expansion of MAP

In the first stage of the pilot project, apprentices and mentors were recruited by word-of-mouth. In the second stage, a Zoom conference was held, primarily for DLTA's past conference attendees, and mentors and/or apprentices were recruited at the end of the session. They were then given a two-hour training session on Zoom and were followed on a regular basis, using participant reflections and quarterly meetings with fellow participants. Some recommendations for expanding the use of the method follow. Most of these recommendations would best be served by hiring one full-time person who is well-versed in the method to conduct the various activities:

1. Chapterhouse presentations of at least an hour and a half to recruit mentors and apprentices, followed by training and assignment of coaches.
2. Interviews about the method on radio programs, such as KGLP's Friday Forum, followed by contact information and an invitation to participate. The content of the interviews can be controlled by providing interviewers with talking points.
3. Networking with the Navajo Nation Library and local community libraries to start classes that serve as troubleshooting-and-support hubs for mentor-apprentice teams who would work together in their own settings.
4. Training high school Heritage Language teachers to make the MAP process part of their curriculum, where students would locate a mentor at home or in the community and work with them a certain number of hours each week as their homework for high school credit, supplementing classroom activities with their work in the community.
5. Advertising on social media, print and radio media with contact information.

Conclusion

The question in this chapter's title: "Can the Mentor-Apprentice Program Method Produce Diné Fluent Speakers" is a two-part question:

1. Is the MAP method one that can produce fluent speakers of Diné bizaad?
2. Can the MAP method be implemented widely across Dinétah to turn around the current endangered status of the usage of the language?

MAP has been tried in much smaller tribes with some success, but it has never, to our knowledge, been tried on a large scale, which, if Question 2 is to be answered in the affirmative, needs to happen. We believe that because MAP replicates a natural first language acquisition process, one of immersion, it has the best chance of promoting language fluency. That said, considering our recommendations for expansion, additional funding and promotion of the method would be required to make the MAP approach one that can redirect the current dire situation and growing trend in use of the Diné language by increasing its use on a large scale.

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