A Direct Role for Universities in Language Revitalization

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Abstract

As the sparse literature on university involvement in indigenous language revitalization suggests, universities have had a limited role in local indigenous language revitalization endeavours. Especially in situations of high language diversity, the practical restraints of not being able to centralize diverse local language courses (hence low numbers of students), and the non-academic backgrounds of many learners, suggest detriments from the institution’s perspective. From the perspective of indigenous communities, indigenous intellectual property rights of languages, unique curricular needs, the fact that fluent speakers and instructors are often in their 70s and 80s, and the very history of endemic disadvantage in education, all add to the equation. Through more than 15 years of experience with more than ten indigenous languages in British Columbia and Canada usually considered “moribund,” the local collaborations and partnerships of Simon Fraser University Kamloops in many First Nations communities have affirmed the role of universities in language revitalization, given trained professionals who work at the local level and in close contact with elders and speakers of languages; and given the fact that, paradoxically, the “institutionalization” of language revival efforts can have interesting and unexpected long-term local results. This paper will discuss various case studies and scenarios of challenges and successes of a university working locally with communities in language revitalization in a regional situation of high language diversity.

The Context of Language Revitalization Efforts in Developing Regions

Languages in many countries exist in a multi-layered linguistic ecology that includes international languages (e.g., English), an official language, various regional languages, and local languages particular to a specific community. The focus of this study is the latter category of language. These languages are characterized by a) limited geographic distribution, b) little or no printed texts, c) a dwindling community of native speakers, and d) little presence in the public education system. Such languages tend to be indigenous, pre-dating the regional, national and international languages in the locality, and are often in danger of being displaced by one of the languages of a more powerful speech community.

The relevance for the language situation in developing regions is that they tend to be highly diverse linguistically, and can sometimes contain a large number of such languages. The island of New Guinea is an extreme example; it is home to as many as 1,000 distinct languages. There are many counterproductive practices that have been seen in the context of development in these areas; one such example is the educational error of attempting immersion of monolinguals in a different, dominant language at the initial stages of schooling, resulting in poor literacy and numeracy achievement in the system (Perry and Edmondson, 2000). The history of indigenous languages being displaced by more powerful languages linked to the development process is well documented and we will not go into it here. One specific factor in the case of British Columbia languages deserves mention, however. For two to three generations between the 1930s and 1970s, intergenerational transmission of languages was disrupted by
the forced attendance of Aboriginal children in Indian Residential Schools, where the Aboriginal language was literally beaten out of many children, or they were shamed and humiliated for using their indigenous language. Coupled with the dominance of English in the workplace and in the public education system since the 1960s, the use of English has completely infiltrated First Nations communities.

The focus in this paper is what to do once local languages begin to be displaced by new ones. The process of language revitalization has been studied in North America, Europe and Australia, and these might serve as models for areas that right now find themselves somewhat earlier in the process of development (e.g., Hinton, 2001, in Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Mühlhäusler, 2002, Ignace, 1998). We will outline our experience with post-secondary language education in British Columbia, Canada, and particularly in providing language instruction in First Nations languages (the term used for aboriginal languages in Canada) to members of the communities in which the languages are spoken. Many of these languages are nearly moribund and all of them are threatened with extinction unless revitalization programs can change the course of events.

In situations like this, university language programs are not normally considered a key part of the revitalization process. Much has been written about early childhood education programs (e.g., Maori language nests, see King, 2001), but there is little on the role of university training in support of language revitalization. We will present an overview of how university courses are used in support of revitalization efforts in British Columbia, for a number of different languages.

**The Paradox of Expertise and Accessibility**

An inventory of the tools needed to mount a language revitalization program would reveal that it is indeed a daunting task. Revitalization programs require high-level expertise, but this is rarely available in a target community. The expertise required often means the skill to develop primary sources, such as teaching materials and dictionaries, since the languages themselves are often poorly documented.

A second characteristic of revitalization programs is that it is difficult to deploy the resources needed to deliver this expertise and training to the communities in a sustainable manner. That is because they are usually scattered and remote, i.e., not near a centre which could provide the needed resources. This creates a paradox – the sophistication of the training and resources needed is high, and the places where they are most needed have the biggest problem in accessing them.

It is clear that university training for teachers and speakers who want to upgrade their incomplete language skills has a role in revitalization (Johns and Mazurkewich, 2001). To achieve sustainability, there needs to be room for advancement beyond low fluency, and that requires integration of language instruction at all levels of the educational system. The answer we advocate for the university level is to take selected university courses into communities and train students there. They will have a better chance of remaining there to take over roles in the revitalization effort.

We are going to describe a specific university program that puts this model into practice. That is not to say that it was originally envisioned as a direct part of language revitalization; rather it was a more general effort in the early 1990s to bring post-secondary education into communities where people lived. It was also thought the program could be used to train indigenous language teachers, which is indeed something that it has accomplished. But the program continues to teach new learners, mostly mature adults as opposed to university-aged students, who had not previously been exposed to their ancestral language. This has been an unexpected positive result.
Challenges Facing University Programming in Direct Support of Language Revitalization

A number of challenges face any university trying to operate one of these programs. The first is a relatively high cost per student. The cheapest way to serve students is to gather a large number of them into a centrally located hall and lecture them; this program operates on a radically different logistical basis. Universities and the communities have to decide that the cost is worth it. With attrition from one level to the next and the diversity of outcomes among a few learners, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain teaching activity on this scale.

Highly diverse language areas require a multiplicity of resources. Standardized teaching material is therefore a problem. In British Columbia, there are some 30 languages, eight in the Yukon. Each language has distinct local dialects that make it difficult for learners to communicate with other speakers. It is even difficult at times to determine whether a given local variety is a dialect or a distinct language. On that count we take guidance from the community.

Language learners themselves may not be prepared, in the conventional sense, for university-level instruction. When it comes to the goal of language revitalization, however, the balance between the traditional cultural knowledge of speakers and elders and the experience-based knowledge of learners levels the playing field for them. Under such conditions, non-traditional learners can make notable progress without sacrificing standards.

During the past decades, First Nations communities have become aware of the issue of intellectual cultural property and its appropriation by outside academics and entrepreneurs. In the absence of legislation that protects indigenous cultural property, First Nations communities have increasingly insisted on language materials as being a fundamental part of their heritage rights (see Bell, 2008; Ignace and Ignace, 2008). The success of collaboration rests in the respect on the part of partners for the First Nation's cultural property.

Lachler (2009) has alerted us to another paradox caused by the booming interest in Haida language learning in Southeastern Alaska on the one hand, and the shrinking resource of fluent speakers on the other:

As a direct result of the increased demand for language instruction, many of these intermediate students now find themselves spending more time teaching the language to beginners than working with the remaining fluent elders to improve their own abilities with the language. In some ways, the more they teach, the less they learn.

This conundrum is difficult to deal with, but can be partially addressed by mentorship programs (see below).

Community/University Partnerships Can Unravel the Paradox of Expertise and Accessibility

Today, First Nations communities in British Columbia and the Yukon typically have only a shrinking number of elderly speakers left. Elderly fluent speakers often have little occasion to use their language with peers, let alone younger generations. Next to the shrinking resource of fluent speakers who grew up with the indigenous language as their first language, each speech community has from a few to a few dozen passive speakers – individuals usually in their 40s to 60s who understand the language. For reasons of disrupted early language socialization, these individuals understand their mother tongue to a good degree, but are not able to speak it (see Government of Canada, 2005; Ignace and Markey, 2004; Government of Canada, 1996).

Throughout British Columbia and Yukon First Nations speech communities, few children still
acquire their language in the home. Predictably, school programs where First Nations languages are taught as second languages have had limited success in producing good proficiency among younger generations, although an immersion program in a Secwepemc community has shown a marked increase in communicative competence among children. With the exception of a small number of households in a few languages (Carrier, Chilcotin, Kaska, Gitksan), English is the “power language” that has become the language of everyday communication, not only with the outside world but also within First Nations communities. As elderly speakers pass on, the practical function of the language has increasingly given way to a symbolic function of the language as a mark of First Nations identity and heritage, its use more and more confined to formulaic language used in prayers at meetings, greetings and leave-taking, and in opening formulae of public speeches.

Nonetheless a growing number of people in First Nations communities throughout Canada have embarked on the project of language revitalization in their communities. As language practitioners have realized, beyond archiving or “pickling” (Hinton, 2001) the indigenous language, this entails producing a critical number of new proficient speakers of the language who will not only prevent its extinction, but who are also crucial to any future efforts toward transmitting the language. As Clarence Louie, the Chief of one Interior Salish First Nation speech community reminded one of the authors, “if we still have a dozen speakers in thirty years because some of our younger people become fluent, then at least we are maintaining the present status quo” (cited in Ignace, 1998).

We will cite some examples from communities who currently work with Simon Fraser University through SFU Kamloops. The largest community is the one based in Kamloops, part of the Secwepemc or Shuswap nation.

Secwepemctsin (Shuswap language), an Interior Salish language, is the ancestral language of some 7,000 indigenous people in the Shuswap Nation in British Columbia. About 60% of them live in 17 reserve communities. Data from the mid-1990s suggest that only 3.5% of Secwepemc people still spoke the language (Ignace, 1995, 1998). By 2004, Secwepemctsin had some 200 remaining fluent speakers, nearly all of them 60 and older (Ignace and Markey, 2004). Their number varies by community, with some communities having between zero to a few speakers left, others 20 or more. About 30 speakers and learners have attended university courses and graduated with language proficiency certificates, most of whom are the current language teachers in Secwepemctsin language programs.

Other revitalization projects our program takes part in are on a much smaller scale, as summarized below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Alternate name</th>
<th>Language family</th>
<th>Estimated number of fluent speakers in Canada</th>
<th>Current learners</th>
<th>Certificate holders (including summer 2009 graduates)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secwepemctsin</td>
<td>Shuswap</td>
<td>Salish</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downriver Halkomelem</td>
<td>Katzie</td>
<td>Salish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St’at’imcets</td>
<td>Lillooet (Upper and Lower)</td>
<td>Salish</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upriver Halkomelem</td>
<td>Halq’emeylem</td>
<td>Salish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xaad Kil</td>
<td>Haida (Masset)</td>
<td>Haida</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In most of the above language revitalization partnerships, language learning efforts involve a variety of delivery methods for exposing learners to their language.

Language classes are offered in the First Nations community in regular scheduled sessions. These are typically taught by a fluent speaker who is literate in the language and has experience in teaching it. SFU Kamloops offers a set of six language courses (each at 39-40 hours of instruction) at three levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced).

Why university credit courses? In nearly all of the communities that are in partnership with SFU Kamloops, the community-based university credit courses offer the only long-term, structured, resourced venues for local First Nations language learning among adults. According to feedback from communities, it is precisely these aspects that make credit courses desirable. This is coupled with the fact that language courses are taught by instructors in whom the local community has faith, and who are deemed as qualified externally by the university. Learners have said that language classes as credit courses encourage them to work towards the goal of passing the course, and thus it challenges them to study and to progress in their learning of the language, and to stay in the course rather than dropping out in light of other priorities. The First Nation community’s sponsorship of participants’ tuition upon proof of attendance and completion further challenges students to complete and pass a course. The combination of the courses into an undergraduate certificate enables students to work towards a credential recognized by local school districts and First Nations, which not only generates morale and professional recognition, but translates into jobs and remuneration.

Among First Nations adults for whom universities represent the interests and institutions of colonizers, the First Nations language courses offered in First Nations communities also provide safe opportunities for learning. Safe here means – especially in light of residential schools – an environment where learners can practice their ancestral language among like-minded peers without being shamed for making mistakes. Students appreciate graduating at the annual SFU Kamloops convocation amidst family, friends and peers.

**Master-Apprentice Learning**

Based on her work with critically endangered California languages, Leanne Hinton described and advocated this one-on-one approach to learning (Hinton, 2001, 2002). It is well suited to languages that have a small number of speakers left, and only a small number of highly motivated learners. Since 1995, SFU Kamloops has offered Master-Apprentice training through
directed-study courses, each requiring 40 hours of contact work with a fluent speaker/teacher, combined with evidence of 80 hours of study, and an evaluation of student progress by a second fluent speaker.

In addition to the language experience they offer, the master-apprentice courses expose students to the traditional indigenous knowledge and practices of their elders, allowing them to learn and re-learn cultural teachings from their elders. Although mediated by an outside institution (SFU) with a home in the First Nations community, such courses allow students to get in touch with their cultural identity and traditions. The quote below attests to this valuable function of master-apprentice courses:

“This [SFU Kamloops] Program enables our people to learn and use our beautiful language where it belongs. We are able to tie our language to our way of life and our land, giving us a close connection to our ancestors. We are becoming a link between our elders and our children, learning and passing on our language and way of life.” (Neawana John, St’at’imc)

**Immersion and Outdoor “Hands-on” Courses**

A third type of language course are mini-immersion courses usually offered over an intensive 7-8 day period of all-day activities and instruction or longer, up to four weeks. These courses not only offer intensive exposure to and practice of the spoken language, but include excursions to traditional resource gathering locations (root plant harvesting, berry-picking, harvesting and preparation of traditional medicines, spear-fishing for salmon), along with demonstrations and manufacture of traditional crafts (basketry, drum-making, hemp-making).

Unravelling the paradox of university/community partnerships for the purpose of local indigenous language revitalization entails transcending traditional boundaries of academy versus community, professor versus student, in favour of inclusive principles that enable language revitalization in light of the cultural protocols of the First Nations community. The principles of decolonized research methodologies and practices which Smith (1999) articulated for indigenous research equally apply to indigenous/university partnerships which serve the purpose of language revitalization. The latter employ what may appear as unusual methods of research, through collaborative work of elders in focus groups which gather data, and authorize knowledge within the indigenous protocol of an audience of experts. Some years ago, the late Skeetchestn elder Nellie Taylor characterized Secwépemc indigenous knowledge as follows:

Long time ago, Secwépemc people looked after the land, and all the animals and plants, everything in it. That’s why they always had plenty to fish. They had deer to hunt and plants to gather for food and medicine. But they had to practice for it, and learn about everything on the land first for a long time. Then they knew how to look after it. It was also important for the elders to share each others’ knowledge. That was how they learned and built up their understanding. What knowledge they shared had to be exact. Not like today, you tell somebody something and they turn around and tell something else (quoted in Ignace, 2008).

The forum of community language sessions and focus group recording sessions with elders recreates the principles of sharing knowledge, as well as generating and transmitting exact and authorized knowledge in the process of sharing and communicating.

Finally, the community courses support and enable the use of the language among those who still know it, and between speakers and learners. They thus play a vital role in the important language revitalization step (see Fishman, 1991) of generating and promoting the use of the critically endangered language. While such efforts are a long way removed from authentic
ongoing use and intergenerational transmission of a language in everyday life, they generate and maintain interest in the project of language revitalization, and help to build a new generation of speakers who may in the end be the ones who will keep the language from extinction. In this way, a university has become – to some extent unintentionally – a tool of language revitalization.

References

Anderson, M S and Ignace, M 2008 Visible Grammar: Sm’algyax grammar resources - twenty user-friendly modules on key Sm’algyax structures. Published on behalf of the Ts’msyen Nation by Wap Sigatgyet, School District 52, Prince Rupert, British Columbia.


Cook, E, Russell, S and Myers, M [manuscript] A Practical Grammar of Tsilhqot’in.


Most language revitalization projects focus on documenting language. A researcher registers data in the form of video or audio recording, or vocabulary and grammar notes, and then processes this material via. Enough languages into their work as informants whose role in the research process is limited to the passive transfer of raw linguistic data. Eventually a publication contributes to the researcher's professional. Language revitalization efforts are also hindered by a lack of interest from the young people and multigenerational shame that exists for many Indigenous nations (McCarty et al., 2006). Krauss (1998) quotes the late Eileen MacLean at a gathering of bilingual educators who said, â€œwe don't need more linguists - rather what we need is good psychiatrists.â€ The role of the university in the training of native language teachers: Labrador. In L. Hinton, & K. Hale (Eds.), The green book of language revitalization in practice (pp. 355-366). San Diego, CA: Academic Press. Language Documentation & Conservation Vol. 9, 2015 Language research and revitalization through a community-university partnership 294 numbers of Listuguj parents from teaching Mi'gmaq to their children at all. The result was a familiar three-generation cycle in which a generation of monolingual Mi'gmaq speakers raised a bilingual generation educated in English schools whose children speak only English (Sarkar & Metallic 2009). Some of the efforts have grown out of programs at the LED, whose mission is to support Listuguj students in all levels of their studies both in and outside of the community. The LED now offers Mi'gmaq language classes for adults as well as a nursery immersion program for preschool-aged children, which began in 2011.