

St. Lawrence students gain from bilingual program . . .

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skills in Yupik until they mastered the second language.

"If I sat in a class taught in Russian I probably wouldn't pay much attention, either," considered Joe Martin, Savoonga principal who taught on the island before bilingual was considered and was concerned about the low scholastic showing made by his students.

"The Yupik child has to learn so many skills: reading, and writing, and before he had to learn them at the same time he was learning a foreign language," explains Shinen. It was a mind-boggling assignment for a student. Before they all looked like slow learners. Only the very brightest could work at an average level. With a good solid base to learn basic skills, they are beginning to be able to learn English as a second language. And they average out like any class."

Luckily Dr. Michael Krauss of the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, had been developing a modern Yupik alphabet with Vera Kaneshiro, a Native of Gambell, and had interested many other Yupik speakers in laying solid groundwork for a Siberian bilingual program. There was very little printed material available with which to work, but teachers developed it as they went along.

The first year was a success. Grades improved. Children became confident and enthusiastic about going to school. After considerable bureaucratic haggling, the BIA took over the bilingual program. Communication was poor at first. Money did not come through to pay the teachers and

the program was interrupted long enough so people began to appreciate how valuable it was. When the money finally came through, BIA quickly made up for lost time, publishing 55 Siberian textbooks in a scant two year period (with 10 more currently at the printers).

Lonn and Myra Poage, who headed the BIA program from Nome, had worked with bilingual problems on the Navajc Reservation, pioneered a BIA program at Akiachuk and were enthusiastic about St. Lawrence.

When we first came up the alphabet was not even definite. There were 40 letters. Now there are 30," recalled Myra Poage. "And when it first started, English was more widely used. Now the children get every concept first in their Native language, then it is given in English. It's working well."

Early last year a successful bilingual workshop was held in Savoonga and the future looked bright. Teachers were gaining in experience, developing a test by which success could be measured. But the plane carrying Gambell delegates crashed on the return trip killing five teachers--the entire bilingual staff of Gambell.

Later a plane crash took more lives, but the program continued. Young, inexperienced teachers learned fast, and the children of Gambell with them.

It's working out real fine," observed Franklin Kininsok, former Gambell mayor and father of seven. "Now our kids understand what they read in the books. We didn't. When I was in school some of the words I learned I didn't know the

meaning of. With bilingual they know each word in English and in Eskimo. And we're not about to give up our language!"

Nancy Walunga opposed bilingual originally because most of her 12 children spoke English instead of Yupik and she didn't want to endanger their chances for dealing with the white man's system.

"They caught English from their older sister," she explained. And to her relief three years of bilingual training has not set them back. "They're learning Yupik too. They don't speak it much but they understand it. I realize now they need it."

Hortense Okoomealingrok of Savoonga is impressed not only by the progress of her children in English but Yupik too.

"Our own kids kinda surprise us. They can say words now in Eskimo we have trouble pronouncing ourselves."

For over 100 years there has been enormous pressure on the people of St. Lawrence to assimilate, but they have preserved much of their culture along with their language, despite a quickness to adapt to modern inventions like snow machines, tape decks and Dr. Pepper.

"Lonn Poage told me he didn't care whether our language or culture survived or not. The only thing that mattered to him was that the little Eskimo boys and girls be better English speakers using Yupik as a tool," recounts Vera Kaneshiro. But both goals may be well on their way to fulfillment.

Three years ago the BIA introduced a crash program in phonics (The Vail System) which has enabled St. Lawrence

students to sound out words and read with astonishing skill. This, coupled with Yupik instruction, seems to be getting far better results scholastically than ever before. And preservation of culture is a happy by-product.

"I was very excited when I finally realized we had a written language Mrs. Kaneshiro said. "When I learned English I wanted to write our old legends down but they didn't make much sense when they were written in English. That took the taste away."

Now the legends are being written in Yupik and illustrated by islanders and the flavor is all there.

There are still problems, of course. Under the bilingual system the St. Lawrence children do not work much in English until the third grade, yet they are still required to take the Standard Metropolitan test in English twice a year.

"The teacher in the end is judged on this test, so it's important," explains Dave Shinen. "It would be nice if they didn't have to deal with that for the first two or three years."

Educators have been trying to work out a test in Yupik but test

writing is a highly specialized field. As yet no satisfactory substitute has been found for the Metropolitan, but Shinen believes its just a matter of time.

Then there's the problem of funding. The BIA ran out of money for bilingual this spring and villagers are worried that the programs may have to be discontinued.

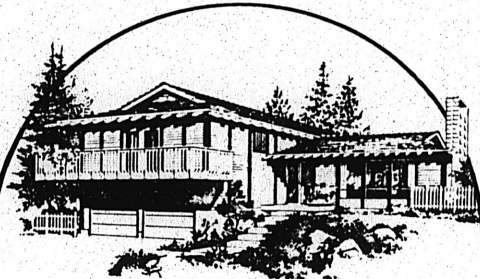
Lonn Poage and Myra left last week to take over his father's farm in Kansas but not before Poage worked with Kawerak in trying to secure Title 4 Indian Education money for the St. Lawrence project. Poage left feeling sure the bilingual program are safe and St. Lawrence people certainly hope he is right.



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"The cautious seldom err." Confucius

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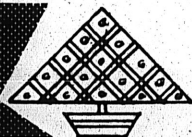
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