

Language Revitalization in Navajo/English Dual Language Classrooms

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This paper describes the Chinle Primary School Dual Language Project in terms of both the activities of the project and the attitudes and aspirations of the bilingual teachers who have restructured the educational setting to meet the needs of students who are speakers of Navajo as their primary language and of students who are speakers of English who are learning Navajo as their heritage language.

The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language to 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 Tribe, 1984, p. 9)

Ambrose Yazzie, a teacher at Chinle Boarding School, describes the purpose for dual language instruction in Navajo and English,

Throughout my education I spoke Navajo. English was my second language. Today when I speak Navajo with my students, they often respond in English. I tell them they should not be ashamed of speaking the Navajo language, that it is good to know two languages.¹

Of the approximately 175 American Indian languages still spoken in the United States, only 11% are being taught to children (Kraus, 1996). Of the 175 surviving languages, Navajo is in the best shape with 148,530 speakers (Estes, 1999). Chinle is a town near the geographical center of the Navajo Nation in Northern Arizona with a population of 7,230. The Chinle Unified School District enrolls over 4,000 students in seven schools. Ninety-nine percent of the students in the district are American Indians, and 62% or 2,633 are considered Limited English Proficient (LEP).

The Chinle Primary School 1995-96 Home Language Survey indicates 700 students speaking Navajo as a home or ancestral language, and 393 of these students were limited English proficient. In 1996-97 the number of limited English proficient students increased to 456 or 61% of the school population.

¹All quotes in this paper, unless otherwise identified, are student reflections from a course in bilingual methodology in which the authors participated in the fall of 1998 in Chinle, Arizona.

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District assessment measures document a 50% decline in Navajo language proficiency for students in grades 1-3 since 1975. This trend, which might mistakenly be interpreted as a successful transition from Navajo to English, has not been accompanied by increases in academic achievement in language or mathematics. Since 1975, average student achievement has remained in the lower 30% of the population in these content areas. This low academic achievement, lack of proficiency in English, and language shift away from the students' ancestral language have been accompanied by a demographic shift from a rural, traditional lifestyle to an urban, deculturalized lifestyle where Navajo language and culture are no longer part of the young child's everyday experience.

In 1983 the Chinle Unified School District K-12 enrollment was 3,100. In 1985 and 1990 two extensive public housing projects were constructed in the community, which led to a significant increase in the number of limited English proficient speaking students. In 1996 the student membership was 4,787. This growth has been reflected in the enrollment at Chinle Primary School.

A Dual Language Program was implemented with two classrooms at each grade level in 1997 in Chinle Primary School. In each classroom a bilingual teacher and a paraprofessional work with 50% Navajo dominant LEP students and 50% English proficient students. Within the dual language classroom students interact reciprocally as active learners. A curriculum outreach component focuses on the design and implementation of curriculum and multimedia presentations in the content area of mathematics to enhance the status of the Navajo language for all students at Chinle Primary School. A Summer Dual Language Camp extends the school year and provides community based language learning experiences to reverse the tide of language shift that has limited human potential in the Chinle community.

The staff development component of the Dual Language Program combines the resources of Northern Arizona University and the Annenberg Rural Systemic Initiative to provide bilingual and ESL endorsements for teachers. Teachers are developing a new perspective on successful learning in mathematics using both Navajo and English. These teachers have a background of experience that provides them with the ability to convey content area subject matter from a perspective of shared cultural values and norms. First grade teacher Alta Clements provides an example of the need for culturally based mathematics when she reflects on the use of story problems in her first grade textbook, "They ask students to count the number of blocks on a trip to the store. Kids here count the fence posts not the blocks. They need to think about their world when they solve problems." A sample unit illustrating Clements' call for Navajo cultural incorporation is described next.

"The lamb's wool feels like a blanket."

The thematic unit "Dibé Iina At'e: Sheep is Life" integrates the world of Chinle Primary students with the teaching of mathematics. Themes are coordinated with the Arizona State Standards for Mathematics. For example, to assess Objective 1.1: "Represent and use numbers in equivalent forms through the use

of physical models, drawings, word names and symbols” (Arizona Department of Education, 1996), teachers discuss the use of visual models for measurement. Traditionally Navajos did not use cups, yardsticks, or any type of measuring tools. They used a hand to measure flour for frybread and estimated a day’s travel not in miles or kilometers but in the length of a day on horseback or in a wagon. When a weaver sat in front of a loom preparing to weave a rug, she did not draw a diagram. She constructed a mental model of the rug. Second grade teacher Beulah Yazzie discussed the visual model developed by weavers, “Everything they’re going to make comes mentally.... They’re going to know if it’s going to be centered or off-centered.”

Teachers at Chinle Primary School ask students to use these visual models to estimate the distance around sheep corrals, cornfields, and hogans. Students confirm their estimation using yarn or sticks as units of measurement. Beulah Yazzie began the “Sheep is Life” unit with a KWL chart showing what the students **K**now already, what they **W**ant to learn, and what they **L**earned after completing the unit. She then asked students to interview their parents with questions that were generated from this class discussion. “Where do sheep get their water?” “How much do they need?” The students experienced measurement in this traditional setting. Yazzie’s second grade students reported that “My grandparents did it this way.” Yazzie and her students learned from the grandparents that sheep need additional water in the winter—about two buckets a day.

Yazzie concluded the unit with a visit to a summer camp where the students selected a sheep for butchering. The students noticed the different textures of the sheep’s wool, took pictures, and recorded their observations in a learning log written in Navajo and English. The students learned about changes in livestock husbandry over the years. They viewed a film *Seasons of the Navajo* (Borden, 1990) that showed the sheep dipping process, read a bilingual book written in the 1940s titled *Who Wants to be a Prairie Dog?* (Clark, 1940), and discussed the sheep dipping process. Students compared the process of caring for sheep in the 1940s with the 1990s. A student wrote about the texture of the wool, “The lamb’s wool feels like a blanket.”

“I was told that I would no longer live in my hogan and shade house”

Just as students write to reflect on changes in the community, these bilingual teachers reflected on changes in the school setting that they have experienced. As a group they wrote of their initial schooling experiences. This section of the paper will reflect on common themes in the writing of these teachers and return to the discussion of Navajo language and culture in classroom and community contexts. The reflections of the bilingual teachers come from a course in bilingual methodology in which the authors participated in the fall of 1998 in Chinle.

Suppression of Navajo language within the institution of the school is a common theme for many of the teachers who entered school in the 1950s and 1960s. This era has been described as the era of termination. At a 1948 congressional hearing Willard Beatty, Director of Education for the Bureau of Indian

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Affairs (BIA), testified that the “basic purpose of Indian education for Navajo children is to teach them to speak, think, and read and write in the English language” (Boyce, 1974, p. 233).

Linda Henley wrote of her experience in a BIA dormitory in the early 1950s,

There we were all required to speak English. All our house mothers or matrons were Hopis except one lady was an Apache. These ladies disciplined us like we were at [an army] boot camp. I believe they were treated like that when they went to school. They were very harsh on all us Navajo girls.

Mary S. Begay repeats this theme, “I was told that I would no longer live in my hogan and shade house. The person who told me this was a Navajo person working in the boarding school dormitory.” The loss of the native language has been linked to a sense of shame and a loss of cultural identity in the memory of several of the teachers. Tony Smiley wrote, “I went through the BIA era of speak English only or else you were punished.” Karen Smiley concurred, “Once I began to understand the English language the Navajo language became negative for me.”

The teachers describe their resistance to learning English as they used Navajo words that sounded like English to respond to their teachers. Eleanor Smiley wrote,

We were all forced to change our Navajo language into English. Speaking my language became hard for me to speak in front of the dorm aide. I had to stay quiet around them. It was funny too. Our dorm aides spoke to each other in Navajo and we couldn't.... One day I decided to mumble anything, just so something would come out of my mouth and to show them that I can speak English.

The teachers describe their efforts as individuals to adapt the language of their home to the classroom: efforts that they continue today in bilingual classrooms. Mary S. Begay recalled,

I was born and raised at the hogan level of traditional life. My first language is Navajo. I am proud of my native language. At the age of seven I started school at Rough Rock Boarding school. I told my mother that I wanted to read and write in Navajo..... She said that Navajo would be easy after I went to school and completed my formal education.

The teachers reflected on the absence of Navajo language and culture within the educational setting. Salita Begay wrote,

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During my elementary school years Navajo literacy was never mentioned and wasn't part of the school system. It was even like this in my secondary school years. In fact, Navajo language wasn't used by the teachers even though they were Navajo. The main emphasis was to teach English.

The first Navajo controlled school, Rough Rock Demonstration School, opened on July 27, 1966. Rough Rock was "regarded not just as a place for educating Indian children, but as the focus for the development of the local community" (Roessel, 1977). Ramah Navajo High School, which opened in 1970, was the first contract high school (Iverson, 1993). Borrego Pass School opened in 1972 with students in grades K-3. At Rock Point Community School, which gained contract status in 1972, the goal was to educate students within the community and to educate students in their native language (Holm & Holm, 1990).

Loretta Begay, who attended Rock Point Community School in the 1970s, wrote, "When I was a child at the age of 5 years old the first year I started school I was told to say my clans. I remember that I already knew my clans.... I was then introduced to the phonetic sounds of the Navajo alphabet that was above the chalkboard in our classroom. By first grade I was getting good at writing sentences and reading the language."

The teachers also discussed how they learned Navajo in community settings outside the classroom. The institutions of the church, Navajo Headstart, and the family provided support in maintaining the language in both oral and written forms. Linda Henley wrote,

One time my mother took us to church.... I was very impressed when I saw the community people ... and they had never had English education go up on the stage and they sang Christmas songs all in Navajo. Some of them actually held song books and looked at the words while singing.

Charlene Begay remembered,

When I was about seven years old, my grandmother took me to the Presbyterian Church. There I sat with her and she would be holding a Bible and the preacher would be reading the verses in Navajo. I looked at the Bible while sitting by my grandmother.

Marie Kiyannie recalled, "The church services were usually conducted mostly in Navajo.... I remember sitting there reading the Bible and singing the hymns with the grownups."

Navajo Headstart was founded in 1968 as a part of the Lyndon Johnson Administration's War on Poverty and staffed by Navajo teachers, aides, bus drivers, and cooks. Karen Smiley wrote,

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I remember the songs I learned in preschool.... Each song had action of movements and each song was meaningful to a five year old. I think that's where I began to understand that the language was important to my family and relatives because each time I sang a song or said a word in Navajo they would all smile.

This sense of positive identity as a speaker of Navajo was supported within the institution of the family. Virginia Jones recalled,

Most of what I learned, the language itself, is from my own family. Learning the language at home was an everyday activity and I felt comfortable using it because it was vital to communicate with one another.

The language was transmitted both in oral and written form within the family. Virginia Jones continued,

I started seeing my young nieces and nephews bring home papers written in Navajo. It is from this experience that I really wanted to learn myself and knew that someday when I had children of my own they will need to learn themselves too.

“Learning continues on everyday throughout your life”

Teachers discussed their role as language learners as they assumed the role of bilingual teacher. Charlene Begay wrote, “Even though I speak my own Navajo language fluently, I'm still learning how to read and write in Navajo. Learning continues on everyday throughout your life.” Gloria Denny concurred, “I was having a hard time writing in Navajo.... I used to get confused when I was learning how and when to use these marks like glottal stop, nasal and high tone. At one time, I was trying to write the word ‘night’ and I wrote a nasty word.” Isabelle Yazzie wrote, “learning Navajo language for me was very difficult for me because it was like programming a computer. I had to sit there for hours just to think about what words to use and how to spell them correctly.”

Many of the teachers found that they lacked a foundation in Navajo language literacy. Salita Begay wrote, “finally I knew the Navajo language was written using the consonant sounds. I started writing entries in my journal... my entries became longer.” Carol Johnson wrote,

Sometimes we would ask the meaning of a word. A lot of times we broke up the word. I always think this is amazing. Even with the names of people. It helped me to become aware of the language and to analyze it. It helps me to learn to say the words right.

Carol Johnson, a Kindergarten teacher wrote, “I've come to believe that Navajo is essential to the students. I've grown up mostly without it. Kindergarten being

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the foundation of the school, I would like for my students to know that they also have a foundation in their own lives.”

As teachers gained proficiency in oral and written Navajo, they strengthened their cultural identity. Tony Smiley, who worked as a literacy tutor at Rock Point Community School, wrote,

there were Navajo literacy classes offered locally. Diné college also offered classes and we were even encouraged to get our certification in Navajo language through the college. Eventually I ended up in the classroom and taught Navajo language. I think that this is the best thing that has happened to me. I believe that it made me more aware of myself. I consider myself lucky to be able to read and write in Navajo.

Carol Johnson wrote,

From writing I've learned how to read. It has helped me to feel confident in the classroom. I've also greatly improved in my speaking of the language. I can read Navajo stories to my students.... They know that our language has its own writing. I always tell them that it is hard to learn but once you've come across that barrier, you can accomplish anything.

Cindy Aronilith wrote, “I am still learning the language and I am proud that I am a Navajo.” Sondra Nez wrote,

I remember making mistakes and repeatedly sounding out the proper pronunciation of our language while reading in class or at home nestling by the wood stove.... I began to wonder and listen to my own children speaking our language and realizing that those same words have sounded beautiful.

“If you write in Navajo you are expressing exactly what you want to say”

These bilingual teachers have discussed how their attitudes as language learners were shaped by their early schooling experiences and how they have transformed these experiences and to revitalize the teaching of Navajo language and culture within the school. Mary Boyd wrote,

Since most Navajo children often learn through demonstration and observation prior to performance, I do a lot of modeling to heighten the Navajo cultural awareness of the students. As a bilingual teacher, I try to create social well-being in my classroom by expressing ideas and knowledge in a variety of ways.

Cindy Aronolith wrote, “The one method that I found to be very useful is learning as ‘co-learners and co-teachers’.... We take it day by day and try to

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relate what we do to our own lives and interests.... Our class takes both the Navajo and English language (reading, writing, and speaking) one day at a time.”

The teachers have introduced Navajo language literacy into the curriculum. Sondra Nez wrote, “During the listening comprehension time I read books that are written in Navajo for 20 minutes reading. There are times the students would recall hearing that particular word at home or at their grandparents home.” Veronica Ahasteen reflected,

As a bilingual teacher I try to encourage my students to sound out words and to try their best developmental spelling. Some of my students are also learning to understand Navajo and I try to give them as much encouragement as my family gave me. Most of my students are learning to say Navajo words.

The teachers also discussed the support that they find as both teachers and learners. Mae Goldtooth wrote,

At a young age children are inquisitive about learning new things.... Young learners acquire language or culture much faster than an adult would.... My children help me to spell words that are a little too advanced for me. I remind them why it is very important to learn to speak, read and write in Navajo. I explain to them if you write in Navajo you are expressing exactly what you want to say.... We, as a family, are helping one another to spell words and to build our vocabulary.

Pandora Yazzie wrote,

Every other day students would have Navajo conversations for at least 15 minutes. We would start with a proper introduction and pick a topic to talk about. I am going to do a project with their children as part of our community unit, to visit our elderly group home in Ganado every other month. This would help our children to understand that our grandparents are important resources.

Marie Kiyannie wrote,

I interpret instructions, word meanings and numbers that pertain to mathematics. Sometimes we discuss a ceremony and things that happen around the school in Navajo. Just translating from one language to another so someone can understand, really uplifts my spirits.

The teachers discussed a curriculum that includes the prior knowledge of the students. Al Begay, a parent educator, wrote, “I have the parents make big books with all Navajo words that relate to their children because the parent knows the child better than anybody else.” Virginia Jones wrote,

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I am doing whatever I can to make my students realize that their culture is unique and that there is more to it than just learning to read and write the language.... You can create books or video or whatever you want.... I want them to be creative in their work and to think of new ideas that may not have been touched or tried.

This curriculum extends beyond the classroom. Marlene Tsosie wrote,

We explain to the parents that we need their help at home by talking Navajo to their child for one hour a day. We give them home activities to do that stress language usage. We also tell them to use the language as naturally as possible and to talk about any situations they can in the home.

The teachers have transformed the schools of the past to meet the needs of their students. Darlene Yazzie wrote, "As a bilingual teacher I really want to teach the Navajo language. I approach my students differently than those who taught me how to read and write."

These bilingual teachers discussed the need for language learning in the future. As Caroline Johnson put it,

As a Navajo teacher I feel we need to listen to our Navajo vocabulary in real-life situations.... We should not take our language and shelve it as we do books. If we use the language our students will begin to model it at home and in their communities. Students need to know it is special to speak their own language.

For the teachers, the transformation of the curriculum and pedagogy, which is founded on this understanding of the need to preserve and revitalize Navajo language and culture, is based on this awareness of the value of the language and culture in their own educational development. Mary Ruth James Goy felt "We must carry on what is given to us by our ancestors and teach our children the importance of preserving our language."

"To prepare Navajo teachers who read, write and speak Navajo"

To conclude this discussion of the revitalization of Navajo in the Chinle community we will discuss the literacy of Helen Dineyazhe, a dual language teacher at Chinle Primary School. Today Helen Dineyazhe, a 1994 graduate of Diné College and a 1997 graduate of the Ford Foundation Teacher Education Program at Northern Arizona University, is a bilingual third grade teacher at Chinle Primary School and a participant in the Learn in Beauty Master's Fellowship at Northern Arizona University. The goal of the Ford program is,

To prepare Navajo teachers who read, write and speak Navajo, who understand the social, economic and cultural dynamics of Navajo com-

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munities, and who motivate and challenge students in the classrooms while providing a quality education that empowers Navajo students to succeed.

Diné College worked with Fort Lewis College, Northern Arizona University, Prescott College, The University of New Mexico, and The University of Northern Colorado to graduate over 200 teachers by 1996 with a retention rate for the project of 85%. Students in the program earned both a teaching endorsement and a bilingual endorsement in Navajo. Students were required to select an academic specialization in Navajo language, culture, and history. Courses included Navajo Literacy for Speakers, Navajo Literature and Grammar for Speakers, Navajo Descriptive and Narrative Writing, Foundations of Navajo Culture, Navajo History to the Present, and one restricted elective related to Navajo studies. Students were also required to take courses in Diné Educational Philosophy, first and second language acquisition, teaching Navajo to non-native speakers, teaching literacy in bilingual education/ESL classrooms, and teaching Navajo to native speakers.

Today, Helen Dineyazhe works with bilingual classroom teachers to prepare Navajo language thematic units that focus on culturally bound content area instruction. She talks about how she studied Navajo literacy at Diné College and how learning to read and write in Navajo prepared her for her teaching career.

The daughter of a bilingual first grade teacher at Chinle Primary School, Dineyazhe spoke English as a child. When she entered the Navajo Teacher Education Project she enrolled in Navajo 101 and 102: Navajo for non-native speakers. Her instructors encouraged her to think in Navajo, and she began to practice grammatical substitution drills while jogging. Dineyazhe read children's books in Navajo and asked colleagues and family members questions about the language. When she gained proficiency in oral and written Navajo she enrolled in courses for native speakers: Navajo 211 and 212. Her proficiency in reading helped her to become a better speaker. Her instructors, A.J. Becenti and Martha Jackson, encouraged her to use her interest in music in preparing class presentations. Dineyazhe wrote songs in Navajo that she published and taught to the class. For an oral history project, she interviewed elders in the community in Navajo about their early schooling experiences. The elders told her that they had been hit with a wooden spoon as punishment for speaking Navajo in their dormitory rooms. Dineyazhe used these stories to improve her ability to record and transcribe oral Navajo, as a reminder of changing attitudes toward Navajo language, and as an example of the importance of respecting her students.

Dineyazhe's instructor, Martha Jackson, used sketches and photographs from the community to allow students to explore their language and their culture. In one lesson the instructor observed students discussing a photograph of a winter hogan and recorded students' comments in Navajo on the chalkboard. Jackson's students generated a vocabulary list in Navajo and English, and the class read the list from the chalkboard. Students dictated sentences using these vocabulary

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words, and the instructor used these key sentences to write a group story on the chalkboard. The story was typed and reproduced for students to read aloud in small groups.

Students used this growing body of student writing to increase fluency (Slate, Jackson & Goldtooth, 1989). They also read the bilingual *Rock Point Community School Newspaper*, Navajo language readers produced in the 1970s by the Native American Materials Development Center, and the bi-weekly Navajo language page in the *Navajo Times*.

Jackson's students wrote in Navajo for personal purposes, including notes for oral presentations, class notes, lists, personal journals, and rough drafts. Students also wrote for assignments, including Navajo jokes, oral histories transcribed for class presentations, radio scripts, essays on cultural issues, video scripts, and writing integrated with content area coursework. Peers who were fluent native speakers of Navajo edited these assignments.

Helen Dineyazhe enrolled in Navajo language literacy classes at Diné College and used community resources to gain proficiency in her ancestral language. Today she uses examples from her study of Navajo language and culture to inform her own teaching practice. As a dual language Navajo language teacher she uses her language to transform the educational setting.

Note

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