

A Program for Language Revival

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(Ed. Note: This proposal was presented during the bilingual conference in Anchorage last week. Complete coverage by P. M. Ivey, with photos, will appear in our next issue.)

In spite of recent efforts to revive Alaskan Native languages which are no longer spoken by the children of the language community, we are finding that the children are not really learning that much of the language in the school language programs. How, then, can we develop a more effective program to insure that these now "dying" languages gain a new lease on life? This is one proposal aimed at that goal.

The reason school programs have not really revived languages is easy to understand: the children are exposed to the language for only an hour or so a day, starting when they are 5 or 6 years old. By this time, children are losing their ability to learn languages easily, and in the limited time allowed for the language at school, even a good language program can only do so much. In my opinion, the way things are going in some areas of Alaska now, the children now at school will not learn to speak the language fluently, and the language will die.

However, if the people are sincere in their desire to pass on the language, and keep it alive, something can be done. The plan I have in mind has long been used in Europe by families who wish to teach their children a foreign language which will be of value to the child in later life. Suppose they wish the child to learn French. They hire a "nanny" who is a native speaker of that foreign language. Her job is to take care of the child and to speak nothing but French to the child. It's as simple as that: the child learns French. No training in language teaching methods, no second language materials needed, just natural language acquisition. The same thing can be made to work for the native language programs in areas where the children no longer speak the language.

Choose Older People

My suggestion is this: Choose people, especially older people who have raised their own families and who now have time on their hands. They would be hired to take care of groups of five or six pre-school children whose parents wish them to participate in the program, for five days a week, four hours a day, speaking to them in nothing but their native language. These children should ideally start about the time they start speaking English, say between one and two years of age, and continue up to kindergarten. This way they could be learning their native language naturally at the same time they are learning English, thus growing up truly bilingual.

The three keys to the success of this program are consistency, continuity and clear vision. First, the home language instructors as we shall call them, must be consistent in using nothing but their native language every time they have contact with these children, whether at their own homes or away from them. In effect, these children could become as their own children, and they would have the responsibility of bringing up these children to speak the language. Thus, I feel that it is important that these home language instructors be given children who are not members of their own families. The reason for this is that they have already established the pattern of speaking English with their own children and grandchildren, and would surely feel very awkward trying to establish new speech habits with their own flesh and blood. Imagine, for example, how you would feel if your German-speaking grandparents suddenly decided they were going to teach you German after speaking to you for a number of years in English. It would seem unnatural, as if they were being deceitful to you. But if your neighbor's grandparents were hired to do the same thing by your parents, it would be much easier to go along with, and you could speak English with your own family, and German with your neighbor's family, so that in effect you would have two families. Thus I say, one of the keys

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language revival . . .

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of the program is consistency.

Carry Living Heritage

The second key to the program is continuity. The program should begin when the child starts to learn how to speak, and continue on at least through high school. Thus the Head Start program would also have to be altered to conform with the home language program. Perhaps the Head Start instructors could work with each child for only half a day. One group of children could go to the home language program. Perhaps the Head Start instructors could work with each child for only half a day. One group of children could go to the home language teacher in the morning and Head Start in the afternoon, and another group to Head Start in the morning and home language instruction in the afternoon. The program would be modified for children in kindergarten and grade school, with the number of hours being reduced, and the children being taught in a group by the native language instructors at the school. These instructors could accomplish more than they do now, since the children would start coming to school with some ability in the native language, and their job would be to teach more about the language and culture in the language, and to teach the children how to read and write their language. This instruction could be continued through high school, by which time the children should have enough ability in their language to carry them through their adult lives as truly bilingual speakers, carriers of a living heritage.

Using the Language

The home language program would be a great advantage to the school language teacher. In many "bilingual" classrooms now, most of the time is spent explaining in English what the teacher is talking about. This is not a very effective way of teaching the language, since perhaps only one-fourth to one-half the time period is spent actually using the language. If the students came to school already able to function in their language, however, the whole class time could be spent in using the language. This would make an enormous difference in the success of the program.

Of course, this program is very ambitious in its scope. As a matter of fact, it is not being used anywhere else in the U.S., as far as I know. If it proves to be a successful method of language revival, it could be of tremendous importance to all communities where the survival of their language is in doubt. However, because it is new and because it required a re-ordering of the relationships between the older and younger people in a village, it will require the full support of the community. Such a program can be successful only if the people understand the ideas involved and are behind them. If there are not enough community members willing to participate, it would probably be better not even to start the program, setting in motion another half-hearted program destined to failure. We must carefully determine whether the parents of children eligible for the program really want to participate in it. If enough community participation is achieved, this could be a real boost to the whole state.

Be Realistic About Attitudes

To begin work on this program, a workshop should be held to inform the community about the goals and expectations of the program and how they might help it succeed. The workshop should be held in the community, with the attendance of the prospective home and school language instructors. There should be full discussion of the process of language learning involved and how it is to be achieved. The participants will be required to examine realistically their own attitudes toward their language and culture and evaluate the necessary change in their own habits that would have to be made in order for this program to work properly—and then make the commitment to see it through. This process is most necessary, it is only too easy for programs to fail where there is no sufficient understanding of the goals involved. "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Whole Idea is Simple

One of the greatest advantages to this program is its simplicity. The only expenditures are the preliminary workshop and the wages for the home language instructors, as well as ordinary materials for the children to play with, things that any babysitter needs. No special facilities are necessary, since the instructor teaches in his own home. No second language instructional materials, books, etc., are necessary, since the language is to be taught exclusively orally. No degree is necessary for the home language instructor, since he is not operating in conjunction with the school system. The whole idea of the program is quite simple, yet it could make all the difference in the future of a language.