

Yuk Eskimo

Primary Use in Three Schools

By LIBET JOHNSON

For the first graders in three villages of the Kuskokwim area school this year will include a new and long-overdue program, unique among all other schools in Alaska. They will be using their own native tongue, Yuk Eskimo, as the primary language of instruction.

Akiachak, Nunapitchuk and Napakiak are the first villages to receive this new program, developed by the linguistics department of the University of Alaska. The department developed the system as a pilot program under the aegis of the Rural School Project, sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The program is unique because it involves a new system in which the language can now be written as well as spoken. Eskimo has been written to some extent for many years, but the similarities from one village to the next were so vague as to often be undecipherable, because the spelling and grammar were left up to the individual.

The linguistics department has developed a new system, using the standard English alphabet, with the exception of a few symbols, which has standardized the spelling and grammar rules.

This offers the opportunity

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of using the mother tongue as a language of instruction, and in so doing preserve the native language which has been in serious jeopardy of dying out.

Until now, children were forced to speak English from the time they first went to school and were punished for doing otherwise.

Many of the materials used for the instruction of reading, writing, and social studies and math can be and have been adapted from English texts. Further materials are being developed by Irene Reed, of the department of linguistics and her assistant, Pascal Afcan, with a large grant from the BIA.

Mr. Afcan has written and illustrated several original childrens stories, and along with Miss Reed, translated several others from the English. These little books are being used in the three schools at the present time.

The three villages all speak the Yuk dialect and this will be

the primary language used in the first grade this year.

English will be taught at the same time as a secondary language.

Next year Eskimo will be used also in the second grade, and so on, until the fifth grade when the children are supposed to be fluent in reading, writing and speaking both languages.

These villages were chosen because they are still primarily native speaking, so the children will come into the school already using the native tongue in speech.

Another important part of the bi-lingual program is that which is presently going on at the university.

Ten native students, who were recruited from the villages by Miss Reed are now undergoing an intensive year of Eskimo language study, preparing them as teachers of this system, so that they will be able to institute it in their home villages when they return.

Each student, who must be fluent in the native tongue to start with, will become literate and master the system of spelling and grammar rules.

They also take instruction in the subtleties involved in the art of teaching.

Last summer, the University hosted a special eight week training course to prepare the teachers now instructing in the villages. Most of the students were already assistant teachers and fluent in their native language.

At that time Irma Jean Benton was in charge of the "teaching teachers to teach." She was particularly well-equipped to handle this as she is quite familiar with the Kuskokwim area and sensitive to the needs of the people there.

Mr. Walter Featherly, who was the principal of the school in Akiachuk, is acting as supervisor for the program in the participating villages.

So far the reports from the field indicate an enthusiastic reception on the part of the parents in the villages. A more accurate appraisal will be forthcoming after Miss Reed returns from an inspection tour she hopes to take in the near future.