

Section III

Family and Community

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Family and Community Group Abstract

Issues:

1. All Native American languages are severely threatened.
2. The consciousness levels of Native American families about the threat of language loss tend to be low.
3. Native language is inseparable from cultural identity and spirituality.
4. The impact of non-Native cultural elements on Native American youths interferes with native language acquisition.
5. Language stabilization efforts must proceed in culturally appropriate ways.
6. New effective strategies for intergenerational language transmission can be implemented at various levels, from individual to tribal.
7. Hypercritical native speakers tend to discourage the efforts of less fluent learners.

Strategies:

Individual level: Native speakers must help latent speakers and non-speakers learn the native language by utilizing existing language learning material, taped stories, and by creating new materials.

Family level: Organize family reunions and family-based summertime and weekend language immersion activities; encourage families to limit the intrusion of English-language media; and establish parental support groups for native language.

Community level: Encourage senior citizens centers to have seniors use their native language with young children, for example in “language nests” at local preschools and Head Start centers; promote community seminars in the native language, community meetings and conferences about native language, language institutes for families and communities, and programs for parents of children in bilingual programs; and establish “banks” of language learning materials.

Tribal Nations level: Encourage elected officials to use and promote the native language; develop networks of Native American language supporters across tribal boundaries.

Promotion of attitudes: Use every means to promote native language and the virtues of bilingualism: radio announcements, air speakers’ testimonials, posters, bumper stickers, T-shirts. Document successful efforts.

Families and Community Group Summary

Some native languages may be less severely endangered than others, but all of them are threatened as the time honored ways of passing them on to the next generation are rapidly disappearing. Strategies that promote the intergenerational transmission of languages require community support; if they are imposed from outside, they are likely to encounter opposition.

Native languages are inseparable from cultural identity and spirituality. Since every community is different, language stabilization strategies will also differ from one place to another, if they are to be consistent with local customs. The concepts of language, identity, culture, and spirituality are highly complex, and some confusion is inevitable now that the schools are involved in the teaching of native language and literacy. One can and should ask whose responsibility and privilege it is to teach a native language, but the answer is unclear and varies from one context to another.

Within each community, native language transmission can occur at different levels. At the individual level, a fluent speaker can take the initiative to help less fluent ones improve their proficiency. One person's example may motivate others to do the same, and their apprentices can eventually become teachers.

These individual efforts often occur in one-on-one or small-group situations, but they can have a significant overall impact over time. The teachers should maintain a positive and encouraging rapport with the apprentices and refrain from scolding or shaming them for making mistakes. In addition to using whatever suitable materials they can find, the native speakers should also try to develop additional ones. If they are not literate in the language they can tape stories, songs, and interviews. If they are literate, they can produce written versions of their tapes as well as additional texts, including letters, readings, and poems.

Not only individuals but families can play an important role in language transmission. They can provide opportunities for meaningful interactions both in and out of the home. When outside influences such as television and English-speaking visitors intrude on the time intended for native language use, it may be necessary to schedule specific times, events, or places for the total and exclusive immersion in the home language. Families consisting of speakers as well as non-speakers must make a special effort to designate such times so that the non-speakers or limited speakers can have the opportunity to gain some understanding and some elementary communication skills in the home language. Family reunions provide additional opportunities for language learning and teaching. Weekend and summer visits to grandparents and other relatives add new, culturally-enriching experiences to those available at home, because of the different age-levels, voices, interests, and backgrounds of those involved.

It is important that families control and limit the intrusion of English-language media, especially television and videos, into their daily lives. Support

groups consisting of several families can be very effective in this area as well as in expanding the scope and richness of language learning, teaching, and use.

At the community level, a high priority should be the dissemination of information so that everyone becomes aware of the threat of language loss and the strategies for preventing or reversing it. Conferences and training sessions on cultural topics that reinforce language awareness and community identity should be well advertised and promoted, especially among educators and parents. The public is often unaware of the existence, availability, and location of resources that would serve their needs and interest at little or no cost to the user.

Each community can emphasize and demonstrate its language loyalty by posting signs, announcements, advertisements, and other messages in the local language, even if they already exist in English. Radio broadcasts, theatrical performances, art shows, and other special events can also be powerful tools for strengthening a community's cultural and linguistic identity.

Senior citizens can be a powerful language transmission resource. Many of them would welcome the opportunity to share their unique knowledge with students of all ages, and especially with young children in day-care centers. In today's economy, it is often necessary for both parents to go to work and miss the opportunity to give their children a traditional upbringing at home. These families would appreciate the linguistic and cultural continuity provided by the presence of senior citizens in day-care facilities. The seniors, on the other hand, could gain some financial independence and prestige.

At the tribal level, elected officials can support their native language through personal example, by using it and encouraging others to use it. Rather than using only English at public events attended by speakers as well as non-speakers of the tribal language, they could insist on simultaneous translation or interpretation. They could also develop networks of native language supporters across tribal boundaries.

To promote attitudes in support of native language use broadcast radio announcements that encourage individuals to learn the native language and not shame non-speakers, air speakers' testimonials in support of the native language, inform the general public about the virtues of bilingualism, encourage speakers of the native language to use it at conferences about language use, and create "If You Care About The Native Language, Use It" and "I Speak the Native Language to My Child" posters, bumper-stickers, radio ads, buttons, t-shirts, and so on—in the native language. Publicize as widely and as much as possible information on the threat of native language loss and encourage parents and grandparents to use and teach the native language and document the success, or lack thereof, of different reversing-language-shift efforts. Explain as widely as possible that western-based institutions like schools alone cannot rescue the native language; parents, families, and native communities must deal directly with the issue of language loss.

Disseminate information on native language preservation as effectively and as widely as possible to native communities. Translate information as appropriate and disseminate the information on promoting native languages in oral and/

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or written form as widely as possible. We need to ask the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) to help us produce brochures, radio announcements, articles, and other sources of information for wide distribution in native communities.

Individuals who attended the OBEMLA sponsored symposia here at Northern Arizona University need to try out as many of the language-preservation strategies discussed as they can and analyze what worked, what didn't, and why. Do not lose focus on the main goal — to promote the teaching and learning of the native language from grandparents and parents to children, across the generations. Demonstrate your own commitment to promoting native languages by using the strategies shared at the symposia.