

TEACHING FOR JOY AND JUSTICE

5: Language and Power





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Uncovering the Legacy of Language and Power

“You will never teach a child a new language by scorning and ridiculing and forcibly erasing his first language.”

—June Jordan

Lamont’s sketch was stick-figure simple: A red schoolhouse with brown students entering one door and exiting as white students at the other end of the building. Kahlia’s illustration depicted a more elaborate metaphor: She drew a map of Africa hanging from a tree; tightly closed red lips cover the heart of the map. A U.S. map flies over the tree, and sentences swirl around it: “I cannot speak my language. My identity is gone. My African language is gone. The language I grew up with has been taken from me.”

In the classroom, according to my students who study the linguistic history of the colonized, too often the job of the teacher is to “whitewash” students of color or students who are linguistically diverse.

Over the years, students have drawn mouths sewn shut, tongues nailed to the ground, languages squeezed out or buried under stacks of English grammar books, a Spanish voice box removed, graveyards for indigenous languages, a mouth rubbed out by an eraser with the word English written across the top, and language trees with the withered leaves of Korean, Spanish, Russian, African languages dropping off while the red, ripe English fruit flourished. As my students’ drawings depicted over and over in a variety of ways, schools and societies erase language and culture.

Our schools do not have linguistic genocide as their mission. In fact, most schools and school boards fashion mission statements about “embracing diversity.” Multilingual banners welcome visitors in Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese on the hallway walls of most school buildings these days, but in the classroom,

according to my students who study the linguistic history of the colonized, too often the job of the teacher is to “whitewash” students of color or students who are linguistically diverse.

English Only laws in many states have banned Spanish and other languages from some classrooms. Ebonics was used as fodder for racist jokes after the Oakland School Board proposed teaching Ebonics. Native American languages were decimated in boarding schools during a time when “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” directives gave straightforward instructions to teachers. Although I intentionally invite and acknowledge the variety of languages and voices from our community into the classroom, I learned this wasn’t enough. I can tell students to use their home language in their poems and narratives, and I can bring August Wilson’s plays, Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s stories, and Jimmy Santiago Baca’s poetry into my class to validate the use of dialect and home language; but without examining the legacy of language supremacy, I maintain the old world order because I haven’t explored why Standard English is the standard and how it came to power, and how that power is wielded to make some people feel welcome and others feel like outsiders.

After years of teaching and tinkering with this language unit, I finally realized that I needed to create a curriculum on language and power that examined the colonial roots of linguistic genocide and analyzed how schools continue to perpetuate the myths of inferiority or invisibility of some languages. I also discovered the need for stories of hope: stories of people’s resistance to the loss of their mother tongues and stories about the growing movement to save indigenous languages from extinction.

Depending on how many pieces of the unit I include, this curriculum takes between five and 10 weeks. Students read literature, nonfiction texts, poetry, and watch films. They write narratives, poetry, and a culminating essay about language. For their final “exam,” they create a “take-it-to-the-people” project that teaches their chosen audience an aspect of our language study that they think people need to know in order to understand contemporary language issues. The curriculum includes any of the following five segments: Naming as a Practice of Power; Language and Colonization; Dialect and Power; Ebonics; and Language Restoration.

Linguistic Genocide Through Colonization

Max Weinreich, a Yiddish linguist, wrote, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” In other words, it’s about power. In order for students to understand how some

languages came to be dominant, they need to understand how and why indigenous languages were wiped out or marginalized. According to the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, over half of the world’s languages have become extinct in the last 500 years. In fact, David Harrison, a linguistics professor at Swarthmore, says, “the pace of their global extinction exceeds the pace of species extinction.” Students need to understand how this invisible legacy that privileges some languages—and people—and excludes or decimates others continues to affect us today.

Teaching about language and power is huge and complex and messy because language policies and colonial practices played out in different ways across the globe. In some places, the languages died with the people who spoke them, as colonial powers took both the land and the lives of the people they “encountered.” In some instances, indigenous groups were pitted against each other. In many places, colonists renamed every nook and cranny, banned native languages, and created governments, schools, and economic systems using the language of the colonizer’s home country.

Today, language is still contested territory in many parts of the world. Because most political, educational, and commercial interactions take place in the language of the colonizer or the primary language, many indigenous languages have become marginalized or extinct. Parents are frequently forced to choose between teaching their children in their home language or pushing them to study the language of the dominant social groups. In a workshop in San Francisco, a teacher talked about how the educational and economic necessity of learning English pressed her to put her Vietnamese language aside. “I didn’t feel like I had a choice.” Ultimately, this forced choice causes a disconnect between generations of language speakers and a loss of family ties, traditions, and cultural memory.

Because of time, my classes didn’t study each language situation in depth; instead, we looked for patterns across the stories. In many places, the colonizers taught people shame about their “primitive” or “backward” language and cultural practices. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a Kenyan teacher, novelist, essayist, and playwright, wrote in his essay “The Language of African Literature”:

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people’s wealth ... [but] economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism, this involved two aspects of the same process: the

destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonizers.

Ngugi stopped writing in English and started writing in his native tongue—Kikuyu—as a protest against the devaluing of his mother tongue, but also as a way to revive and celebrate literature in his language. This “conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer” and the parallel domination of the “mental universe” that Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes is echoed in stories from Kenya to Ireland to Australia to the United States.

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The “domination of the mental universe of the colonizers” continues today in the daily interactions that “non-standard” language speakers must negotiate when they enter the halls of power—schools, banks, government and employment offices. Whether it's the marking down of essays because of “poor” grammar or the conscious or unconscious way that lack of linguistic dexterity marks a speaker or writer as “unfit” for a position—a job, a college, or a scholarship—language inequality still exists. The power of the standard language is so pervasive and so invisible that students need to uncover what they take for granted and internalize as personal failure. But I also need to teach them how and why some languages have power and others don't.

The Linguistic Tea Party

To familiarize students with the context and characters they will meet during our journey into language and colonialism, I wrote a tea party to introduce the personalities and events they will encounter as we read stories or watch movie clips. The roles also alert students to the patterns that emerge in the unit—loss of languages, humiliation, shame, and beatings, as well as the heroic efforts to save dying tongues. I tried to make the tea party entice students into curiosity about language study—admittedly, not a subject that most students initially rate as the number one topic they want to learn about.

As George Bernard Shaw wrote in the preface to his play *Pygmalion*, which I typically teach as part of the unit,

“I wish to boast that *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else.” Although I hesitate to crow like Shaw, the “dry” and “didactic” subject of language engages students because language is so closely tied to culture and home.

In constructing the tea party roles, I write in first person, so students feel more comfortable introducing themselves as the person. Bud Lane's role, for example, gives students a sense of the urgency around the issue of language preservation. Although Oregon was once among the most linguistically diverse places on earth, it is now infamous as a language-death hot spot according to the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, because there are few remaining first speakers—people who learned the language as children:

Some people already count my language as dead. I speak Oregon Coastal Athabaskan. At 50, I am one of the youngest speakers of my language. Here in the Northwest, we are a hot spot for language extinction. I'm hoping to change that. You see, I think that the language and the people are the same. I didn't grow up speaking my language either, but I found an elder Siletz woman who knew the words, but who never spoke them in public. She'd been taught shame of her native tongue by white society. But Nellie Orton found her voice and taught me my language. Now I teach our language at the local school, so that our children can save our native tongue.

Each character can answer at least one question on the tea party question sheet. (See p. 226.) For example, Lane's character answers the question, “Find someone who started or joined an organization to preserve his or her language. Who is the person? Why did the individual decide to take this action?” Most of the tea party questions can be answered by more than one person.

Students meet a spectrum of characters, including Distinguished Professor Geneva “Dr. G.” Smitherman; Irish poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn; Hawaiian writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka; Carmen Lomas Garza, a Mexican American artist; Hector Pieteron, a 12-year-old boy killed in the Soweto Uprising; and Neville Alexander, a South African linguist working to restore mother tongue literacy in Africa. (See pp. 218-225 for the full roles.)

After I distribute a role and tea party questions to students, I ask them to read the role and underline key facts that their classmates need to know: Where is this person from? What is his or her experience with language? I also tell them to highlight any piece of information they find particularly compelling. Then I tell them to turn the role sheet over and write those key facts on the back. Students are more likely to remember the facts if they read them, write them, and recite them. Once most students have completed these tasks, I demonstrate what I want them to do. I pretend I am one of the characters, say Esther Martinez, and I walk to a student across the room and say, “Hi, I’m Esther Martinez. I want to tell you a few things about myself.” I ham it up, so they won’t feel awkward pretending they are a character from our tea party. Students are stiff and unsure the first time they introduce themselves as their character, but after a few conversations, they own their role; they’ve become John Rickford or Hector Pierson.

After the tea party, I ask students to write a paragraph about what they learned about language and power and then we talk. During our post-tea party discussion, Deandre said, “[The society] tried to take people from what they were raised to believe in, and I don’t believe that was right.” When I pressed him, “Who was one person you met who had something taken away from them?” he talked about his own character, Joe Suina. He said, “Well, myself. My name is Joe Suina. I am currently a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at University of New Mexico. I was punished at school for speaking my

language, and they tried to teach me that my language was not right. They tried to turn me into what was the dominant culture. They tried to make me believe what everyone else believed in.”

Reading the School Stories: Finding the Patterns

After the tea party, we dive into the readings and movies. I want to saturate students in the stories—memoirs and fiction—about language. We begin by examining five memoirs about language and boarding schools—two from the United States, one from Australia, one from Kenya, and one from Canada. These are short 2- or 3-page excerpts from longer pieces and two video clips. In addition to reacting to each piece about language and boarding schools through writing and discussion, students keep track of each person’s experiences on a chart, including a description of the race and class of each main character. I tell them to record who is forced or encouraged to change their language, who doesn’t have to change, and who forces the change. (See Story Retrieval charts on pp. 228-229.) Because the unit is long, the charts help them collect evidence over the span of the unit, so they can quickly go back and retrieve evidence for the culminating essay or project.

I begin by examining what happened to Native Americans. The video *In the White Man’s Image*, a documentary about Native American boarding schools, shows the Carlisle Indian School established by Captain Richard Pratt, who attempted to assimilate Native American children into white society from 1879 to 1918. Today Pratt’s mission is widely viewed as cultural genocide. Pratt’s



(Left) Chiracahua Apaches as they looked upon their arrival at the Carlisle Indian School, an institution dedicated to inducing Native Americans to abandon their traditional ways. (Right) Chiracahua Apaches after four months at the Carlisle Indian School.

motto was, “Kill the Indian and save the man.” In order to “kill the Indian,” he punished children for practicing their religion and speaking their language. He renamed them, cut their hair and took away their clothes. Native students resisted Pratt’s attempts to “deculturize” them as one of my students, Harold, put it. Many died, others ran away, few graduated, and ultimately, most maintained their Native American identity. Pratt used before and after photographs of the students to sell white audiences on the success of his school.

In the White Man’s Image portrays the boarding school system at work, but doesn’t focus as much on the individual stories, except for Ernest White Thunder, who resisted the campaign to take away his culture by running away

Dee said, “If you kill the Indian culture, you might as well kill the Indian because nothing about him is really him.”

from the school and refusing to eat. Ultimately, he died. His resistance was a touchstone for some students who referenced White Thunder and later wanted to review his section of the video for their essays and projects. Dee said, “If you kill the Indian culture, you might as well kill the Indian because nothing about him is really him.”

Joe Suina’s essay, “And Then I Went to School: Memories of a Pueblo Childhood” (see p. 230), describes his experiences at a boarding school where he learned to be ashamed of his language and his home:

My language, too, was questioned right from the beginning of my school career. “Leave your Indian at home!” was like a school trademark. Speaking it accidentally or otherwise was punishable by a dirty look or a whack with a ruler. This reprimand was for speaking the language of my people which meant so much to me. It was the language of my grandmother. . . . [I]t was difficult for me to comprehend why I had to part with my language. . . . I understood that everything that I had, and was part of, was not nearly as good as the whiteman’s. School was determined to undo me in everything from my sheepskin bedding to the dances and ceremonies which I had learned to have faith in and cherish.

Because the video clips are only about 15 to 20 minutes each and the stories are short, we mostly read them aloud in class together, filling in the chart individually, then discussing each piece as a class, as we move through the stories. The boarding school stories, videos, and discus-

sion take about a week. As we read one story after another, students see the pattern of punishment and shame that permeate the stories. When I asked, “What do these stories have in common? What do you learn about language and power?” Josh said, “When people weren’t allowed to speak their own language, and when they were punished for speaking it, people felt inferior and stupid. It crumbled the community.”

After learning about language policies in Native American boarding schools, we look at similar practices in Australia and Africa. Molly Craig’s experiences in Australia, recounted in the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*, parallel Suina’s experience in Native American boarding schools. Molly was part of Australia’s “stolen generation” of mixed-race children who were taken from the “bad influence” of their families and isolated in boarding schools where they were trained as maids and day laborers—another forced assimilation into the white society. Part of the process of merging “half-caste” children into white culture was separating them from their language as well as their religion. After watching a video clip from *Rabbit Proof Fence*, I asked students to respond to Molly’s story in an interior monologue or poem. Throughout these stories, students connected with loss of culture and heritage, but they also connected with Molly’s resistance. In the following poem, Jennifer Overman takes on Molly’s point of view, expressing her resistance:

*Write that I was a half-caste,
taken away from my family and my home
to be cleansed of my aboriginality,
to be a slave.*

*When you speak of me,
Say that I refused to be erased,
That my blood would stay the same,
That I would not serve my other half.*

Maria succinctly captured this resistance to “whitewashing” in her piece from Molly’s perspective when she wrote simply, “You can never wipe the brown from my skin.”

In her memoir *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work on the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, describes the ongoing process of humiliation that caused students to abandon their language at school, at home, and later when they became part of the country’s educated elite. Her words echo the pain heard in the other stories we read:

A common practice to ensure that students kept pressure on one another was to require those students who were found using a language other than English to wear a button known as a “monitor.” It was sometimes inscribed with phrases in English such as “I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue.” At the end of the day, whoever ended up with the button received a punishment, such as cutting grass, sweeping, or doing work in the garden. But the greater punishment was the embarrassment you felt because you had talked in your mother tongue. In retrospect I can see that this introduced us to the world of undermining our self-confidence. . . . The use of the monitor continues even today in Kenyan schools to ensure that students use only English. Now, as then, this contributes to the trivialization of anything African and lays the foundation for a deeper sense of self-doubt and an inferiority complex.

When I asked students to make connections between the stories, they pointed out both the enforced changes as well as the changes that students in the readings adopted to avoid embarrassment. Although students initially laughed at Denzell Weekly’s comparison of the boarding schools to the movie *Men in Black*, ultimately, they agreed with his explanation. He said, “This is like the movie *Men in Black*. For anyone who’s seen *Men in Black*, there is a flashlight. They’re looking and they’re flashing and they erase all of your memory. They tried to come in and just brainwash, basically take away their language and their culture.” When students become passionate about a subject, this is what they do: search their own experiences to make original, unusual connections to the curriculum.

A number of students wrote their essays about assimilation. (See “Writing Wild Essays from Hard Ground” for a full description of the essay-writing process.) While some students merely summarized the series of events, Dennise Mofidi focused on children who resisted assimilation. “The children who did not fear punishment were the ones who fought for their culture. They were the ones who suffered horrible consequences, including the loss of their lives.” She went on to relate this to her relationship with her grandmother and Farsi:

Today assimilation is still happening. Children go to school and see that everyone else is speaking English and feel different if they are the only one who does not speak English at home. My family came here from Iran and speaks both English and Farsi. My mother and father taught me to speak Farsi, and I do at home and when I’m with my family. My younger brothers, on the



April 1994, Soweto, South Africa — Members of a Soweto school drama group reenact the events of the 1976 Soweto student uprising.

Gideon Mendel/CORBIS

other hand, do not speak Farsi. I asked them why and they told me, “I don’t want people to know that I speak another language or ask me how to say a word in Farsi because then they will want me to talk in Farsi all the time and we live in America, not Iran.” I couldn’t believe that being different at school was so hard that they would not want to be able to talk to their family. . . . My grandmother and I talk all the time in Farsi. She tells me about Iran and what it is like there. She also shares stories of life when she was younger. I love talking with my grandmother and couldn’t imagine being like my brothers and needing someone to translate.

In his final essay, Daunte Paschal wrote about Carmen Lomas Garza’s experience in school. “In ‘A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi corazón,’ Garza wrote about her life growing up as a full-blooded Chicana in a predominantly white school. . . . Because of those girls at her school making fun of her, she started to feel ashamed about her food that her mother had made. Garza was verbally assaulted, and she eventually felt as if she was born in the wrong race and wrong culture. Assimilation will do that to you.”

Resistance: Soweto Uprising

On the day we studied the Soweto Uprising, I started class by projecting the image of Samuel Nzima’s famous photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying the dead body of 12-year-old Hector Pieterse. I played “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa) while students entered the classroom. Then we read and listened to a podcast about this historic event where thousands of students marched out of their schools in a mass demonstration against the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. Students refused to learn in the “oppressor’s tongue.” This protest against the education that blacks received in South Africa was

built on years of grievances against the Bantu Education Act established in 1953 as well as years of grievances against apartheid, racism, and exploitation. Black schools were overcrowded and underfunded, preparing students for a life in the mines, not the university. The imposition of Afrikaans pushed the radicalized student movement to action against the language as well as the government.

As students listened and read about the Soweto Uprising, I asked them to take notes in three columns: one column on the details for the demonstration, one on their reactions, and one on connections they made to the other pieces we had studied. A number of students admired that people their age “took matters in their own hands,” as Kalia Haa Watts wrote. Annie Oldani, who wrote her essay on the uprising, noted that “[The students] felt so isolated from their culture and their families that they didn’t think they would support their cause. The adult generation is resigned to taking their place in the society and not fighting the oppression of their people.” Michael’s reaction to the story of the uprising echoed the feelings expressed by a number of students:

I know a lot of kids put their well-being on the line for their education, and I respect that more than anything because I don’t know too many people who’d be so quick to stand up and plan the gathering of thousands of students and say this is what we need to do to create change and better opportunity. I like how they didn’t tell their parents and were resourceful enough to band together and do what they had to do. A line that stood out to me was “the parents are immune to the yoke of oppression.”

After gathering information about the Soweto Uprising, students wrote from the point of view of a witness to the day’s events. I encouraged students to think of people, but also to think about inanimate objects. Their list included: rocks students threw, Hector Pieterse’s sister (from the photograph), the school, a burned-out car, a student involved in the uprising. (See “Unleashing Sorrow and Joy: Writing Poetry from History and Literature,” p. 50, for a full explanation of how I teach these poems.) Annie wrote from the point of view of a student who watched Hector Pieterse die:

*We no longer march
Now we fight
Not just for our language
Not anymore
But for ourselves
For Hector*

*Who wanted to laugh
Wanted to cry
Wanted to speak the words of his family
The words of his people*

Jayne’s poem as Hector’s classmate uses the “Write that I . . .” frame (see p. 52) that helped some students move into their poems:

*Write that I
sang as loud as I could
in unison with my brothers and sisters
until a deafening “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”
was all that could be heard.
Write that I,
along with my people,
posed no threat to the police
except for
the threat of our knowledge
the threat of our desire
the threat of our power
marching united and strong
like a pack of lions.*

Students demonstrated both pain and outrage through their poetry and interior monologues, a fitting memorial to the children of Soweto. But their poetry is also an expression of their understanding of the events in a way that quizzes or discussions miss.

Metaphorical Drawings

Once we’ve read the memoirs about the boarding schools in the United States and Kenya, watched video clips from Australia and Ireland, and listened to and read about Soweto, I bring boxes of crayons and colored pencils and large pieces of blank paper to class. I ask students to create a visual representation of language and power, telling them, “Don’t worry about your drawing ability. I’m looking for the quality of your ideas, your ability to work with all of that information you’ve collected over the last quarter.” After the initial excitement of using crayons in a high school class and the initial groans that they can’t think of a single metaphor, the ideas start rolling. We begin the conversation by recalling the definition of a metaphor and brainstorming a few examples. I walk a fine line of giving them enough models to jumpstart their imagination, but not so many that my ideas crowd out theirs. I show them a couple of drawings from former students, including stick figure sketches, so they can see a range of possibilities, but



also because I don't want their drawing skills to get in the way of their ideas. When they complete the drawing, they write a paragraph explaining their metaphor.

As I noted in the opening of the chapter, student metaphorical drawings of lips sewn shut, language coffins, and severed tongues are evocative. Michael Moser drew three boxes, each locked with a padlock. The writing on the first one said, "Freedom of thinking, knowledge, freedom of speech"; the second box had a heart with the words "family, name, culture, homeland" on the exterior; the third one said, "religion, soul, language, culture." Michael wrote:

To assimilate someone you take way their mind, heart and soul. Their mind is the right to think and their freedom to speak their own language. To take away their heart is to take the things they love, like their family and their home. The third is how the boarding school kids were taken from their families and forced to adopt a new religion and new language. And to take someone's soul is to take everything they stand for.

Kirkland Allen drew a picture of a dark-skinned woman with her black hair pulled straight by a comb with the word "school" across it. On the side of his picture, he drew a series of cans and jars labeled "Proper English Magic Grease," "Plan B Insurance," and "After School Bands." The title on his drawing read, "If You Can't Achieve It, Weave It." He wrote:

In this piece a nappy-headed woman is getting her hair done. Proper English Grease moisturizing it, a school comb working with the grease, forming it into a white version. After-school rubber bands hold the hair together, giving her the thought that going back is bad.

Deandre, a talented rapper, excels in assignments that call upon him to bring his gifts of rapping to bear on the content of our unit. He drew a stage with two flags, a U.S. flag and a flag with "Africa" written on it. A microphone stood in front of each flag. The U.S. mic was plugged in.

A hand unplugged the African microphone. He said, "It's about unplugging our voice."

When students shared their drawings with the class, I pushed them to fuller explanations. "What's that tell us about language and power? What's your explanation? What does your drawing illustrate?" While the student drawings demonstrated understanding, their discussion of their drawings bordered on generalizations, littered with indeterminate pronouns. For example, a number of students said, "They beat students for speaking their language." I pushed them to identify who "they" were, to name names. "Who beat them? Where did this happen? Locate it." At one point, I said, "Let's name them together. Whose languages and cultures were taken away? Who took them away? You need to be specific." This is an important part of the activity because too often students describe or recite events, but in the past I've failed to push them to analyze their drawings. Students know things in their bones, and the metaphorical drawings tap this "bone knowledge." But without pressing kids to precisely articulate their analysis, the brilliant insights revealed in their drawings may stay in their bones.

Although the drawings might seem like a day of child's play—and we do have fun on those days—they also serve a critical purpose: They help students rehearse the creation of a thesis and support for their upcoming essay. Even if the students do not use the drawings and metaphors in their language essays, creating an image that summarizes their understanding about language pushes them to think more deeply about the patterns they saw across the readings and to start articulating those understandings as they draw, as they write their explanation, and as they present their piece to their peers. This class-talk about the topic, the use of specific and varied examples, the building on each other's ideas, helps them later as they construct their essays.



Brothers Gwaai (left) and Staas prepare to perform a Haida language play at the Haida Heritage Centre at Skidegate beach, Haida Gwaii, Canada. The language of the Haida is considered highly threatened with fewer than 70 fluent speakers left in the world.

Language Restoration

Because of time limitations, we never spend as much time on the language restoration movement as it deserves. But after all of the death and destruction, I want students to become familiar with some of the current work across the globe to save indigenous languages. Students need to critique, but they also need to learn how to build and rebuild. The inspiring stories of language preservation from Ireland to Kenya to South Africa to Hawaii and the Oregon Coast provide great models of how grassroots people—from grandmothers to youth activists—are creating language schools as well as lobbying for legislation to keep languages alive.

For example, Neville Alexander, Director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), created the National Language project to bring “mother tongue” literacy back into the lives of African people across the continent. He recognized that because of colonization many people had become illiterate in two languages—their mother tongue and the colonial language. As the Language Plan of Africa states, “Colonial conquest, imperialism and globalization established a hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet. The overall effect of this configuration has been to hasten the extinction of innumerable language varieties and to stigmatize and marginalize all but the most powerful languages.” His organization promotes a culture of reading and writing in African languages, and works with publishers to develop a market for African language writing and literature. Alexander and others in his organization have also initiated programs with teachers to

help develop materials and strategies to bring back mother tongue literacy in the schools.

In the United States, language activists, including Esther Martinez, pushed for legislation to keep the remaining 150 of the original indigenous languages alive. The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, H.R. 4766, was passed in 2006. This legislation provides money to support Native American language immersion programs: language nests, survival schools, and language restoration programs. As the website Cultural Survival points out:

Native American languages are not disappearing because they are obsolete. They are disappearing because of a U.S. government policy to specifically terminate American Indian language. Under this program, which lasted until the 1950s, children were taken from their homes and forced into boarding schools where they were beaten and had their mouths washed out with blistering lye soap for speaking their language. With that background of brutality, they did not speak their language in their homes as adults, so their children never learned it—the chain was broken. But the remaining Native American languages can be saved. There are proven techniques that enable elders to pass on their languages to their children and grandchildren. Immersion schools surround Native youngsters with their own language and build fluency quickly and naturally. Native Hawaiians launched an immersion program in the 1980s, when there were fewer than 30 speakers of Hawaiian under the age of 18. Today there are 2,000 speakers in that age range.

Other tribes have set up similar schools, with similar results. Others are teaching Native languages to adult learners who will pass them on to their tribes' children.

To bring the point home, we read our local paper's article, "Last of the Siletz Speakers," about Bud Lane's work to keep the Oregon Coastal Athabaskan language alive by teaching at Siletz High School. He recorded the elders in the community and developed a dictionary for the language. Now he teaches the language to students at Siletz High School and works with researchers at the Living Tongues Institute in Salem, Ore., to preserve his language.

In retrospect, I should have spent more time on the incredibly exciting language preservation work, perhaps by assigning student groups different language projects to research and report on as part of the unit. Next time.

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