

Ten Tips for Teaching in Navajo Immersion Programs

- 1. You gotta believe!** A timid self-conscious use of Navajo communicates to the students that the teacher doesn't really believe in what s/he's doing. If the teacher doesn't believe in this, or doesn't really expect the students to be able to do this, the students will sense this. They will rise only to the teacher's low level of expectation. You've got to communicate confidence and expectation—even if you don't quite feel them yourself at first.
- 2. Stay in Navajo.** Teacher uses only Navajo. Teacher not only teaches in Navajo but also gives directions in Navajo and interacts with students in Navajo. The teacher creates a fully-Navajo language-environment.
- 3. Expect Students to talk Navajo.** Teacher must create a situation where students need Navajo: not just for instruction but also in communication with the teacher and interacting with the teacher. Teacher should set up instruction where students *must* talk Navajo to each other as well. The teacher should *encourage* students to communicate and interact with one another in Navajo as well.
- 4. Focus on doing things here and now.** Describing things is all right—but isn't terribly useful in getting things done. Recounting stories is all right—but telling what happened in the past doesn't help you know how to get things done now. Writing stories is all right—but it has the same problems as telling stories do plus students aren't talking while writing. Focus on the language needed to get things done here and now.
- 5. Focus on verbs.** Too many teachers teach only lists of nouns. Teachers should focus on verbs that are needed to get things done here and now: the action words of commands and requests.
- 6. Focus on only a few verbs**—sometimes only one—in a given lesson. Over several lessons, give students several forms of that verb. You want them to 'sense' the system of making verbs. You want them to try out verb-forms they've never heard. Some of the time—hopefully most of the time—they'll be right. But you don't really learn language until you strike out on your own.
- 7. Expect all students to talk meaningfully.** In some classes, teachers do talk all Navajo. Students respond in chorus if at all. One sees few students initiate communication in Navajo. Insist that students respond when spoken to, even if only to ask for help. It may be 'boring' to a teacher to make time for everyone to 'say it' in a meaningful situation. But if the teacher focuses on helping the students say and understand these things for real communication—s/he won't have time to become bored.
- 8. Keep it simple/consistent.** It's hard for many Navajo-speakers to realize just how hard all this is for non- or limited-Navajo speakers. Take small chunks; build on them. Be fairly consistent. Being consistent doesn't mean you can't make it fun.
- 9. Support and encourage students** to try new verbs-forms in their own sentences. Students learn by trying to communicate. In trying out a new language, students will make mistakes. But if they're too embarrassed to even try, they won't learn much. Don't laugh at students' mistakes. Use tactful ways to correct students. Really encourage students to 'take risks.'
- 10. Plan/assess/test.** In laying out a lesson, be explicit what you expect students to be able to do at the end of that lesson. Teachers are often surprised at how small they must 'chunk' these expectations. In the course of a lesson, or at the end of the lesson, formally or informally test all the students. Have the courage to plan the next lesson based on how the assessment of the last lesson turned out. If it's important, don't go on until almost everyone can do it. [WH NNLP 09/98]

—Navajo Nation Language Project, Division of Diné Education. *Directory of Secondary Navajo Language Programs*, 2000-2001, pp. 116-.