

Indigenous Youth and Language Revitalization

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[My grandmother's] mom, she...went to school during the boarding schools and she was whipped for knowing her language...so she didn't want her kids to grow up like that, so she didn't teach them at all.
– Youth interview, April 19, 2006

For me [the Native language is] important because it's *my* language and I should speak my language rather than other people's language...when I speak the language, I think it makes me more Pima and that I can show it to people that I am Pima. – Youth interview, June 1, 2004

These kids,...they know how to speak Navajo, but many times they might be ashamed or have that self-hate within themselves. That has been pumped into them.... It's being told that Navajo is stupid....to speak Indian is the way of the devil....Many times the older people will really encourage English so that [children] can make it in the White world.... – Youth interview, May 6, 2004

And this is why children have lost their identity; they do not know where they belong. They can't speak Indian. They just go with the flow, which is sometimes not good. What can you say? – Elder interview, December 7, 2005

These statements, just a few from thousands of pages of interview transcripts we collected as part of a large-scale study of Native American language shift in the U.S. Southwest¹, illuminate the complex and often conflicting attitudes and ideologies underlying language shift and revitalization among contemporary Indigenous youth. The excerpts show youth to be keenly aware of the history of linguistic oppression that has marginalized their ancestral languages, even as the youth resist and push back. Also evident in these statements are the generational disjuncts between adults who, out of love and concern for their children, made conscious decisions to socialize them in English, with the result being seemingly oppositional youth and adult identities.

In this chapter we examine the everyday, “on the ground” language practices of Native American youth in settings of rapid language shift. While our research documents the conditions that lead to language shift, it also illuminates the sociolinguistic resources present within Indigenous communities, the possibilities for youth self-empowerment, and their potential as agents of language revitalization. We focus on two areas of our research: (1) youth communicative repertoires, and (2) youth language attitudes and ideologies. As we show, Native youth are growing up in highly complex sociolinguistic environments that defy simplistic assessments of their linguistic abilities, either-or dichotomies (i.e., that they must choose between *either* the Native language *or* English), and easy “staging” of language shift.

Language shift and retention “on the ground”

In the spring of 2001, we embarked on a multi-year, federally funded research project to examine the impact of Native language shift and retention on American Indian students' language learning, identity formation, and academic achievement. Our goal was to investigate how language shift, and efforts to counter the

shift, are experienced “on the ground” by youth. For the next five years, we worked closely with five Indigenous communities in the U.S. Southwest. The participating sites – Ak Wijid Community School (AWCS), Bahidaj High School (BHS), Beautiful Mountain Community School (BMCS), Black Foothills Unified School District (BFUSD) and U:s K:ek Community School (UKCS) – represented a cross-section of rural/urban settings and school types. Five Native American languages and three language families were represented in the study:

1. Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham, mutually intelligible varieties of O’odham, a Uto-Aztecan language with some 20,000 speakers in the southwestern U.S. and Sonora, Mexico;
2. Navajo, an Athabaskan language with 178,000 speakers;
3. Pee Posh or Maricopa, a Yuman language with less than a dozen speakers; and
4. a Native American language spoken by 100-150 people in several communities in which Spanish and English also are used in everyday communication. (At the request of some tribal members, we do not name the Indigenous language for this site.)

Altogether, seven schools were represented in our study, including community-controlled schools, urban public schools, and a charter school with an enrollment of 2,039 Native American students.

This was an applied, action-oriented project, and local Indigenous community research collaborators (CRCs) worked closely with us, validating research protocols, gathering data, and participating in university courses through the American Indian Language Development Institute on ethnographic and sociolinguistic research methods, language immersion, and language planning.

We employed an ethnographic methodology, making 80 site visits over the course of five years for data collection, debriefing and planning with CRCs, and reporting back to tribal councils, education committees, and other stakeholders and participants. Data collection included demographic records, observations of language use in and out of school, student achievement data, sociolinguistic questionnaires, and 212 in-depth interviews with adults and youth. The qualitative data alone produced more than 3,300 pages of single-spaced text.

We turn now to our findings.

Youth communicative repertoires

In analyzing our data, we borrow from Marilyn Martin-Jones and Katherine Jones’s (2000) discussion of *communicative* or *group repertoires* and Ofelia García’s (2009) notions of *heteroglossia* and *translanguaging*. The construct of communicative repertoire signals varying degrees of expertise in different languages and “the complex ways in which people draw on the language and literacy resources available to them as they take on different identities in different domains of their lives” (Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000, p. 2). Moreover, “people draw on and combine the codes in their communicative repertoire when they speak and write” (Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000, p. 7). García’s application of Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia to bilingual education similarly emphasizes the dynamic character of bi-/multilingualism in which “language practices are multiple and ever adjusting to the multilingual multimodal terrain” of particular communicative settings and acts (2009, p. 53). The notion of translanguaging gets at the fact that “languages are not compartmentalized in a diglossic situation, but rather they overlap, intersect, and interconnect” in a fusion of languages, dialects, and semiotic systems, all of which are part of an individual’s and a group’s communicative repertoire (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007, p. 10-12).

How do these concepts relate to the language practices of Indigenous youth? Figure 1 shows educators’ assessments on questionnaires (n=102) of the percentage of their students who hear the Native language spoken at home. As can be seen, most educators said that only a few of their students were likely to hear the Native language spoken in their home environments, with Navajo being the single exception.

Compare this to Figure 2 – youths’ self-reports of their home language environments. Again, the largest number of youth who reported hearing the Native language spoken “all the time,” speaking it themselves, and being spoken *to* by Native-speaking parents and grandparents, were Navajo youth. But even youth from the late-shift communities reported that their parents and grandparents spoke the Native language, but typically not *to them*.

At the time of the study, only Navajo had a formal Native-language proficiency assessment. Thus, the primary data for our assessments Indigenous-language proficiency are self-reports and teacher assessments –

protocols that are not without problems, but that have been validated in other studies, most notably the Navajo Reading Study conducted by Bernard Spolsky and his colleagues in the 1960s and 1970s (Spolsky, 1975) and more recently by Agnes and Wayne Holm (1995) and Paul Platero (2001) with Navajo students.

As Figure 3 indicates, most educators (n=102) reported that very few of their students were fluent speakers of the Indigenous language. This was poignantly illustrated in the metaphors adults used to describe the Native language:

“There is this *afterglow* of a language... “[T]here are only *remnants* of an active Native language”... The Native language is *withering away*...”

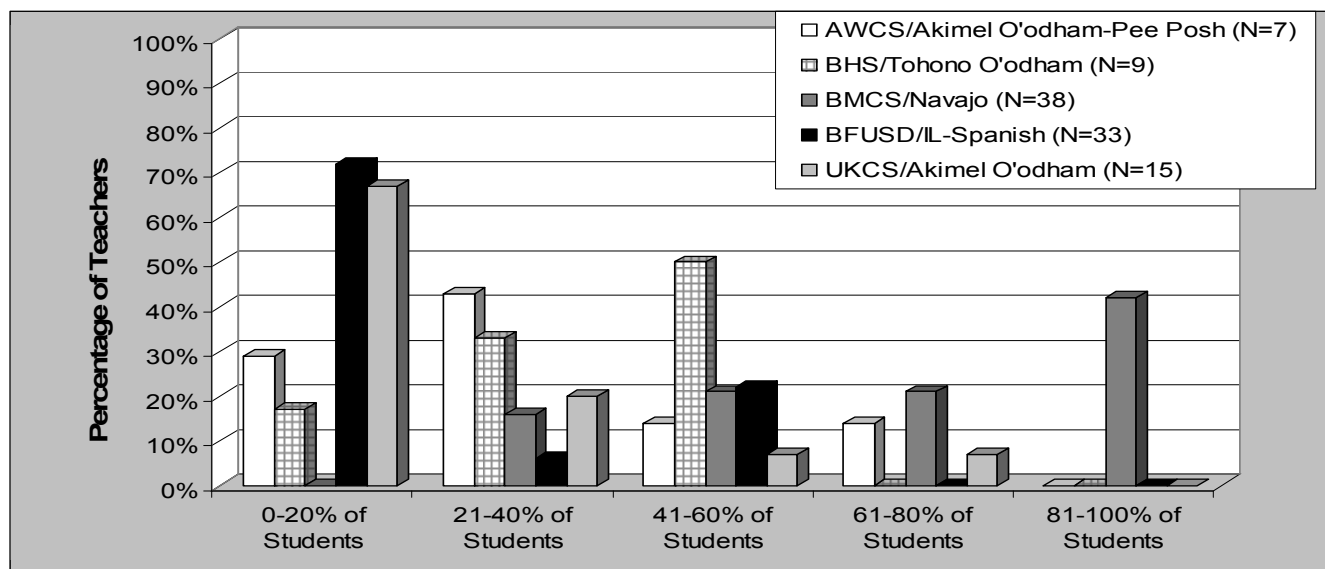


Figure 1. Educators' assessments of the percentage of youth who hear the Indigenous language (IL) spoken at home

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Teacher Questionnaires. AWCS=Ak Wijid Community School; BHS=Bahidaj High School; BFUSD=Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS=Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS=U:s K:ek Community School. IL=Indigenous language.

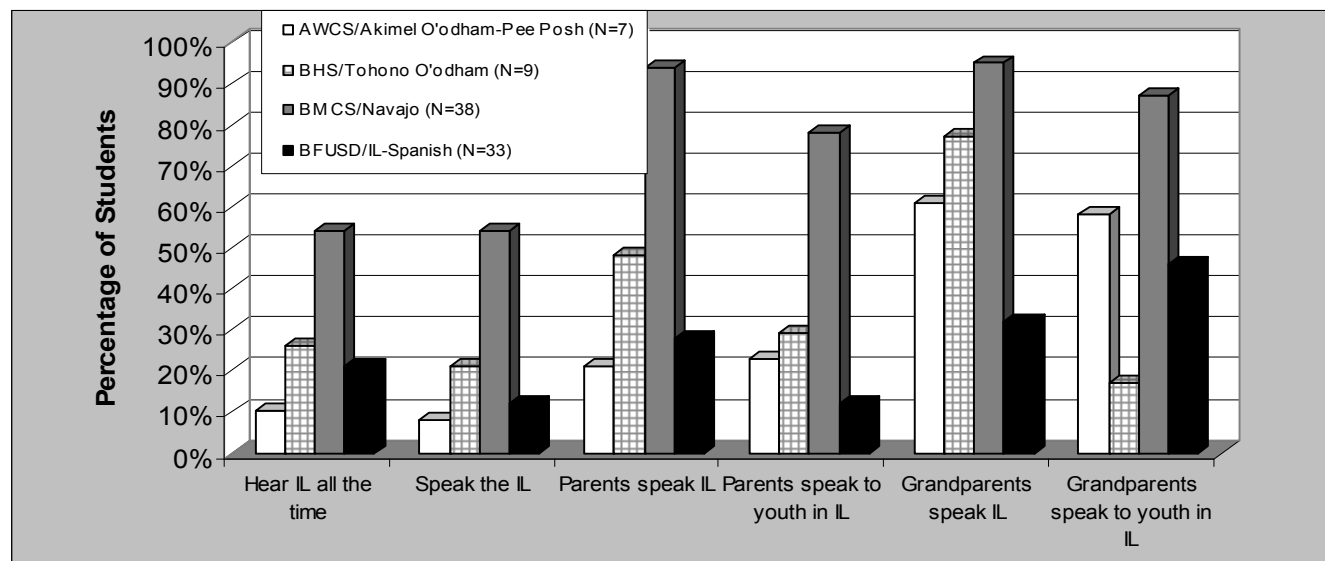


Figure 2. Youth self-reports of who speaks the Indigenous language

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS=Ak Wijid Community School; BHS=Bahidaj High School; BFUSD=Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS=Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS=U:s K:ek Community School. IL=Indigenous language.

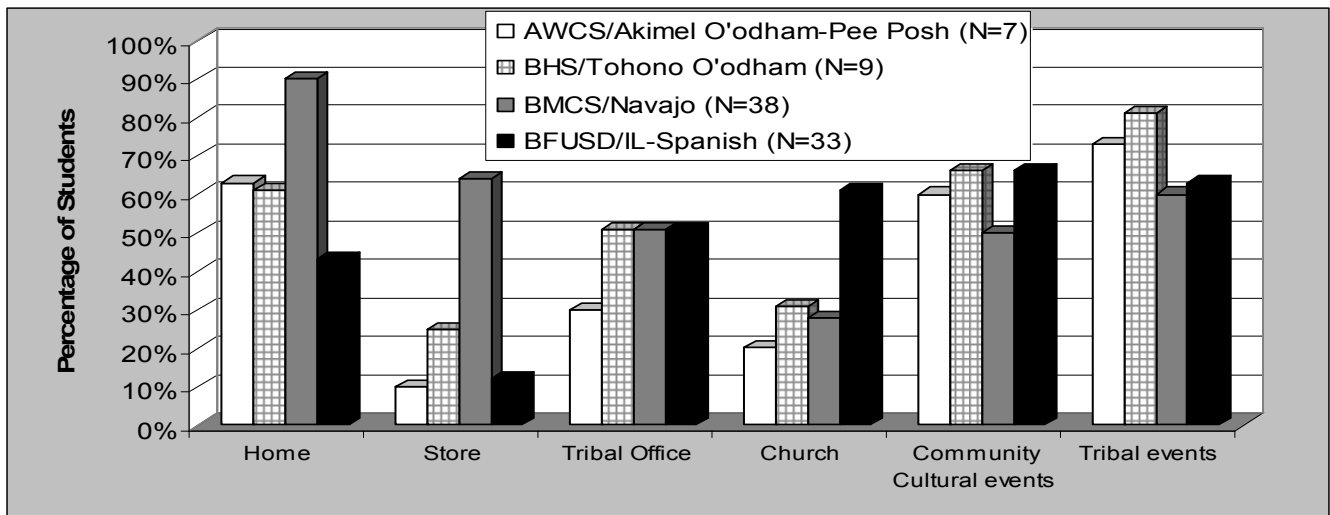


Figure 3. Youth self-reports of where they hear the Indigenous language spoken in the community

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS=Ak Wijid Community School; BHS=Bahidaj High School; BFUSD=Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS=Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS=U:s K:ek Community School. IL=Indigenous language.

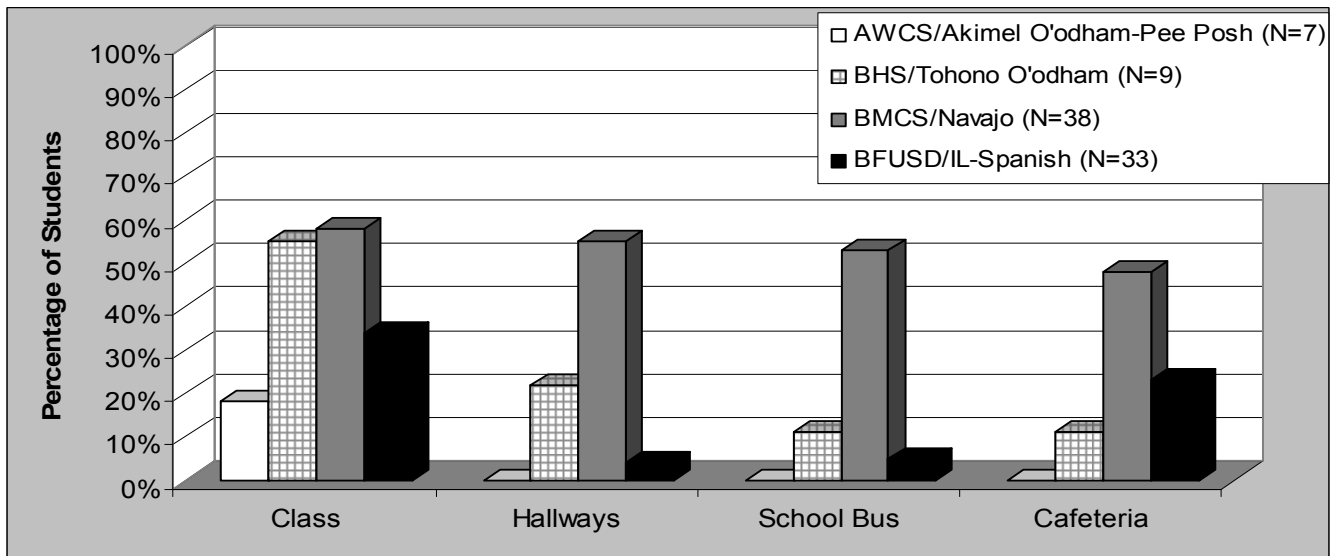


Figure 4. Youth self-reports of where they hear the Indigenous language spoken at school

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS=Ak Wijid Community School; BHS=Bahidaj High School; BFUSD=Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS=Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS=U:s K:ek Community School. IL=Indigenous language.

Figure 4 shows youth reports of Native language use at school. BHS and BMCS had the most school-based Native language use, and 55% to 58% of students, respectively, reported hearing and using Tohono O'odham (BHS) and Navajo (BMCS) in class. Twenty-two percent of BHS students and 55 percent of BMCS students reported hearing the Indigenous language informally in the hallways. In contrast, no AWCS students reported hearing Akimel O'odham or Pee Posh spoken outside the classrooms designated for Indigenous language teaching.

The interview data further illuminate these findings. At our Akimel O’odham site, where all participants – youth and adults – agreed that few youth speak Akimel O’odham as a primary language, teachers nonetheless told us about students whom they knew spoke O’odham but were “just not speaking [it in school].” A 12-year-old revealed that he had learned both Pee Posh and O’odham from his grandmother as a young child; his grandmother still speaks to him in Pee Posh, he said, and both Pee Posh and O’odham are spoken at home. A 13-year-old revealed that her friend interacts with her parents in O’odham at home: “[H]er mom talks it to her and she can understand.”

Youth also described parents using different languages in different domains:

“My dad speaks English when he is working...and my mom speaks both...English and [the Native language]. But if they go outside [the reservation], they would speak English.”

Similarly, youth reported different languages being used with family members of different generations, as reflected in one youth’s account that her father “talks [the Native language] when he is talking to the elders” but uses English or Spanish with younger generations. When asked what language his parents and grandparents speak at home, one youth reported, “sometimes [the Native language], sometimes Spanish, and then English.”

Youth also reported using different languages with different siblings, depending upon sibling order: “To my brothers I use Spanish,” one youth stated, “[except with the youngest because] he doesn’t understand Spanish that well.” And Navajo youth insisted that, “everyone speaks Navajo out here.”

In short, we found complex linguistic ecologies and communicative repertoires both within and across community contexts. Within these rapidly changing linguistic ecologies, youth make use of multiple sociolinguistic resources and deploy hybrid discursive practices to negotiate their multilingual, multicultural worlds. Youth overwhelmingly reported being “overhearers” of the Native language in their homes and communities, even if they did not represent themselves as fluent Native language speakers. Their communicative repertoires also included diverse varieties of English (e.g., Navajo English, O’odham English) and in some cases, Spanish. We did *not* find “semi-lingual” children, although that stereotype persists (see MacSwan, 2000 and Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1986, for a critique of semilingualism). One multilingual educator summed up these language practices this way:

The elders speak Spanish, the Native language, “and maybe a little English”; the “next generation speaks English, Spanish and [the Native language]” and is literate in all three; while the “generation that is coming up...is English only....So we have a trilingual family but each generation is slightly different than the one before it” (Educator interview, March 30, 2004).

Although these hybrid communicative repertoires provide clear evidence of language shift, they also represent resources that can be strategically repositioned to counter the shift – a topic we take up in our conclusions.

Youth language attitudes and ideologies

Indigenous youth in our study expressed both positive and negative attitudes and ideologies toward English and the Native/heritage language. Not surprisingly, youth placed a utilitarian value on English, describing it as universal, a “business language,” and a “language of survival.” English also was viewed as a marker of social class and prestige. For example, reflecting on her grandchildren’s language preferences, an elder commented, “And I think as they get older...they think they are more civilized if they can just speak English [only]” (Elder interview, August 9, 2006).

But youth also viewed English as an alien, intrusive language – a tool for assimilation and conquest. These language ideologies were repeatedly expressed in the context of Anglo-American schooling. “Some [parents and grandparents] had really bad experiences in school, so they said, ‘Forget it [speaking the Native language]....It’s all English, English, English,’” one educator said. Youth described these experiences in trenchant terms, as in the statement of a 16-year old who asserted that Whites had literally killed his ancestors with words: “[A] long time ago they [Whites] killed Navajos with their White tongue even though we don’t know what they said.”

Even if they were not fluent speakers of the tribal language, youth regularly referenced sentimental

attachments to their heritage languages, emphasizing their centrality as markers of a unique and local Indigenous identity. The Native language is “my cultural language,” one youth said. Another described his heritage language as “my blood language.” Still another said: “Knowing [the Native language] helps me not to lose the identity of who I am, of where I come from.”

Both youth and adults placed a utilitarian value on the Indigenous language and on bi-/multilingualism – a value not typically associated with minoritized languages or their speakers. “I get the best of both worlds,” a Navajo youth stated, adding that he wanted to become a medical doctor “and to do that I have to know how to communicate with patients in Navajo and...English.” Knowing the Native language “gives you a chance to communicate with elders,” another youth pointed out, “and...to listen to [and learn from] what they have to say.”

In these discourses, youth also voiced concern about the endangered status of their heritage languages. Maintaining the Native language is important, one young man said, “because the language is dying out...[the Indigenous language] is supposed to be spoken at all times in the house..., and these parents, they should not be treating their [language] like this.” “[R]ight now, we’re losing it,” another youth maintained, “...so it’s very important for me to learn about it and to speak it.”

At the same time, both youth and adults acknowledged language practices that ran counter to these expressed beliefs. The Native language “is just the past,” one youth claimed – an attitude reiterated by some educators, who described the Native language as “dead” to many of their students.

In explaining these negative attitudes, participants repeatedly referenced the legacy of colonial schooling. “Parents said they did not speak to their children in [the Indigenous language] because of shame and guilt,” an educator stated. “It’s being told that [the Native language] is stupid,” a 16-year-old declared, adding: “You know, you forsake who you are, you give up having to learn [the Native language]...in order to accommodate the mainstream life.”

Linguistic shame and guilt lead some youth to deny or “hide” their Native language abilities and identities. Youth “are judged by other people that speak English more clear than they do,” one youth stated, “and they just kind of feel dirty about the whole thing, and that’s why they put on a fake front and try to make people believe they speak more English than [the Indigenous language].”

Feelings of language shame are compounded by youth insecurities about their language abilities. “They’re afraid they’re going to make mistakes,” an educator explained, “and if they do, they think that [other] students will start laughing about them.”

These discourses point to a complex array of ideological forces that underpin language practices and identities among Native American youth. On the one hand, both youth and adults express pride in their heritage language, fusing it symbolically to their emplacement within particular Indigenous homelands and cultural worlds. Further, youth recognize that their heritage languages are endangered. On the other hand, youth are not immune to the social pressures that equate speaking the Native language with backwardness and traditionalism, and English with modernity and success. Thus, youth may come to believe they must make an either-or choice: “either a nostalgic minority identity and no economic opportunity..., or economic opportunity and leaving the minority language behind” (McCarty, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Magga, 2008, p. 301).

Summing up

Data from this large-scale study and other recent studies of Indigenous youth and bilingualism (e.g., Lee, 2007; 2009; Messing, 2009; Nicholas, 2008; 2009; Wyman, 2009; see also McCarty & Wyman, 2009) show language shift in Indigenous communities to be much more complex than the simple replacement of one language by another. The Native youth in our study are drawing upon multiple semiotic systems for different purposes and contingencies. Even in communities with few Native speakers, children are likely to be “overhearers” of one or more Native languages and varieties thereof at home, at school, and in their communities. These varieties mark speakers’ locale, age, and social status – knowledge tacitly acquired by children in specific sociocultural contexts. Their communicative repertoires include diverse and uneven linguistic expertise (receptive, spoken, written) in different varieties of the Native language, English, and in some cases, a regionally valued third language such as Spanish. Some youth have high levels of spoken proficiency and, through their Native language classes at school, are developing literacy in their heritage language as well.

The school is the primary domain for academic English – a variety that children may have little exposure to at home. As a consequence, these youth are likely to be stigmatized as LEP, “semi-lingual,” or “language delayed.”

These heteroglossic environments and communicative repertoires are complicated by ambivalent and conflicting language ideologies. Asked whether they believe it is important to learn to speak their heritage language, youth in our study overwhelmingly (87 percent; n=336) responded that it is “very important.” Many thoughtfully articulated the symbolic link between the Indigenous language and a unique Indigenous identity. At the same time, youth acknowledged feelings of linguistic shame, tracing this to the punitive English-only schooling endured by their elders and ongoing linguistic and racial discrimination. Yet, like all ideological constructs, feelings of language embarrassment and shame are malleable and subject to change. We take up these possibilities in our conclusion.

Concluding thoughts: toward youth empowerment in language revitalization

Much of the recent work on Native American language shift and revitalization centers on the home-school-community nexus. Although schools cannot “save” Indigenous languages in and of themselves (Fishman, 1991), schools can play (and have played) a pivotal role in the counter-hegemonic possibilities of Indigenous language planning and policy (Hornberger, 2008; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001; 2009). There is growing evidence that heritage-language education can do much to strengthen children’s (re)acquisition of the Indigenous language while also promoting healthy ethnic identities and high levels of academic achievement (Fillerup, 2005; Hermes, 2007; Johnson & Legatz, 2006; May & Hill, 2008; Wilson & Kamanā, 2006; 2009). Our research indicates that in dynamic settings of language shift, realizing these outcomes requires reframing education practices to reflect and valorize the heteroglossic linguistic ecologies in which Indigenous children are growing up. As Wilson and Kawai’ae’a (2007) write for Hawaiian-medium education, a crucial component is what is called in Hawaiian *honua*: “places, circumstances, structures where use of [the Indigenous language] is dominant” (p. 38). Lee (2007) adds the need to create opportunities for youth to use their heritage language to engage issues of relevance in their everyday lives: “If [the Indigenous language] is to attain status equal to English in school contexts, it needs to be related to the world of today’s teenagers” (p. 29).

We are witnessing the beginnings of these possibilities at some study sites. At a school with a limited (one-half-hour per week) Indigenous language program, the CRCs mounted a community-wide language planning effort that included teacher workshops on “*honua*-like” Indigenous language immersion and Saturday language classes for children, youth, and adults. These initiatives are working their way back into the schools via their teacher-participants and a newly created tribal language and culture office headed by one of the CRCs. At another school, the CRCs are working closely with parents and school leaders to implement a voluntary Indigenous language immersion program in the elementary grades. The first class began in 2007 with eight children; by the end of the school year, 15 students were enrolled, and the following school year three immersion classes were in place from kindergarten to grade 2. The school continues to expand immersion into higher grades, including for youth at the middle school.

By working collaboratively with families to create opportunities for young children to learn their heritage language, these language planning efforts reshape the sociolinguistic possibilities for the coming generation of adolescents. These projects are also ripe with opportunities to engage today’s youth in the language planning process. “I want to share my language with little kids,” a high school student told us, adding that she felt personal responsibility for this because “their families don’t always do it” (Youth interview, May 5, 2004).

The conditions in which young people’s decisions about language are made can alternately empower them to take the risks necessary to sustain a threatened heritage language or constrain their choices and imagined futures. Our research shows youth to be informed, thoughtful, and vested stakeholders in Indigenous language reclamation. But youth cannot single-handedly counter the myriad pressures on their language choices; they need support from families, communities, and other social institutions, particularly schools.

Action research of the type discussed here can be a galvanizing force for bringing together educators, parents, and other community stakeholders to address the pressures on youth language choices. The next step, we believe, is inviting youth directly into these language planning processes, thereby carving out new possibilities for youth self-empowerment. As one youth in our study emphasized, this type of research “is... finding a way to bring the language back to the Native people” (interview, May 5, 2004).

Note

¹ This chapter is adapted from McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, and Zepeda (2009a, 2009b). The study reported here was supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the Alice Wiley Snell Endowed Professorship in Education Policy Studies at Arizona State University. We express our deep gratitude to the Indigenous community researchers with whom we worked (and whose anonymity we are committed to protect), and wish them the best as they move forward with this work. We also thank our former graduate research assistants. All data, statements, opinions, and conclusions herein reflect the view of the authors and research participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agency, tribes or tribal councils, the Arizona Board of Regents, or Arizona State University (ASU). This information is presented in the pursuit of academic research and is published for educational purposes. Pursuant to our agreement with ASU's IRB, this chapter may not be reproduced, transmitted, or distributed without the authors' prior written consent.

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