Building an Intergenerational, Home-Based Language Nest

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Abstract

This talk reports on the efforts of a small family that is striving to maintain the Seneca language by establishing a language nest in the home of one of the speakers (King, 2001; Reyhner, 2005). Many Seneca people are currently struggling to preserve their heritage language. Although estimates vary, people who speak Seneca may number less than 50. On the eight-stage "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale" to measure language endangerment developed by Joshua Fishman (1991), 1 represents the least endangered while 8 represents the most. Seneca may represent Stage 7, where nearly all fluent speakers are beyond childbearing age. A language in that position is seriously endangered.

Although Indigenous communities are adopting various locally-specific ways of maintaining their languages in the face of endangerment and domination by English, a body of research suggests that intergenerational language nests are often key ways to reverse language shift effectively (Reyhner, 2005; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). The presentation describes a project designed to explore the importance of using practical language in the home on a regular basis and transmitting linguistic and cultural knowledge from fluent grandparents to grandchildren. The two presenters will give an analysis and description of building such a language nest.

The project includes a grandmother and her two granddaughters speaking the language in the granddaughter's house on the Allegany Territory in western New York State. The granddaughters and their children are asked questions that initiate reflection on appropriate activities in the language nest setting. Analyzing and sharing these experiences can be an important contribution to the field of language maintenance. The intent is to encourage and assist this family and other families to help maintain Seneca language and culture for future generations. Ideally the project will also provide incentives to other small families and groups that are trying to revitalize languages on their own. The experiences and feelings of these few people may serve to ground the experiences of others who are striving to do whatever they can to pass on the heritage language.

1. Introduction

This project involves a grandmother and her two granddaughters teaching their children in the granddaughter's house on Ohi:yo′ (the Allegany Territory) in the Southern Tier of New York State. They discuss individual teaching/learning/language activities in the language nest. Creating a nest in Seneca and disseminating its progress is a new contribution to the field of language maintenance. The intent is to encourage and assist this family and other families to help maintain Seneca language and culture for future generations. Ideally the project will also provide incentives to other small families and groups that are trying to revitalize languages on their own. The experiences and feelings of these few people may serve to ground the experiences of others who are striving to do whatever they can to pass on the heritage language.

2. Context

The Seneca are part of the *Hodínöhšö:ni:h* (also Haudenosaunee, Iroquois, or Six Nations) Confederacy*,* which also includes the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga, and Tuscarora. The Iroquois' traditional territory spanned the eastern Great Lakes area; today they live in Canada, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and western New York State. Their tradition states that they have inhabited the Northeast "since the beginning of human time" (*Basic Call*, p. 80). The focus of this project centers on one of the territories of the Seneca known as the Allegany Territory, or Allegany Reservation, in the Southern Tier of the state bordering northcentral Pennsylvania. This territory includes 3,500 enrolled Senecas[1] living in and around the city of Salamanca, New York. The Territory is in the foothills of the Allegany Mountains and straddles the Ohi:yo:h (Allegany) River.
Endangerment

In terms of language endangerment in the United States and Alaska, of the approximately 300 Indigenous languages, only 175 are still spoken; 135 to 155 of those are moribund (Crawford, 1996; McCarty, 2008; Pease-Pretty On Top, n.d.). Only 20 are still transmitted to children (Hornberger, 1998). McCarty (2008) indicates that in 2000, 72 percent of Indigenous children under 5 years of age spoke only English at home. Although the statistics are dire, there is still cause for hope as some languages, such as Hawaiian, are making a comeback from endangerment. As Hinton (2001) explains, "This is also a time of unprecedented efforts on the part of minority peoples to keep their languages alive and to expand their usage" (p. 4).

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[1] Enrollment, for Onöndowa'ga people, is granted to descendants whose maternal side is Onöndowa'ga. While several other Indigenous nations use the same system as the Onöndowa'ga, some nations require a percentage of blood quantum, a complicated system devised by the government's bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

3. Seneca Endangerment

Many Seneca people struggle to preserve their heritage language. Although estimates vary, people who speak Seneca may be as few as 150 ("Seneca," 2007). Even since this minimal figure was published, the numbers may have dwindled. Chafe (personal communication, 10 November, 2007) offered a more pessimistic estimate: "My guess is that there are less than 50 speakers altogether." Chafe went on to refer to an eight-stage "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale" to measure language endangerment, developed by sociolinguist Joshua Fishman (1991). On this scale, a 1 represents the least endangered while 8 represents the most. Speaking of the Seneca language, Chafe commented that he "would definitely put it at Stage 7." In Stage 7, most speakers are beyond childbearing age, and a language in that position is seriously endangered.

4. Revitalization

Although hundreds if not thousands of different languages and communities are conducting revitalization efforts, the conditions that lead to the loss of languages and the need to revitalize them often feature very similar stories of colonization and oppression. The people who maintain their languages and cultures in the face of such opposition are often nothing less than heroic. In consideration of the differences and similarities across cases in the challenge that is language revitalization, communities often look to other populations facing similar challenges as they try to find the best of existing models and adapt them to meet their specific, local needs. There are different histories, demographics, values and funding sources that cause these differences, but shared aspects of their histories should not be overlooked. Speaking of Indigenous peoples in North America, McCarty & Watahomigie (1999) emphasize this point: "The uniqueness of individual tribal and community situations notwithstanding, all indigenous peoples in the USA share a history as the targets of federal policies aimed at eradicating their languages and lifeways" (p. 80).

The oppression of colonialism can be seen in the biography and teachings of Sakokweniónkwas (Tom Porter), an Akwesasne Mohawk and director of the traditional community of Kanatsioharé:ke. His narrative attests to researchers' findings:

> I attended a government school. It was organized by the federal and the state governments together through some kind of agreement. But the Christians – the Catholic and the Protestant religions – were the only two religions that were allowed to instruct the kids … there was no other choice. (2008, p. 28)
> I've been told over and over that to be an Indian, to believe the way an Indian believes, to dress like an Indian, to behave like an Indian is hocus-pocus, nonsense, and you'd best straighten up and start accepting the Western world: the language, the religion, the everything. Being told that over and over since I was little is what made me rebel, in a sense … But, I'm not immune to colonization either, 'cause I was just a kid. So one of the things that hurts me so bad I still

> can't even deal with it is … I had good teachers, good teachers: Grandma and Grandpa and all of them. And I can name all of them for you. And they told me things, and then the school told me not to believe in them because they weren't "documented." (p. 30)

This reflection echoes May's estimation of the complicated nature and internalization of linguistic and cultural colonialism. "Moreover, while the supposedly inexorable process of such language loss is often articulated and defended by majority language speakers (secure in their own linguistic and cultural heritage), it has also come to be internalised by many indigenous speakers themselves – the result, largely, of the long process of negative ascription to which indigenous languages and cultures have been consistently subject" (May, 1999, p. 2). May does assert that the situation is by no means hopeless, and that attestations of language endangerment as "fait accompli" are premature. "Nonetheless, indigenous community-based education stands as an example of just what can be achieved in 'turning the tide' of these long-standing hegemonic processes" (May, 1999, p. 2). Darrell Kipp, a Blackfeet educator and researcher, remarks on the strength of community-based models, since in their adoption, "You don't reform, you abandon bad systems" (2000, p. 23).

Innovative language revitalization and education efforts include school-based initiatives, programs outside of but connected to schools, such as after-school or summer programs, programs for adults, efforts aimed at language documentation and materials creation, and programs based in the home.
Again, Tom Porter sheds light through his personal reflection:

> We must immerse our people, our children, and teach them how to be mothers and fathers, give them back their ceremonies, give them back their language, give them back their spiritual history altogether, teach them how to be wholesome family members, ambitious, honest, and morally good … I believe this dream will be fulfilled. (2008, p. 389)

Often, the people who possess the fluency and cultural and historical knowledge are tribal elders. "To succeed, language renewal projects require not only good intentions but enormous practical efforts … As a result, these projects must draw on cultural resources available on reservations, relying especially on elders, the true experts in these languages" (Crawford, 1996, pp. 8-9). Pease-Pretty On Top echoes this sentiment in her *Native American Language Immersion* report. "Elder involvement in Native language immersion camps, classrooms and activities is multi-dimensional and integral to the language learning in tribal communities" (n.d., p. 38). Elders are part of the intergenerational web of language speakers and learners in the community. Researchers have long advocated for intergenerational language transmission and cooperation of community efforts as critical for endangered language revitalization. In terms of the vitality of the language using this concept, "perhaps it can aspire to societal re-attachment or even more to inter-generational mother-tongue transmission, not just to societal re-attachment. It may realistically aspire to the inter-generational transmission of that re-

attachment, so that it becomes the mother tongue of a vibrant speech community" (Fishman, 1996, p. 4). Other parts of the intergenerational web include parents. *Guidelines for Strengthening Indigenous Languages* (2001), from the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, advises elders and parents to:

- Keep heritage language alive by using it as much as possible in everyday activities and in ceremonial events.
- Assist younger speakers of the heritage language in expanding their fluency to deeper levels and enlist their support in passing the language to other members of the community.
- Be a role model for all generations by practicing and reinforcing traditional values and using the heritage language to maintain spiritual traditions and convey the history of the community.
- Assist all members of the community (especially new parents) in providing opportunities for young children to grow up hearing their heritage language spoken in the home and community.
- Assist others to acquire the heritage language by using it on an everyday basis, and serve as a mentor to those wishing to learn the language." (*Guidelines,* 2001, p. 3)

How this is done varies by local context, but a few principles may apply to all efforts. Hinton (2001a) also advises speaking primarily in the language at home:

> If parents try to do something like spend "equal time" on the two languages, it is the endangered language that will suffer, for unlike the mainstream language, the endangered language receives little or no reinforcement outside the home. Since children do a great deal of language learning outside the home, the parents, if their goal is bilingualism for their children, should spend relatively little time on the language that is dominant in the general environment and concentrate instead on speaking in the endangered language … if the parent is fluent, then that must be the language of communication between the parent and child, either at all times or during a significant amount of time … for a person in danger of dying, the first job of medics is to get the heart beating again. For an endangered language, the first job is to get the native speakers speaking it again. (p. 13)

Parents are advised to start with their young children by immersing them in the language at home. "Immersion programs should begin as early as possible" (DeJong, 1998, p. 5). "The home must be the central focus of native language learning" (p. 3).

Parents might not know enough of the language to transmit it, and communities are sometimes splintered so that local organization is difficult. "Even when a family continues to use a threatened language in the home, the outside environment may be so steeped in the majority language that the child unconsciously shifts languages around school age and no longer speaks the minority language even at home" (Hinton, 2001a, p. 4). This is a phenomenon that stalls many revitalization efforts. But researchers

emphasize that speakers need to start somewhere. "Should they take two intermediate speakers and an elder and start with five students and just go for it? Yes." (Kipp, 2000, p. 29). One way to initiate small-scale revitalization is through language nests.

5. Language Nests

Outside of the continental US, two of the most famous and successful programs of all language revitalization efforts are found in the Pacific Islands in Hawai'i and New Zealand. New Zealand is where the language nest, or *Te Kōhanga Reo*, was established in 1982. This initiative resulted from the knowledge that a majority of Maori speakers were elders beyond childbearing age. The generations of parents and young people were those whom King describes as having "missed out" from knowing the language; in the 1970s, fluent speakers represented roughly 20% of the population, yet most were over the age of 50 (2001). The nest is designed for preschool-aged children and their parents who do not or cannot take part in other early childhood programs. Nests provide daycare services through the heritage language. Language nests often take place in the home, with elders and young adults transmitting the language and cultural practices to young children while caring for the children's daily needs. As the nests grew in popularity, they extended from strictly home-based locations to centers throughout the communities.

Today there are 704 nests in New Zealand enrolling 13,000 children. Although by 1995, 72% of speakers over age 16 were "low fluency" speakers, 29% reported knowing enough to carry on conversation (King, 2001). The nests became the "most popular early-childhood option for Maori children" (p. 122). Often, the participants are related, or at least have kinship ties. The language used is informal, conversational, and imbedded with cultural values, for instance, in the teaching of traditional children's stories that teach religious values or cultural beliefs. They teach customs, greetings, "tribal connections" (p. 123), and group relationships, and utilize natural materials in the lessons. Thus, they "affirm" the culture (p. 123). Parents are encouraged to participate and to use the language in the home. King has noted a few difficulties experienced over the years. One is that the transition from the nest to mainstream education has been difficult for some children, as the schools do not value the teachings of nest programs. Also, the organization of the nests has changed multiple times, and there has been a need to find qualified teachers and speakers. Other problems include low enrollment, lack of family support, difficulty in avoiding the use of English, and a lack of staff. Teachers and staff need to be reassured that formalized teaching of the language is not necessary since children will acquire language when it is used naturally. Thus the nest programs are providing more training for nest teachers and staff.

Hawaiians began aggressive immersion programs by adopting the Māori language nest model. The *'Aha Pūnana Leo*, the preschool language nest, co-founded by William Wilson, was inspired by the Māori model ("'Aha Pūnana Leo," 2006; Pease-Pretty On Top, n.d.). Kipp states that in Hawai'i, "[t]hey were Native Hawaiians, and they were down to less than a thousand native speakers. So, they started the language nests called *Punana Leo* in their language and taught their children their language … today, they have twenty-eight schools" (2000, p. 8). In 1983, the nest was legally registered as a non-profit

(Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). In the early years, there was no state support for the nests, but eventually, a coordinator and advisory council were established, and they were able to secure funding and partner with the University of Hawai'i.

In these Hawaiian nests, parents, as well as children, learn the language; they also participate in administering their own local schools. The central idea of these nests was to use a Hawaiian-dominant model, not Hawaiian as a Second Language. They insist on "the total use of the indigenous language" in communication, and integrate culture into the teachings (p. 151). They use a daily routine and have adapted Montessori methods to transmit family experiences and values. The routine starts with a circle in the morning, with singing, stories, exercise, and cultural activities, to free playtime, to a structured lesson featuring activities such as premath skills, to outdoor play, lunch, nap time, snack time and more story time in the afternoon. Nests often contain 10 to 12 children aged 3 to 5 attending Monday Through Friday from 7:30 until 5:00 during the months of September to July. Parents are encouraged to participate and provide in-kind services; in the beginning stages when materials were scarce, they helped to create culturally-relevant materials in the language, such as books with family photos and information (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001).

Immersion increased fluency in youth from 35 to 2,400 young speakers (Pease-Pretty On Top). Wilson and Kamanā reported in 2001 that the nests increased "strong Hawaiian communicative and behavioral fluency" among five-year olds (p. 153). In addition, it helped to build confidence and acceptance of Hawaiian as a part of daily conversation. The young adult/parent generation has also increased its use of conversational Hawaiian, building community-wide excitement for language revitalization, more statewide receptivity, and popular use in the public arena.

Seneca Language Nest

During the summer of 2009, Sandy Dowdy, fluent speaker of Seneca and veteran teacher of Seneca language and culture, capitalized on the inspiration she gained from existing language nests and started to build her own. Dowdy was aware of the nature of Seneca endangerment and saw a similar historical trajectory between Seneca, Māori, and Hawaiian. She was deeply concerned that the various teaching activities that she and her community have engaged in were not addressing the key element in language revitalization – the youngest children in the community. She saw that the model nests that were so successful in other communities were the missing piece in her own community. Her son and granddaughters, who are capable speakers and language teachers, often become entangled in day-to-day commitments and find little time to engage their own youngest generation in conversational Seneca language, much like the "generations who missed out" in King's narrative of New Zealand. Since Dowdy had extensive experience in early-childhood training in Montessori and Asher's Natural Approach teaching methods, and was well-versed in language teaching strategies such as Total Physical Response, she understood her unique appropriateness as the language nest progenitor in her community. Her position with the Seneca Nation Language Department allowed her the flexibility and support to begin the nest-building process. She started, then, with her own great-grandchildren at the home of one of her granddaughters.

Interruptions from other commitments caused a lapse in planning and utilizing the nest, but she restarted it again in late 2009 when she formalized the nest concept and gave it a name, Onödowa'ga: Wadehsayë' Oiwa'shö'öh, or The Seneca Language Nest. In addition to teaching language and culture, the nest has a mission to be a "green" campus and to teach concepts of environmental sustainability to students and teachers alike. Nest activities often take place outdoors, as the seasonal cycle is important; ceremonies follow the natural order of the seasons. Dowdy began regularly teaching four preschool children, three of which were her great-granddaughters and one preschool daughter of another language teacher, and occasionally included her 10-year-old great grandson who is not only a learner but also a facilitator. She also mentors the parents in incorporating the nest vocabulary and conversation materials into the home for daily use. Parent inclusion is accomplished through daily contact when parents drop off and pick up children, through informal meetings, and by informing parents of the teaching methods and language activities and goals. Dowdy created a series of Parent Brochures (see Appendix 3) so that parents are aware of the content taught in the nest and are encouraged to reinforce it in appropriate units. Families participate in seasonal ceremonies throughout the year.

Children in the nest learn about clothes, foods, numbers, pets, commands (see Appendix 1 for chart of commands used in TPR lessons), names, family terms, miscellaneous items such as questions and observations, songs, and the Ganö:nyök, all in the Seneca language. The 20 verses of Ganö:nyök is a daily recitation in the Seneca language that gives thanks to all the vital natural elements, such as water, medicines, and the sun, and to the Creator. The children are learning the basic vocabulary words for the elements using images (See Appendix 2) as they hear a short version of the recitation. Each verse has a repetitive portion that facilitates learning. Thus they are beginning preparation to be able to recite the Ganö:nyök in their daily lives, at social occasions, and at ceremonial events. The great-grandson has delivered it at special community occasions and is able to ad-lib his version with relative ease. Dowdy teaches its initial use using various educational strategies using the flash cards.

Conscious effort is made to use Montessori and Natural Approaches. There is a defined structure to the daily routine (See Appendix 5), yet the routine can be flexible depending on the children's needs and community doings. Direct translation to English is avoided, but children's responses are acknowledged whether they are in English or in Seneca. When children show disinterest, they are not redirected immediately. They are permitted to grow and attend to activities when they are ready. Social skills, Seneca ways of behaving and acting accordingly, and cultural materials are incorporated as much as possible and overlap the language goals. Dowdy reflected on the nest during the initial start-up phase:

> Pre-school children are quick at mastering the language; meaning that they use the language with each other naturally. The students unconsciously used the phrases they heard with each other. We never had to translate when using TPR method. We used many non-verbal gestures throughout the day, during class time and during free play. Having a flexible schedule allows the children to freely express themselves during free play situations … We use a lot of positive reinforcement,

smiles, hugs. Some students are more dominant and others are more out-going. Their 10-year-old brother was constantly calling the girls by their native names. On the sixth day of the language nest, one of the students called to one of the other students and gave her the Seneca command to "come here!

Dowdy is currently at the stage of developing and using a regular formal assessment tool to measure the children's progress (See Appendix 4). This sheet is intended for keeping track of concepts as well as for sharing with parents. This tool is designed to be easily expanded as new vocabulary is introduced. There is emphasis on simply hearing the vocabulary, ability to repeat it, and ultimately, using it spontaneously without prompting. Other components will be added to the nest as it evolves.

Recently, the nest has moved from the granddaughter's house to Ganöhsesge:kha Hë:nödeyë:stha, or the Faithkeepers School, a small community school co-founded by Dowdy and her husband, Lehman "Dar" Dowdy, a Faithkeeper in the Seneca-Allegany community. The school has been the site of various Seneca programs, including ceremonial language classes for adults, and summer immersion camps for youngsters. It is a natural location for the nest as well, as if offers a larger building set in the woods and near a playground. At the school, the Nation provides an assistant who prepares breakfast and lunch and provides other ancillary services.

In the near future, Dowdy hopes to expand the nest to include up to ten children, hire an assistant language teacher that she can mentor, expand the nest days from once a week to five days per week, and increase parent involvement.

Overall, the nest operates with the acknowledgment of the sage advice of Darrell Kipp: "Your language is your curriculum" (2000, p. 26).

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6. Appendices

Appendix 1: TPR Chart/Word Wall

Appendix 2: Ganö:nyök Flash cards

Appendix 3: Page From Parent Brochure

GANONYOK
1. *Yŏëdzade' (Earth)*
2. *Ha'deyögwe'dage:h (People)*
3. *Oneganos (Water)*
4. *Ha'deyogeo'dza:ge:h (Grasses)*
5. *Hadeyonohǿgwa'shä:ge:h (Medicines)*
6. *Ha'deyojiyage:h (Fruit)*
7. *Ojisdoda'shä' (Strawberries)*
8. *Ha'degayo'dage:h (Animals)*
9. *Ha'degaji'dage:h (Birds)*
10. *Johehgŏh (Three Sisters)*
11. *Deyä̆wë:nye:h (Wind)*
12. *Hadĭwĕnodaji's (Thunders)*
13. *E:de:ka:' Gähgwa:' (Sun))*
14. *Sŏëka:' Gähgwa:' (Moon)*
15. *Gajihsŏ'dĕönyŏ' (Stars)*
16. *Ganyodaiyo' (Handsome Lake)*
17. *Hadiŏya'geonŏ' (Four Beings)*
18. *Sŏgawjĕnokda'ŏh (Our Creator)*

Gaeno'sho'oh (Songs)
1. *Ha'nowa:h, Ha'nowa:h,*
2. *Nyawëh Sgĕ:nŏ'*
3. *Ji'towĕdŏ:h*
4. *Jiyăh Todi:ni:h*
5. *Ésgŏgĕ'ae' _____*

Gashene'sho' *(Pets/livestock)*
1. *Ji:yâh (dog)*
2. *Josgwaŏn (cow)*
3. *Gĕŏdanĕhgwih (horse)*
4. *Nyagwai' (bear)*
5. *Dago:ji' (cat)*
6. *Dagă:'ë:' (chicken)*
7. *So:wăk (duck)*
8. *Goisagihs (monkey)*
9. *Ji'dĕ'ö:h (bird)*
10. *Gisgwi:s (pig)*

Osheda'sho' *(Numbers)*
1. *Sga:d*
2. *Dekni:h*
3. *Sĕh*
4. *Ge:ih*
5. *Wis*
6. *Yei'*
7. *Dza:dak*
8. *Degyŏ'*
9. *Johdŏ:h*
10. *Washĕ:h*

Appendix 4: Assessment Sheet Sample

Language Nest 2009-2010
Vocabulary Checklist

	Listened	Repeated	Mastered	Comments
Gano:nyok				
1. Yŏëdzade'				
2. Ha'deyögwe'dage:h				
3. Oneganos				
4. Ha'deyogeo'dza:ge:h				
5. Ha'deyonöhgwa'shä:ge:h				
6. Ha'deyojiyage:h				
7. Ojisdöda'shä'				
8. Ha'deganyo'dage:h				
9. Ha'degaji'dage:h				
10. Jŏhehgŏh				
11. Dëyä:we:nye:h				
12. Hi'nö'				
13. Ëde:kha:' Gähgwa:'				
14. Söekha:' Gähgwa:'				
15. Gajihsö'dëönyö'				
16. Ganyodaiyo'				
17. Hadiöya'geonö'				
18. Sögwajëno'kda'öh				
Colors				
1. Gwëhdä:'ĕ'				
2. Jitgwä:'ĕ'				
3. Oshä:'ĕ'				
4. O:ya'ĕ'				
5. Jinyowae'				
6. Ganëhdaikö'				

1

Appendix 5: Daily Routine

8:30 - CHILDREN SAY, "Ësgögë' ae' No'yëh!

8:45 - BREAKFAST

9:00 - CIRCLE TIME (Sing songs, Ganö:nyök lesson, introduce new "table work," do a language activity)

9:30 - TABLE WORK (puzzles, drawing, coloring, sorting, play dough, manipulatives)

9:45 - STORY TIME

10:00 – WASH HANDS, SNACK

10:30 – FREEPLAY   (in classroom)

11:00 – CLEAN UP, WASH HANDS, LUNCH

12:00 – OUTDOOR PLAY/FIELD TRIP/PLAYGROUND/RIDE/NAP

2:00 - WASH HANDS, SNACK

2:15 - CIRCLE/STORYTIME

2:30 – FREE PLAY

3:30 – CLEAN UP, CLOSING