

Project Update: Dakota Immersion Preschool at Pezihuṭazizi

Languages represent unique ways of seeing the world and are intimately connected with the social and cultural identity of those who speak them. Of the roughly 6,000 languages currently spoken throughout the world, linguists estimate that more than half could be lost during the next century. Particularly at risk are languages spoken only in small indigenous communities. One such language in Minnesota is the Dakota language which, like almost all other Native American Indian languages in the United States, is in imminent danger of being supplanted by English. The Dakota constitute one of the major Native American Indian peoples of the Upper Midwest region. The Dakota language is closely related to that of the Lakhota of present-day North and South Dakota, and the Nakoda or Assiniboine of Montana. These three peoples make up the nation known as the Sioux.

At Pezihuṭazizi (Upper Sioux Community), a Dakota reservation situated in southwestern Minnesota near the small town of Granite Falls, the number of Dakota speakers had dwindled to no more than 20 by the late 1990s. Most of these speakers were over the age of 60 and rarely used the Dakota language on a day-to-day basis, speaking English even among themselves. Recognizing the threat posed to Dakota culture by the loss of its native language, some members of the Pezihuṭazizi community began work on a project that aimed to produce an accurate and culturally sensitive Dakota dictionary. One product of this work has been a standardized orthography that is used for Dakota words in this article.

Important though the dictionary work is, the community realized that it was not sufficient in itself to save the Dakota language from extinction. In 1997, the Pezihuṭazizi tribal council decided to establish an immersion education program on the reservation as another component of language preservation. Immersion programs are based on the principle that language is best acquired at an early age through naturalistic use—that is, interaction and use focused on meaning-making and not memorization—and without the

constant presence of a dominant cultural language such as English. After receiving a one-year grant from the federal Administration for Native Americans to establish the program, the council hired tribal member Angela Wilson, a doctoral candidate in oral history at the University of Minnesota, to direct the program. In fall 1999, CURA provided additional support for the project through a Faculty Interactive Research Program grant to support the work of Bill Johnston, an applied linguist at the University of Minnesota who was hired by the tribal council as an outside consultant and teacher trainer. In light of the difficulties the program encountered, CURA is presenting this brief update on the project rather than a feature-length article.

Officially named “Pezihuṭazizi Wahoḥpi Wohdaḳapi Unspe” or “Pezihuṭazizi Language Learning Nest,” the immersion program was based on the language revitalization programs of the Maori in New Zealand and the Hawaiians in Hawai’i, two of the most successful such programs in the world. The program was structured around the

“language nests” originally devised by the Maori, in which children are immersed in the indigenous language from a very early age. The school opened on October 4, 1999, with six elders from Pezihuṭazizi as teachers and two University of Minnesota graduate students working as a classroom aide and curriculum coordinator, respectively. Within the first month, between 10 and 15 children aged one to five were enrolled in the program. A year-long curriculum was developed, based primarily on the Dakota calendar and its related activities and celebrations, and a more detailed curriculum was created for each week, broken down into five *hahunṭa* or “threads” reflecting five crucial aspects of Dakota life, one for each day of the preschool week. Pre-service and in-service training were provided to the tribal elders who taught in the program, and a great deal of attention was paid to the physical environment of the classroom.

One of the greatest successes of the program was its observance of the “Dakota Only” rule in the classroom. For the four hours of the program each morning, none of the teachers or staff



Photo by Bill Johnston

spoke a word of English. The children were exposed to nothing but Dakota during this time. An important part of the curriculum was the use of repeated linguistic routines that provided predictable, contextualized language to make acquisition easier; such routines included handshakes and a round dance at the beginning of each day, a prayer to the four directions sung at mid-morning, and another dance to end the morning. Other activities included the use of songs and games with predictable and repetitive linguistic components.

One important measure of the program's success is whether the children were learning the language. Researchers involved with the project observed both increasing indications of comprehension among children, as well as gradually longer and more complex utterances either in Dakota or a mixture of Dakota and English. Although children still preferred to speak English with each other, they increasingly used Dakota when interacting with adults. In addition, several parents reported that their children were speaking Dakota at home; one little girl had a special corner in her home, akin to the special Dakota classroom she attended, where she spoke only Dakota. Although the children did not achieve fluency, they did make significant progress in learning Dakota, and the most important condition for language learning—a supportive, input-rich, Dakota-only environment—was firmly established.

Although there were many successful elements in the immersion program at Pezihuṭazizi, the program ultimately proved difficult to sustain. The immersion approach that was used at the school is based on providing rich linguistic input for children, supported

by visual and tactile experiences, and requires using an interactive style of teaching and communication. However, some of the Dakota elders who taught in the program found it difficult to engage children one-on-one in conversation or interaction, or to describe aloud to children the actions they were performing. Some of the teachers were also reluctant to invent new vocabulary words for modern objects or recent technological inventions, believing that creating neologisms for these objects transgressed the bounds of their language.

For whatever reasons, after several months of the program, four of the Dakota teachers left the immersion school and established a rival Dakota language program elsewhere on the reservation. Described as “language classes” rather than full immersion and open to community members of all ages, the program became an alternative to the immersion school. Although the two remaining Dakota teachers in the immersion program were joined by a third elder, it was difficult to maintain the same level of linguistic input and interaction with fewer teachers. By the end of the year, struggles over control of the immersion program led to its demise.

The ultimate failure of the immersion program to establish itself at Pezihuṭazizi might serve as a cautionary tale for others who attempt to establish such language programs. First, practitioners should recognize that what appear as sound administrative or pedagogical approaches may conflict with cultural values and practices of the community. In this instance, certain key elements of the program—using unfamiliar teaching methodologies and

creating neologisms for modern objects and technologies—ultimately created insurmountable difficulties for some Dakota elders. Although it may not always be possible to work through such differences, a sensitivity to cultural values and a conscious effort to acknowledge them at the beginning may avert problems such as those that derailed the program at Pezihuṭazizi.

Second, the experience at Pezihuṭazizi strongly suggests that a mix of community elders and younger people is essential for such a program to work. Community elders bring wisdom and cultural knowledge, whereas young people can bring both energy and a greater openness (for instance, to new teaching methodologies). The Hawaiian immersion experience has shown that effective teachers do not need to be native speakers of the language, especially if other native speakers are on hand as resources. Because the young people of a community offer the greatest hope for the future preservation of language, including young teachers and aides—even non-native speakers of the language—is an important component of a successful immersion program.

Finally, it is critical that immersion programs garner community support from the beginning. Although a few dedicated participants can create an immersion program, the community will that is necessary to successfully sustain such programs over the long run can come only from broad-based support.

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