Language Policies in Practice: Preliminary Findings From a Large-Scale National Study of Native American Language Shift

MARY EUNICE ROMERO-LITTLE, TERESA L. McCARTY, and LARISA WARHOL
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona, United States

OFELIA ZEPEDA
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona, United States

> *Interviewer:* So . . . , as you look back at all the time you've taught, considering all the many students who have come into your classroom, how many do you think speak Navajo?

Navajo teacher: It's a legitimate question, . . . but in thinking about it, they have all taken up English. There is no Navajo flickering in them . . . this new generation of students will respond to you in English. Navajo is set on the side. That's the way it is now.

In this interview excerpt,[1] an experienced Navajo-speaking teacher explains a growing trend among his students. It is a pattern of language shift evident in Indigenous communities around the world. Of 175 Native American languages spoken in the United States, only 20 are still being acquired by children as a first language (Krauss, 1998). Yet even as more Native students enter school speaking English, they often are stigmatized as "limited English proficient" and placed in remedial tracks. Up to 40% of these children will not graduate from secondary school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Thus, the shift to English has not transformed the educational inequities that have historically characterized Native American schooling.

The social and historical conditions that give rise to language shift have been well studied (Crawford, 2000; Fishman, 1991, 2001). For Native Americans, those conditions include genocide, dislocation, and explicit federal policies, including assimilative schooling, designed to eradicate Indigenous languages, religions, and lifeways. Until a few decades ago, physical abuse for speaking Native languages was standard practice in federal Indian schools. What is not well understood is how language shift is being experienced by contemporary Native youth, its influence on their learning, or the implications for education practice and policy. This lack of information contributes significantly to negative education outcomes.

In this article, we report on a large-scale study intended to address this gap in our knowledge. Before we can understand how teachers translate policies around English and Native American languages into practice, we must first understand the language resources present in Native communities, and that is where we begin. Drawing on interview, observation, and questionnaire data across a range of language shift settings, we address students' and teachers' language attitudes and ideologies, their perceptions of language proficiencies, and language use in the classroom. We then discuss how each of these areas is influenced by tacit and official language policies, and the implications for education practice.

[1] The interview from which this text is excerpted was conducted in both Navajo and English (Interview, December 13, 2002). The portion of the interview excerpted here was in Navajo and conducted by community research collaborator Leroy Morgan. Dr. AnCita Benally of Arizona State University did the translation.

THE NATIVE LANGUAGE SHIFT AND RETENTION STUDY

The 5-year (2001–2006), federally funded Native Language Shift and Retention Study responds to a 1998 presidential executive order calling for a comprehensive research agenda in American Indian education, and to Native American efforts to maintain their languages as instrumental to tribal sovereignty. Four research questions guide the study:

1. What role does the Native language (NL) play in the personal, family, community, and school lives of Native American youth?[2]
2. How do language loss and revitalization influence Native youth's school performance?
3. How might these findings inform tribal language planning and policies?
4. What are the implications for state and national education policies and minority language rights?

Data analysis is ongoing, but the preliminary findings have important ramifications for language education planning, policy, and practice.

CONTEXTS, PARTICIPANTS, AND METHODS

The study used a mixed-method, multiple case study design (Stake, 2000). All project sites are in the U.S. Southwest, a region that is home to diverse Native nations and languages. The sites reflect a range of demographic, linguistic, cultural, geographic, and school characteristics, and included

- five NL groups (Akimel O'odham, Navajo, Pii Paash, Tohono O'odham, and a multilingual, ethnically mixed population);[3]
- seven schools representing prekindergarten through Grade 12, and public (state-monitored), federal, and charter school systems;[4]
- rural-reservation, urban, and urban periphery settings; and
- total Native American school enrollments of 2,522.

[2] We use the term *Native language* (NL) to refer to specific Native American languages, not language proficiency or whether the NL is acquired as a first language.
[3] At the request of the tribe and to protect its privacy, the NL is not identified for this site.
[4] Charter schools are linked through formal agreements to public school systems, but chartered by a distinctive mission. The charter school in our study is an Indigenous-serving institution.

NL vitality at these sites ranges from situations in which intergenerational NL transmission continues, to those in which NL speakers are middle-aged or older, to those in which only a few elderly NL speakers remain. With the exception of three urban public schools, some type of NL instruction is in place at each site, from weak forms (pull-out programs) to stronger forms that offer partial immersion in the NL. Participants include youth and adult NL speakers and nonspeakers, and males and females of different ages and professional backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included 230 60- to 90-minute audiotaped interviews (61 youth in Grades 4–12 and 169 adults), and 600 sociolinguistic questionnaires administered to students and school personnel, of which 495 were complete and used for analysis. An additional 34 questionnaires were administered to parents and elders. Interviews and questionnaires were designed to elicit data concerning participants' language attitudes, ideologies, and use. Data collection also included hundreds of hours of ethnographic observations of language use and teaching (80 site visits), and district-maintained achievement data. A total of 3,326 single-spaced pages of text data were generated.

Qualitative data are being analyzed using NVivo 7, a software tool for examining and interpreting text data. Quantitative analysis involves correlation and regression analyses to determine relations between language proficiency and school performance. We are conducting both within-case and cross-case analyses.

Researchers' Role

We come to this study as educators, linguists, anthropologists, and activists in Indigenous education. As Native and non-Native researchers committed to social action, a critical step at each site was the negotiation of research protocols according to school, community/tribal, university, and federal norms. Central to the project are local coresearchers—teaching professionals identified as community research collaborators (CRCs). The CRCs facilitated entrée and access to sites, helped validate research protocols, assisted with interviews and the administration of questionnaires, and attended university classes on research design and methods and NL planning and teaching. The CRCs are the change agents positioned to apply research findings to local language planning and education practice once the project ends.

FINDINGS

Language Attitudes and Ideologies

Participants unanimously affirmed the value of English, although not necessarily at the expense of the NL. Seventeen-year-old Samuel (all names are pseudonyms) spoke for many of his peers: "[English is important] because it's used a lot in America, and you have to know it . . . but you have to know your own Native language to succeed" (Interview, May 5, 2004). As this statement suggests, participants attached an instrumental value to English, but the NL marked personal and collective identity. "I want [children] to know you're [Akimel O'odham]," a NL teacher said; "that's your culture. That's who you are" (Interview, November 3, 2005). "We're Navajo—that's our language," a teacher assistant stated; "we need to keep on talking [Navajo]" (Interview, December 13, 2002). Similar responses were recorded in questionnaires, with the majority of students and teachers reporting that it is "very important" to learn the NL. However, teachers had different perceptions of the value their students attached to the NL than did students themselves. Although 85% of students questioned (334) reported that being able to speak the Native language was *very important,* only 29% of educators questioned (30) reported that students believed learning the Native language was *very important* (see Tables 1 and 2).

Notably, across all sites, students reported that grandparents wanted them to learn the NL at higher percentages than they reported for their parents. These findings point to the influential role grandparents play as mediators in the lives of Native youth, yet grandparents are often invisible to educators (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004).

At the same time, participants described *language shame* (McCarty, Romero-Little, & Zepeda 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Sixteen-year-old Jonathan, a native speaker of Navajo, explained, "Many of these kids know how to speak Navajo, but . . . they might be ashamed [to speak it]" (Interview, May 6, 2004). Students and teachers attributed this feeling to associations of the NL with low status and "backwardness"; students "try

TABLE 1
Teacher Reports of Student Attitudes Toward the Native Language (NL)

Do your students believe it is important to learn the NL?	Totals ($N = 102$)
Very important	30 (29%)
Somewhat important	39 (28%)
Not important	11 (11%)
Not sure	16 (16%)
No response	6 (6%)

TABLE 2
Student Reports of the Importance of Speaking the Native Language (NL)

Do you believe it is important for you to speak your tribal language?	Totals (N = 393)
Very important	334 (85%)
Somewhat important	21 (5%)
Not important	2 (1%)
Not sure	36 (9%)
No response	0 (0%)

to make teachers believe that they speak primarily English and weren't exposed to Navajo," Samuel stated (Interview, May 5, 2004). "They're ashamed, embarrassed," an Akimel O'odham tribal leader said; "kids make fun of [children who speak the NL]" (Field Notes, April 19, 2006). Referring to colonial schooling, Jonathan stated, "It's a result of being told Navajo is stupid, to speak Indian is the way of the devil" (Interview, May 6, 2004). Similar findings have been documented for speakers of Ebonics and immigrant languages (Baugh, 2000; Kouritzin, 1999). Like other language-minority children, Native American children struggle to "hang on to their sense of worth, their cultural identities, and their family connections as they become assimilated into the school and society" (Wong Fillmore, 2000, p. 207).

Perceptions of Children's Language Proficiencies

The majority of teachers at the Tohono O'odham and Navajo sites reported that 20–30% of their students spoke the NL. Teachers of Akimel O'odham and Pii Paash students, and those at the ethnically mixed site, judged only a few students to have some speaking or receptive ability. However, student evaluations of their own and their peers' language abilities were markedly different at most sites. In the Navajo case, in independent interviews and questionnaire responses, students uniformly reported that 75–80% of their peers spoke fluent Navajo. To the surprise of some teachers, a school assessment of students' Navajo proficiencies produced the same percentages. O'odham students also rated the frequency of their and peers' use of the NL slightly higher than did their teachers.

Classroom Language Use

NL instruction included partial NL immersion (Navajo and Tohono O'odham) and pull-out or language enrichment classes (Akimel

O'odham and Pii Paash). Across all sites, a significant majority of teachers, Native and non-Native, reported teaching in English only and using the NL "once in a while" or never, even in schools that claimed to have strong bilingual or bicultural programs. These self-reports were confirmed in the observational data.

Asked in interviews to explain these responses, teachers described academic schedules dominated by federal and state standards and the need to meet *adequate yearly progress* (AYP), a test-driven indicator of school performance under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). NCLB imposes severe sanctions on schools that fail to meet AYP, including loss of funding, takeover by for-profit management firms, and mandated English phonics programs that absorb much of the school day. As one teacher explained, "The school can spend some time teaching [the NL], but we can't be bogged down, . . . we have so many requirements to meet" (Interview, April 18, 2003). Students were keenly aware of these pressures. "It's just hard to have . . . a Native thing going," Jonathan said, "because we're run by the state, and we're told to do these tests and everything" (Interview, May 6, 2004).

In some cases, these pressures led to heavy or sole emphasis on the English curriculum and the curtailment of NL programs. One site identified as "underperforming" under NCLB adopted an NCLB-mandated English phonics program. The following classroom observation illustrates the scripts that teachers and students were to follow:

> This is a mixed-grade class consisting of nine students in Grades 3 through 5. The teacher is preparing her students to read. She begins the lesson by instructing them to place their books flat on their backs with pages open on the table. No book should be standing on edge or held up toward one's face.
>
> *Teacher:* Flat books, please. Flat books, girls. [All students open their books and lay them flat in front of them.]
>
> *Teacher:* Now you look ready. Lana [student], what lesson are we starting?
>
> *Lana:* 39.
>
> *Teacher:* Okay, what color do I read?
>
> *Lana:* Blue.
>
> The teacher begins the reading lesson, a set of repetitious questions and responses. Every sentence is scripted for both the teacher and students, with color-coding in the books.
>
> *Teacher:* Touch the first word in Column A. What word?
>
> *Students:* Beach.
>
> *Teacher:* Touch the word in Column B. Next word, what word?

Students: Bench.

This continues until the group gets to *sail*.

Teacher: What word, spell word.

Students: S-a-i-l.

Teacher: Next word.

Here the teacher has purposefully "tricked" students by not saying the phrase, "What word?" Students are not to respond unless she asks, "What word?" (Field Notes, February 18, 2004)

In an informal meeting, this veteran, highly qualified teacher described the lesson as "not *real* teaching" (Field Notes, Febraury 17, 2004). Teachers understood that direct instruction lacked meaning and substance, and lamented the constraints it placed on English reading as well as NL instruction. But if the teaching was not real, the pressures to raise test scores were, and direct reading instruction remained in place at this site throughout our fieldwork.

DISCUSSION

Findings to date demonstrate the profound impact of both tacit and official language policies on language practices within and outside these Native American classrooms. The divergent responses of students and teachers regarding (a) the value students attach to the NL, and (b) the extent of NL use among the young, illustrate these impacts on language choices. A bilingual teacher who believes that students have little knowledge of or interest in the Native language is likely to downplay its use and value. This is exactly what we see in teachers' self-reports and in observations of teachers' language use, even among teachers designated as NL instructors. For their part, youth may possess greater NL proficiency and interest than they show, hiding it out of shame or embarrassment. The net effect is to establish a de facto language policy that delegitimizes the NL, curtailing opportunities for its cultivation while elevating the status of English. (See McCarty et al., 2006a, 2006b, 2006c for a detailed discussion of these processes.)

Educators and schools also face severe pressures in the form of high-stakes accountability measures in official language policies (e.g., NCLB) that further limit NL instruction. In states with constitutional amendments banning bilingual instruction in public schools, including schools in this study, the pressures are heightened. These policies are diametrically opposed to other federal policies, including the Native American Languages Act (1990, 1992), which promises to "promote the rights and

freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages" (1990, Sec. 104 [1, 5]), and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006,[5] (2006) which authorizes NL "nests" for young children and NL survival schools. Although the latter policies are significant legislative victories, at present they have no enforceability vis-à-vis NLs in education. Meanwhile, NCLB's (2002) single provision for NL programs states that their goal "shall be increased English proficiency" (Title III, Sec. 3,216).

The CRCs and other teaching professionals must work within and around this policy environment in creative, sometimes out-of-school ways. The Akimel O'odham and Pii Paash CRCs, for instance, are leading a reservation-wide language planning effort that includes NL curriculum development for prekindergarten through middle school, Saturday NL classes for adults and children, teacher in-services on NL immersion, and preschool NL instruction. With support from school leaders, the Navajo CRCs have reinstated Navajo immersion in some classrooms. At the charter school, the NL is taught immersion style as a foreign language.

There is growing evidence that teacher-initiated efforts such as these can do much to strengthen children's acquisition of NLs while also enhancing their English language and literacy development. In one of the largest longitudinal studies of language minority student achievement involving 700,000 students representing 15 languages, Thomas and Collier (1997) found that "the most powerful predictor of academic success" was schooling for 4 to 7 years in the NL, even for children, like those in our study, who were dominant in English and "losing their heritage language" (p. 15). Longitudinal studies of Navajo and Hawaiian immersion show that students in these programs not only develop age-appropriate fluency and literacy in the NL; they also outperform their peers on standardized tests of English reading, writing, and mathematics (Arviso & Holm, 2001; McCardle & Demmert, 2006a, 2006b; McCarty, 2003; Romero-Little & McCarty, 2006; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001).

Most youth in our study indicated that they value the heritage language, view it as integral to their senses of self, want adults to teach it to them, and see it as a means of facilitating their school and life success. Further, our findings suggest that collaborative efforts between educators, families, and communities—including grandparents, who are often neglected in the formal educational enterprise—can help mute the English-only, standardizing pressures of official language policies. At the same time, we must work on multiple fronts to challenge and change those policies. Through united efforts, families, communities, and educators can work toward the stability needed to renew and sustain their

[5] This policy is named for renowned Tewa (Pueblo) elder and language educator Esther Martinez.

NLs. All of this effort is aimed at ensuring that Native American learners attain a mature command of both their NL and English through empowering learning opportunities inside and outside of school.

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THE AUTHORS

Mary Eunice Romero-Little (Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico), is an assistant professor in the Curriculum and Instruction Division at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States. She earned her doctorate in education from the University of California at Berkeley and has published articles on American Indian education, gifted education, Indigenous heritage language acquisition, and the socialization of Indigenous children.

Teresa L. McCarty is the Alice Wiley Snell Professor of Education Policy Studies at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States. Her research focuses on Indigenous education, language planning and policy, and ethnography in education. Her books include *A Place To Be Navajo—Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling* (2002), *Language, Literacy, and Power in Schooling* (2005), and *"To Remain an Indian": Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (2006, with K. T. Lomawaima).

Larisa Warhol is a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy studies at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States. She received her masters of education in intercultural communication from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include American Indian education and language policy, language revitalization, and multicultural and multilingual education.

Ofelia Zepeda received a MacArthur fellowship for her work in American Indian language education, maintenance, and recovery. A member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, she is Regents Professor of linguistics and director of the American Indian Language Development Institute at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Ari-

zona, United States. Her areas of research include Tohono O'odham linguistics, language policy and planning, and language education.

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