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Linguistics 115

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The Revival of Hawaiian Language in Education

When multiple languages are ingrained in the culture and lifestyle of a community, local and federal governments are faced with a problem of how to address language in education, politics, and media. How many of the local languages should court documents be translated into? Which language should the schools be taught in? Should there be options for education in multiple languages? If so, when should that start? There are more questions than answers about this topic, which is why there is a lot of research being conducted on the effectiveness of different language policy strategies. One excellent example of the complexities of dealing with language policy and language revitalization is the Hawaiian education system.

While the islands of Hawaii are part of the predominantly English-speaking United States, the Hawaiian language is also an extremely popular form of communication amongst the people living there (as the language's name would suggest). However, this hasn't always been the case. The language's modern popularity is the result of revitalization efforts following a steep decline in the number of Hawaiian speakers and educators during the early 1900s. This drop in fluency was the direct result of a ban on the teaching of Hawaiian instilled after an 1896 coup of the existing Hawaiian government (Porzucki, 2016). While this change only directly affected the language in schools, the policy's impact was still felt far beyond the classroom. Parents were discouraged from speaking Hawaiian with their children, and Hawaii being annexed by the United States led to a situation where English was the federally required language, but often times the appropriate resources for learning it weren't available. This resulted in decades of communication via basic English words with heavy Hawaiian influence, and was the birth of Hawaiian Creole English, also known as Pidgin ("A Timeline of Revitalization," 2019).

Nearly 90 years after the coup that derailed Hawaiian's place in the islands, the Hawaiian Lexicon Committee was founded with the goal of reviving the dying language ("Kualono," 2019). This committee brought modern words such as "computer" and "cell phone" into the language, and even started Hawaiian language pre-schools. The purpose of starting Hawaiian education at such a young age was because research suggests that language acquisition is much easier for adolescents than older learners (Oroji & Ghane, 2014). The goal was ambitious: to

create a new generation of Hawaiian heritage language speakers. A heritage language speaker has multiple definitions floating around, but a common one refers to them as someone who has proficiency and/or a cultural connection to a language other than the LWC (Language of Wider Communication - English in this case) (Kelleher, 2010). The committee was able to get the approval of the Hawaii Department of Education in the 1980s, and the language has since been on the rise in schools and the community. As of 2019, there are over 21 Hawaiian Immersion schools scattered amongst the islands with thousands of enrolled students (“List of Immersion and Hawaiian Medium Education Schools,” 2019). Table 1 shows recent census data from the state of Hawaii that shows Hawaiian has returned to one of the most frequently used non-English languages in the state with nearly 20,000 speakers.

Languages Spoken Besides English at Home in Hawaii			
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Language Spoken at Home</i>	<i>Number of Speakers</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
1	Tagalog	58,345	17.8
2	Ilocano	54,005	16.5
3	Japanese	45,633	14.0
4	Spanish	25,490	7.8
5	Hawaiian	18,610	5.7

Table 1. Hawaiian regains one of the top spots as a language other than English spoken on the islands. Adapted from U.S. Census Bureau.

The history of Hawaiian language in education gives insight into the idea that the Hawaiian government's perspective on language policy (much like other federal entities - more on that later) has not always been concrete. From being the islands' primary language of communication, to outlawed in schools for decades, to now being a federally recognized language of the state, language policy when it comes to Hawaiian has been a rollercoaster. Now, the language is back and more alive than ever, as depicted by a Hawaiian presentation being given at Ke Kula ‘o ‘Ehunuikaimalino Immersion School shown in Figure 2.

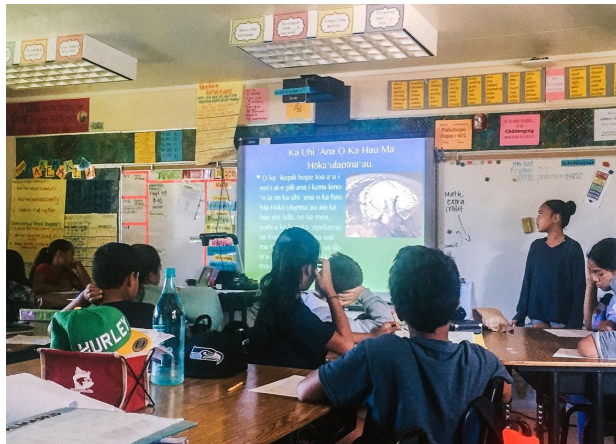


Figure 2. A student gives a presentation in Hawaiian at a Hawaiian Immersion School. Reprinted from Slate.com.

The first generations of these immersion schools are growing up, and the language is following them. The University of Hawaii has even begun offering the first ever graduate degrees taught exclusively in Hawaiian through their Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikolani College of Hawaiian Language (“M.A. in Hawaiian Language and Literature,” 2019).

This question of language education is relevant in many other parts of the United States as well. As mentioned previously, governments may also change their stance on a language policy years later, like in the case of Hawaiian education. In areas that are home to large Native American populations, there are major efforts to undo the damage done to Native American languages and cultures by European settlers centuries ago. Local and federal governments wiped out whole communities and forced others to drop their native languages and conform to English, which has resulted in the extinction of many languages. Recognizing that the history of federal policies towards Native Americans has caused a drastic decline in the number of surviving Native American languages over the past few centuries, Congress has enacted policies such as the Native American Languages Act in an effort to preserve the few languages that are left (“About Native Languages,” 2019). This backtracking of language policy at the federal level mirrors the missteps and attempted correction campaigns that occurred with the Hawaiian government during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The aforementioned examples focused primarily on North America, but the language policy situation in Hawaii gives insight to a worldwide phenomenon when it comes to governments and how they can influence the language(s) of the people. Nowadays, Hawaiian is one of the official state languages of Hawaii and the efforts of many to preserve the language have not been fruitless. With languages dying out at an alarming rate around the world, this kind of federal support for language preservation is important, as is awareness of endangered languages. Being knowledgeable about the potential scope and impact of language policies is crucial to understanding and preserving language in a multicultural world.

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