Training Endangered Language Teachers to be at the Forefront of Project-Based Learning

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Abstract

Around the world, minority communities are leveraging schools to revitalize their heritage languages, despite Fishman's [11] cautions about the school's limitations. While the school can create learning, it generally fails to foster acquisition [16] and Fishman's concern is that, even if attained, school-based fluency will not translate to intergenerational transmission in the home. While many researchers take this as a somber prediction, and teachers often strategically disregard such pessimism, this author has taken Fishman's warning as a challenge and a guide. Fishman's most powerful contribution on this point is the clarity he brings to the goal these schools must have: the creation of new mother-tongue speakers. But accepting this objective leaves minority language programs in uncharted waters; while schools have been very effective in killing languages, restoring their vitality is a novel purpose [5]. So, how to repurpose a homogenizing, authoritarian, generally colonial institution [14] into a vector of sustained plurality, empowerment of the oppressed, and restorer of sovereignty? Such a project is nothing less than a world-building endeavor [18, 22]; one in which the current order of society, implying the inevitability of mass language death and the hegemony of a few languages tied to capitalist activities, is both not accepted and actively combatted.

Teachers of endangered languages (ELs) face daunting challenges even beyond the intense pressures faced by most teachers worldwide. Alongside low salaries, heavy workloads, low social status, unrealistic expectations, and the emotional weight of guiding the future of the community, EL teachers deal with deficits in instructional materials, in student motivation (due to internalized oppression and lack of capitalist imperatives), and in opportunities to practice the language authentically. Given both the difficulty and the urgent importance of what these teachers do, surely we, as scholars of language diversity and pedagogy, owe them proper training and support. It must be our commitment that they gain the skills and techniques from us to create new mother-tongue speakers of their languages. This paper proposes a framework for doing so, recognizing that EL teachers have the potential to be at the forefront of the future of education.

Keywords: *heritage language, endangered, project-based, teacher training, student-centered;*

Optimal methods for EL instruction

While the challenges for EL and heritage language teachers are enormous, too little attention has been paid to their unique opportunities. Once these teachers move beyond the rudimentary methods offered by documentary linguists (Penfield & Tucker [17]), they are often able to teach outside of rote, standardized, teacher-centered traditions because their field is less beholden to both institutional tradition and administrative monitoring. While textbooks, fully-developed pacing and sequencing, and scholastic materials are often lacking, so are standardized tests, outcome-based funding incentives, and scripted programs. This unique vacuum of traditional (Western) pedagogy and constraints that serve historically disenfranchised communities poorly, combined with their unprecedented objectives, makes EL classrooms ideal sites for innovation.

This leads us to ask which methods EL and heritage language teachers should be trained to use, in order to maximize their effectiveness in promoting the vitality of the target language. Holding in mind the objective of creating new native speakers, two criteria emerge as paramount. First, the methods used must produce high levels of communicative competence, easily applied to informal interactions in the social realm and, ultimately, in the home. Second, the language course must be inherently appealing and enjoyable for students, and this enjoyment must transfer to authentic and independent use of the language [1].

Communicative Language Teaching [19] is unquestionably central for these teachers, as it encompasses techniques which allow students to become comfortable interacting in the language, which is essential for social use and eventual parenting [2]. CLT is also a bedrock for groupwork and the integration of multilingual skills (translanguaging in all its forms [13] that allow a language native to another time or place to become a tool for navigating the present and local world in which the students live.

Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) [4] is perhaps the most promising innovation in developing 21st century skills, engaging traditionally marginalized students [4, 7, 9, 12, 21], and providing real-world applications as learning contexts. PBLL is inherently interdisciplinary and content-integrated [20], so it provides an ideal starting point for restructuring the school to be learner-centered. PBLL is particularly well-equipped to address the transcultural and multilingual skill set that EL speakers must develop [15].

Transformative learning for everyone involved

If the project of repurposing homogenizing institutions for the maintenance of diversity is tantamount to a world-building endeavor, there can be little surprise that the design of appropriate training programs, participating in them, and student initiation to new models of learning are all characterized by disorienting dilemmas [8]. For trainers, the process has involved coming to understand how ingrained ideologies and habits are in teachers, and also the severity of the lack of support they experience. The purpose-built program has dramatically shifted its methods and structure each year in response to outcomes and trainee feedback [3]. For teacher trainees, focusing in on the above-mentioned objectives, and simultaneously releasing teachers from pressure to achieve other, often less feasible, objectives, has inspired many tearful outbursts and most trainees report a sense of feeling lost and conflicted (Mezirow's self-examination and sense of alienation*) during the program. For students, regardless of their linguistic profile, the change from rote, teacher-centered learning to active engagement and individual influence over their learning is always baffling at first, and often frustrating.

Given the deeply challenging nature of these processes, a preliminary framework has been developed to support the complex elements of learning, experimentation, reflection, innovation, collaboration, and materials development that are needed for a shift to optimal methods. The framework is outlined below, with further trials and research needed to refine its methods and recognize further needs for optimum outcomes in EL communities.

Preliminary proposed training framework

A.　**An immersive training context:** The creation of an immersion summer camp, in which the target language is used exclusively and non-scholastic, highly-engaging, student-interest-driven activities dominate has proven to be an ideal setting for a training program. Teachers are removed from both their habits and their role by being in a novel context, and they have a chance to observe first-hand and for an extended period, what an alternative and successful model of language instruction looks like.

B.　**Structured observation of a model environment:** While the immersion camp certainly makes a major impression on teachers, it is easy for them to either dismiss its effectiveness as a function of its context rather than its methods, or to fail to analyze the implementation of the methods in sufficient detail as to transform their own practice. For these reasons, structure for reflection and supervision of observations is important to guide teachers through asking the right questions and noticing the individual learner's experience of acquisition in this model.

C.　**Visceral experience of methods:** One of the most effective tools in this toolkit is the personal, lived experience of the trainees as they are required to learn an unknown language through the methods of CLT and PBLL. It is important that the language be unknown to all trainees so that none can become teachers to the others, but rather all are entirely dependent on the effectiveness of the methods being modeled.

D.　**Applied Linguistics with a focus on vitality:** As remarked by Penfield & Tucker [17], EL teachers too rarely benefit from the expertise of applied linguists with state-of-the-art knowledge of

pedagogy. Providing a course for teachers with an applied linguist who understands the grammatical structure and variational richness of the target language is invaluable in refocusing teaching techniques on the aspects of the language that matter most for communication, and in dispelling harmful myths that lead to hypercorrection and hypernormativity [10].

E. **Intensive workshop on integrating CLT and PBLL:** holding an intensive residential workshop during the summer has been effective in allowing trainees to focus entirely on methods and rethinking their courses, away from the pressures of daily performance in the classroom.

F. **Ongoing immersion language learning as needed,** for those who do not feel the target language is their "best" language. In cases where only neo-speakers are available as teachers, such as with Dakota language, this support should involve as many mother-tongue speakers as possible and is vital to ensure teachers can offer immersive classes, and that the language they teach is as authentic as possible.

G. **Fine-tuned objectives** for concrete exercises in backwards planning. The work of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell [6] has provided the best framework for fluency so far identified, in that it is both specific and multi-dimensional. It has, however, been necessary to adapt it for comprehensibility and for each language.

H. **Adapted instruction in critical and creative literacy** for the age groups taught, such that teachers learn to focus on oral proficiency and communicative competence as guiding principles.

I. **Sustained mentoring and personalized problem-solving** for the challenges each teacher faces.This has been crucial for empowering teachers to implement changes in their approaches. Without sustained contact, encouragement, and advice, teachers generally feel sufficient pressure from administration, parents, or from their own lack of self-confidence to dissuade them from attempting new methods beyond the first month or two of the school year.

J. **School-based training** for administrators and other staff to encourage collaboration and school-wide investment in the language program..Combined with interviews with stakeholders, information sessions to explain the new approaches, and rapport-building with community leaders, this can be effective in increasing openness to new approaches.

K. **The supply of well-designed content-integrated curriculum** that teachers can use while they learn to create their own.

L. **Support for the creation and sharing** of large volumes of authentic, target-language materials about present, local topics that are suitable for project-based units and models of communicative scenarios.
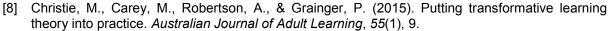
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