ICT for Saving American Indian Languages:  
The Learning of Yuchi

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Abstract

Most American Indian languages in the United States are on the brink of extinction. Of the estimated 154 tribal languages that still exist, less than half are expected to survive the next 10 years. Children have not spoken these languages for three or four generations and only a few first-language speakers remain. Given this critical situation of language loss, it is important that ICT be used to empower Native Americans to revitalize their rich languages and cultures. However, the ICT that is often applied to American Indians is not culturally appropriate and is not consistent with traditional values. Technology has been used to exploit the cultures of Indigenous people and distance them from their own ways of life. This paper offers a model of engagement with American Indian communities using ICT that is community-based and culturally sensitive. The case study of the Yuchi language will demonstrate how ICT can be applied to preserve and perpetuate dying languages. This model will be important for other Indigenous language communities in need of an effective approach for working with elder speakers in a complex technological environment.

Yuchi is the unique language of the Yuchi Tribe of Indians, a population of about 2,500 living in Oklahoma, USA. Only five speakers of Yuchi remain, all of whom are over age 80. Like other American Indian groups, Yuchis have lived on the fringe of technology, with little access to the latest advancements. For the last 14 years, I have engaged Yuchi elders with ICT as a Yuchi tribal member, beginning with the Iowa Multimedia Workshop on Endangered Languages in 1996. There are no books or teaching materials written in Yuchi; it is a completely oral language. For this reason, the five fluent speakers are the only language resource. As a language learner and teacher, I have implemented ICT at the Yuchi Language Project, a non-profit organization, with the goal of producing new young fluent speakers of Yuchi. The discourse and lexicon of the fluent speakers is documented daily using digital audio and video recordings. These elderly speakers are not physically capable of teaching young children directly; however, their recordings are implemented in daily language classes for children. Teachers use the recordings of fluent speakers to create language materials for children, including multimedia lesson plans, interactive storyboards, computer software, children's videos, CDs, and a weekly radio broadcast. Children learn to speak Yuchi with precise pronunciation and prosody, which is a critical part of the nature of the language. After four generations of speaking only English, Yuchi children are speaking Yuchi once again. Using ICT it is possible to bridge the gap between elders and children and keep American Indian languages alive in a manner consistent with the values of the culture.