**Loss of Family Language: Should Education Be Concerned?**

**Lily Wong Filmore**

**The New American Revolution: Indigenous Language Survival and Linguistic Human Rights (Chapter 7 of “ To Remain an Indian”)**

**K. Tisianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty**

**Hi Melody,**

**You have given a nice overall comparison of these two pieces, and they complement each other well. I have put in a couple of notes below where some details could help backup your statements for readers. \**

**It is interesting to think how technology could be used to help sustain heritage language skills for immigrant students- there are many heritage language programs in the US, but I wonder if any are using new technologies to connect learners to heritage language speaking youth in other countries. Just a thought of how this might potentially tie to your main area of interest.**

**Grade: A**

**Part 1: Situating the Research**

In reviewing these two readings, I want to examine three issues: 1) the loss of language in different setting, 2) the revitalization of language in some cultures and 3) some ideas for educators to consider to make English learning less subtractive when it is taught as a second language. Both of these readings discuss loss of language among groups of individuals from different cultures. It is pointed out that among today’s immigrants the learning of English is a subtractive process (Lambert, 1977), this also appears to be true among the Native American people.

Currently, Native American languages are experiencing a rapid and drastic decline. Of the 300 original indigenous languages only 210 are still being spoken. This rate of loss is predicted to increase in the next 60 years with up to 84% of the Native American languages having no new speakers (Krauss, 1998). There are many reason cited for the loss of the Native American languages. Could one of the reasons be related to the learning of English as a subtractive process? Here you would want to explain what you mean by “subtractive process”- and the various claims around that-

There are some communities that are taking steps to resolve the loss of their language and culture. The Hawaiian-language immersion program has been proven to be one of the most successful stories in helping to reclaim and restore a tribal language and culture. This program does not focus on academic achievement, but emphasized creating an environment much like the earlier generations, where the Hawaiian language and culture were developed. The Native speakers had to fight against many obstacles to create and maintain the immersion schooling, but the end result has been a very successful one. In what ways has it been successful? A couple of lines on this would be good to include- In fact, this program is so successful that other Indigenous language revitalization efforts have been modeled after it.

So how can we as educators model this type of success in the classroom and make the learning of English a less subtractive process? I find it interesting that in the article by Lily Wong Filmore (2000), she believes the responsibility lies not just with the schools and teachers, but also with the parents and the community as a whole. She talks about teachers guiding parents to providing opportunities for children to reach a mature command of their native language in the home environment. She points out that parents need to be aware of the pressures their children are undergoing to fit into the new society and that there needs to be an effort to neutralize some of the negative forces pushing on their children in adapting to becoming an American. Her most powerful point is that the immigrant communities must take action and be involved in supporting and maintaining their culture and heritage language.

These two reading dovetail each other in looking at the loss of language and the revitalization of heritage languages that have been lost. In the next section, we will examine the details of the cases that are discussed in these two readings.

**Part 2: Summary of the Scholarly Piece**

***Literature Review***

Bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs have both been used in the United States to teach immigrants and Native American speakers to learn English and gain access to the American educational system. Most of the children in these programs do learn English, but in doing so they end up losing their heritage language in the process. It has been pointed out that within two generations this process of language loss can take effect (Fishman & Hofman, 1966: Portes & Rumbault, 1990). Lopez (1982) found that there are few second-generation immigrants who are considered bilingual. What is happening to make English language learning become a subtractive process by which children abandon their heritage language and perhaps cultural traditions to blend into the American lifestyle and culture? Ah- Ok, here you lay out subtractive education-

For the Native Americans, the process of teaching English was intentionally a subtractive process. There have been well-documented incidences of teachers using violence to knock the heritage culture out of the children (Watahomigie & McCarty, 1996).

Children were taught directly in school that their heritage language was second best (Dick & McCarthy, 1996). By doing this, the dominant culture was not only destroying a language, but also wiping out cultural identity and overpowering an entire race of people. Since this time in history, laws have been enacted to prevent and fight this kind of injustice.

The Native Americans now have the task of revitalizing their language and culture. This mission can be accomplished by implementing a key strategy used by the Hawaiian people, heritage and community language immersion programs. For as Hinton (2001) observed, “There can be no doubt that [heritage-language immersion] is the best way to jump-start the production of a new generation of fluent speakers.”

***Research Site and Participates***

In the Filmore case study, the members of the Chen family are Chinese immigrants who came from Canton, a province on Mainland China. They had spent almost ten years in Hong Kong waiting for a visa to come to the United States. The family consists of a Mother, a Father, an Uncle, a Grandmother and two children (ages 5 & 4). Once the family arrived in the United States, they had two more children. The family settled into a suburb of San Francisco, California. The study makes observations over an eleven-year time frame about the effects of language loss on the dynamics of the family and each individual member.

There are three case studies in the “The New American Revolution” chapter of “To Remain An Indian”. The first study takes a look at the Hawaiian immersion program. The school cited in the study is the Anuenue K-12 School that was created as a full immersion program. The students are instructed in Hawaiian until fifth grade, and then English is introduced as language arts.

The second study is based on the Navajo immersion program based in the Southwest region of the United States. The best-documented immersion program was conducted in Fort Defiance, Arizona in a pre-K-12 school. The third study focuses on the Pueblos, one of the most enduring Indigenous communities of North America. The Keres-speaking Pueblos of Acoma and Cochiti are the tribes that are studied, because they are actively engrossed in reclaiming their heritage language.

***Analysis and Findings***

In the Filmore study, it was observed that the Chen family was very affected by the loss of language. The parents and grandparents in particular, lost a connection with the children. The adults did not know what was going on in the lives of their children and tension built up in the home, because of this loss of communication. The children still speak some Cantonese, but are not as proficient as Chinese children their own ages. How will the next generations of this family fare with the use of Cantonese? Chances are that the language will continue to dwindle as the family becomes more Americanized.

In the immersion programs discussed in the “The New American Revolution”, the success rate runs high across the board. The Hawaiian program intensified the development of critical literacy and cultural pride. The program also served in strengthening the Hawaiian community, enhanced academic success and was a catalyst for other Indigenous language programs.

The Navajo immersion school at Fort Defiance was also a success with some interesting findings. Not only were the Navajo immersion students performing well on English test as compared to the nonimmersion students, but the nonimmersion students performed worse on the Navajo assessments than they had when tested in Kindergarten. Yes- very powerful evidence of the subtractive nature of English submersion for these students-

Finally, the Keres immersion program that was designed to revitalize the heritage language of the Acoma and Cochiti proved to be successful, too. The focus of this program was to build up the oral skills or oral traditions rather than concentrate on the literacy of the language. The students who were part of the immersion programs performed slightly better than their peers in the English-only classes.

***Implications***

In reviewing these reading, the implications are vital to assisting educators in being aware of the effects that schools can have upon the loss of language for immigrant and Indigenous students. It may be necessary to train teachers to be sensitive to heritage languages and to have prepared materials available for these students. The most important factor to realize is that communities must become proactive in creating initiatives to preserve and foster both the heritage language and the culture of their people.

One other point that was addressed in the “The New American Revolution” chapter was the attitude and ideologies of the youth. The young people are interested in learning their heritage language, but are afraid of being ridiculed for making errors in their speech. They also feel that others are judging them when they speak their native language. They think that people perceive them as uneducated, backwards and not having experienced the world. These are just some hurdles that must be overcome to retain and revitalize heritage languages.

**Part 3: Your Own Critique/Response**

After reviewing these articles, I am reminded of a book I read years ago by Hilary Clinton, called, “It Takes a Village”. I think this title is a very powerful and true statement. Even though individuals can and do make a difference, it really take a collaborative effort to keep up the momentum. If a society really wants to retain or revitalize a heritage language or culture the responsibility cannot fall solely on the schools. The parents, community leaders and the students must take proactive steps to preserving their cultural identity. Yes, and the schools can also offer key support- though it takes a lot of envisioning to think what this can look like- as in the Hawaiian case.

One of my saddest observations in the loss of language is the break down in communication between generations. Language is the means by which grandparents and parents impart knowledge, beliefs and cultural history. What happens when this tie or connection is broken? The loss can be devastating to the relationship of the family and the existence of the culture.

Another observation that really made an impact upon me was that unlike the immigrants who come to the United States, the Native American people cannot return to their native country. The immigrants who come to the United States can go back to their origins, where their language and culture are being preserved. However, the Native American communities have no other nation or homeland to return to, no one in a homeland is preserving their way of life and language. For these societies, when the language and culture disappears it is gone from the face of the earth perhaps forever. Yes- and this has implications for heritage language learners and efforts in school- although as Wong Fillmore reminds us, each instance of intergenerational communication breakdown has its own complicated dynamics, and those can be challenging for families, even if they know that their language is thriving somewhere else… though there is also some interesting recent research on how families work to maintain transnational connections, with implications for their children’s language development.

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