The Benefits of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching for Indigenous Language Educators

Lawrence N. Berlin

This paper proposes the field of second language acquisition and teaching (SLAT) as beneficial to educators who want to implement or are currently engaged in indigenous language education. The point of view being presented here is that, in most cases, American Indian/Alaska Native children are not learning their tribal languages as their first languages, but rather as a second or subsequent language. For this reason, schools can play a pivotal role in reversing language shift by addressing the circumstances specific to second language learning. Awareness of SLAT theory, can help teachers understand the developmental and cognitive processes that make learning a second language different from the first. In turn, SLAT pedagogical approaches and techniques, which are based on language-specific theoretical research, can provide helpful and effective ways to teach indigenous language as second languages. These approaches and techniques are also discussed as they are congruent with different cultural beliefs and practices, and different ways of knowing.

What Exactly is SLAT?

Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT) is a field of inquiry that investigates the acquisition of all languages subsequent to the mother tongue of individuals from a number of perspectives. Among these are (a) the linguistic perspective that analyzes languages themselves in all their varieties; (b) the sociolinguistic perspective that positions language and its different variations within a societal framework establishing functions and uses; (c) the psycholinguistic perspective that examines both the receptive and productive skills associated with language at various stages during the learning process and attempts to determine the how and why of individual differences

between learners relative to cognitive and neurological factors; and (d) the pedagogical perspective that attempts to translate the knowledge produced through research in the other areas of the field into effective and workable approaches to classroom instruction. It is this fourth and final perspective that could contribute the most to indigenous language educators. As the field is clearly interdisciplinary in nature, combining features of anthropology, sociology, psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, and education, SLAT pedagogy finds its strength in the broader focus required when seemingly diverse disciplines are brought together for one purpose: the study of second language learning.

The State of Indigenous Languages in the United States

Today, of the 175 indigenous languages spoken in the United States, it has been reported that only about 20, or 11%, are still being transmitted to children in the traditional way (Krauss, 1996). The remaining languages "in use" are spoken by the parental generation and up with an increasing percentage spoken by only a few elderly adults. Indeed, the degree of language loss may even be underrated since the reported numbers reflect only the languages of tribes that are recognized by the U.S. government. Thus, the true number of potentially active languages may, in fact, be much higher than suggested, reflecting a lower percentage of viable languages.

Of those languages reported as being "in use," Krauss (1996) proffered a scale designed specifically for the classification of language endangerment in indigenous communities in North America. Keeping a focus on intergenerational transfer, the classifications range from Category A to E posited on a continuum (see Figure 1). Category A represents a vital language spoken by all generations in the community. As

the generations of native speakers are gradually seen to decline, the classification changes until Category D, toward the opposite end of the continuum, which represents a state where the heritage language is spoken by only a few of the eldest members of the community. Category E would be used as a classification for those languages deemed extinct.

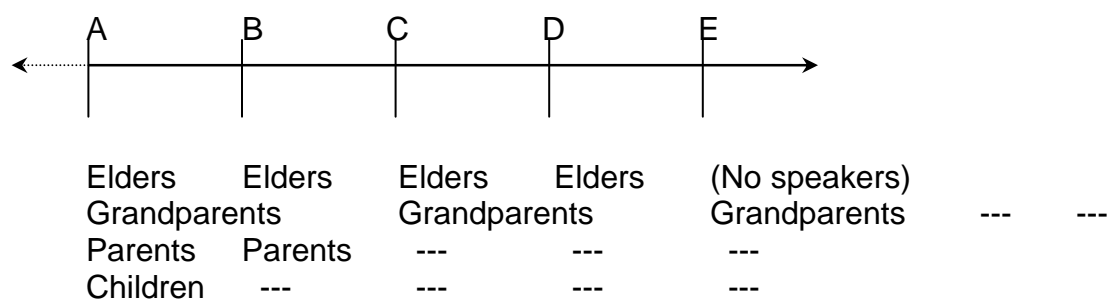|	A	B	C	D	E
	Elders	Elders	Elders	Elders	(No speakers)
	Grandparents		Grandparents		Grandparents --- ---
	Parents	Parents	---	---	---
	Children	---	---	---	---

Figure 1. Continuum of indigenous language endangerment (based on Krauss, 1996)

More and more, American Indian/Alaska Native communities are coming to terms with the slow disappearance of their languages. Reports from different tribal groups give evidence for a gradual shift as fewer and fewer children are learning their indigenous languages as a first language, or at all (Adley-SantaMaria, 1997; Batchelder & Markel, 1997; McCarty, Watahomigie, & Yamamoto, 1999; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995). Thus, the languages are rapidly moving along the continuum in a unidirectional fashion away from Category A, the most vital classification. If some form of intervention is not initiated, it is predicted that all these languages will most likely move to Category E (Crawford, 1995; Fishman, 1996a, 1996b; Hinton, 1994; Krauss, 1996; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995).

Based on research in language change, it has traditionally been speculated that linguistic instability in bilingual communities caused by a conflict in their functional use

leads to progression along the language endangerment continuum towards extinction, sometimes referred to as *language death* (Dressler, 1988; Gal, 1979). In this example, it is more than likely that the language of wider communication would overtake and eventually replace the indigenous language in the daily lives of the community. Despite the generally negative prognosis, research on reversing language shift suggests that early recognition can incite a community to take remedial action that may preserve its heritage language, suggesting that movement along the continuum need not be unidirectional. It has been suggested that one way to achieve linguistic stability and to get an indigenous language on firm footing is to establish a form of "diglossia" (Crawford, 1996; Fishman, 1991). Diglossia is the state where each language has its own functional use within the community; that is, the indigenous language and the language of wider communication would serve particular functions within the daily lives of the people (Fishman, 1989, 1991). Depending on the needs of the individual community and the state of its language, this may at least serve as a practical interim goal in the efforts to reverse language shift. Fishman (1991) proffered a scale in which he identified eight areas of functional language use that could be targeted in efforts to reverse language shift. Like the implication of Krauss' categories, he claims that intergenerational transmission of the language is the crux of reversal and any efforts to revitalize indigenous languages must target the use of the language at home as their primary goal. Though this may be the ultimate goal of reversing language shift, many practitioners believe that schools can play an instrumental role (McCarty & Zepeda, 1995).

Why Do We Need to Worry about Language Extinction?

It is commonly believed that when a language dies, much more is lost than the language itself (Crawford, 1995; Fishman, 1996b). Indigenous peoples are among the many who feel there is an integral link between their language and culture (Hinton, 1994). They believe their culture is expressed through their language and cannot be adequately represented by any other language (Benjamin, Pecos, & Romero, 1997; Fishman, 1996a). The current gap in communication experienced between grandparents and their grandchildren who do not speak the mother tongue points to the loss of intergenerational transmission of culture. Moreover, this lack of connection to the heritage culture has been cited as leading to a general loss of identity among American Indian youth (Hathorn, 1997; Watahomigie, 1995; McCarty & Zepeda, 1999). Furthermore, there is sanctity inferred in the language as it serves as a direct link to the Creator. The *Pascua Yaqui Tribe Language Policy* states that without the ancient language "we could not exist in the manner that our Creator intended" (cited in Trujillo, 1997, p. 15). Thus, the loss of language threatens the existence of the people on several levels (Fishman, 1991, 1996b).

Crawford (1995) advanced other arguments for the need to preserve indigenous languages on the basis of diversity. He proposed that not only is the general diversity that exists in the world being lost, but also a good deal of knowledge (see also Krauss, 1996). One example comes from ethnobotany, the study of indigenous plants. The curative properties of plants have been known to healers for generations. In some tribes, this sacred and secret knowledge was transmitted orally by the healers only when they were ready to pass on. As fewer young people are able to speak or

understand the language or choose to engage in traditional practices, the benefits of these natural cures to modern medicine are vanishing with the elders.

The diversity of languages has also been proffered as a benefit to humanity. Moreover, it has been hypothesized that multiple ways of understanding represented through the knowledge of more than one language may lead to greater cognitive capacity, especially if activated during the period of initial language acquisition (Cummins, 1992; Wolfe-Quintero, 1998). With the encroachment of monolingualism, this human potential is diminished.

Despite these several arguments for the preservation of indigenous languages, the policy of the government of the United States has long been toward assimilation and monolingualism (Crawford, 1995; Ruiz, 1994). Even with legislation claiming to promote bilingual education, such as the *Bilingual Education Act* of 1968 and subsequent legislation to support its implementation, actual school practices have primarily had transition to English as their goal, usually at the expense of the heritage language (Lessow-Hurley, 1996; Lyons, 1995; Reyhner, 1992). Moreover, while bilingual education has been applied to the teaching of many immigrant languages, the history of immigrant assimilation and subsequent loss of language cannot be compared to the situation of American Indians/Alaska Natives. While immigrant communities have the opportunity to look back to their "homelands," American Indians/Alaska Natives are indigenous to this continent. There are no other homelands or locales where their languages and cultures are thriving (Adley-SantaMaria, 1997; Crawford, 1996; Fishman, 1991).

What Causes a Language to Become Extinct?

External Influences

In the history of the United States, there are many sources that can be identified as leading to the current state of indigenous languages. While these causes are diverse and contextually dependent, working in tandem or independently, they have done much to damage the integrity of American Indian/Alaska Native languages. Displacement of many tribes and annihilation of others by the Anglo settlers coupled with the ideology of Manifest Destiny led to a breakdown in many indigenous languages (McCarty & Zepeda, 1999; Spring, 1996). As many indigenous languages incorporate "place" as an integral feature of their modality (Basso, 1989; Hinton, 1994), the removal of American Indian/Alaska Natives traditional homelands, and their continued displacement, brought about by the desire of white settlers for more land, initiated an erosion of some languages. In other cases where American Indian/Alaska Native populations were completely annihilated or forced to assimilate, the fate of indigenous languages was more immediate (Prucha, 1981, 1985).

Even more insidious in nature, the removal of children to boarding schools as early as the 1600s ensured a physical separation from parents and grandparents (Axtell, 1985, 1988). This, in turn, led to a schism in the transmission of language and culture to the next generation. To further guarantee that the children would be assimilated into Anglo culture and break from traditional practices, they were dressed in European attire, forced to engage in the "civilized" practices of the Anglos, and forbidden to speak their own languages (Crawford, 1996).

On reservation lands, government intervention assisted the loss of indigenous languages. Customary practices were altered, reduced, or simply eliminated. Contemporary lifestyles and the continual encroachment of Anglo society have further contributed to a rapid decline in the use of indigenous languages. Ongoing government attempts to assimilate American Indian/Alaska Natives led to policies that resulted in further disintegration of the traditional kinship system, breaking down the traditional locus for language and culture transmission. Among these were the urban relocation programs of the 1940s and 1950s (Prucha, 1985) and the building of HUD housing. Additionally, as people are often forced to leave the reservation in order to find work or attend school, and highway construction and mass media access increase the exposure to Anglo culture and language, the instability of indigenous language and culture has increased (Crawford, 1996; McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998a; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1997).

Internal Influences

Even though the federal government may have a policy of assimilation, one may wonder why all indigenous communities themselves are not engaging in reversing the shift of their languages. In many communities, language shift is not as evident as in others. For example, until recently, Navajo has been presumed to be the most stable American Indian language. In its favor, the Navajo Nation, although geographically isolated, has maintained a large, intact population, many of whom speak the language. Recent research, however, has indicated that even with efforts to teach Navajo in the schools, fewer children are coming to school knowing how to speak Navajo (Begay, Dick, Estell, Estell, McCarty, & Sells, 1995; Holm & Holm, 1995).

Despite other work that has been done revealing the gradual disintegration of American Indian/Alaska Native languages (cf. Adley-SantaMaria, 1997), the information has not been widely disseminated. Even when attempts are made to bring the issue of language shift to local leaders, it cannot be assumed that language is the *cause celèbre* of a native tribal council. There are often more pressing matters that need attention. Even when communities are aware and sympathetic to the state of the language, they may not have the financial resources or the educational resources (e.g., indigenous language teachers, materials, teaching approaches, and techniques) to effect any changes. In some cases, it may even be too late as the language has moved to Krauss' Category D, spoken by only a few of the oldest members of the community (Fishman, 1991).

It is also necessary to recognize that not all individuals see the eventual loss of their languages as problematic. Based on their own boarding school experiences, many parents fear that learning the heritage language, at home or in school, may hinder their children's development in English and preclude them from future opportunities (Ayoungman, 1995; Crawford, 1995). From the perspective of some of the younger generation, the language is often associated with old traditions that are archaic and out of sync with modern times (Holm & Holm, 1995; Ruiz, 1995). Researchers and educators, as the usual advocates of the language, trace these internalized attitudes to external sources. The opinion that the indigenous language is outdated by some may be fueled by the lack of visibility of the language in the immediate environment. Again, mass media and technology play important roles in the development of this negative perspective. Additionally, the fact that much advocacy for reversing language shift

emanates from the schools may be another cause for hesitation. Schools have always been viewed as alien in some indigenous contexts (Lipka & Ilutsik, 1995; McCarty & Zepeda, 1999) and as repressive entities in others (Cantoni, 1997). Schools had traditionally played a primary role in the disintegration of indigenous languages and cultures (Littlebear, 1992; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Salinas-Pedraza, 1997). Thus, the thought of using schools to revitalize indigenous languages may seem inappropriate or even absurd to some. Furthermore, through their practices, schools themselves have been effective in causing American Indians/Alaska Natives to internalize the misconceptions held by the dominant culture about negative effects resulting from maintaining the heritage language and culture (Cummins, 1992; Trujillo, 1997). If this disdain and mistrust of schools is now to be reversed, educators will have to work doubly hard to involve the community in its transformation.

Reversing Language Shift from Within

It must be remembered that schools alone cannot bring about language shift reversal. Widespread community efforts are also necessary. Some examples can be seen in the incorporation of the language into mass media (Anderton, 1997; Peterson, 1997), multiple approaches to disseminating the language throughout the community (Benjamin, Pecos, & Romero, 1997), and the use of innovative techniques to teach the language to adults (Hinton, 1997; Taff, 1997).

To initiate efforts for reversing language shift, a good start may be to methodically engage indigenous communities in language planning efforts (Benjamin, Pecos, & Romero, 1997; Silentman, 1995). Ruiz (1995) recommended the initiation of "endoglossic policies," or policies which give primacy to the indigenous language in an

effort to promote its stabilization. That is, the immediate focus of language planning must be on strengthening and identifying functional uses in the community for the indigenous language itself. With the enactment of simultaneous status and corpus planning policies, it is believed that the language shift can be reversed (Fishman, 1991). Status planning, which focuses on improving attitudes about the language, requires what Watahomigie (1995) referred to as "reverse brainwashing" (Ayoungman, 1995). This is aimed at internalizing appreciation for the language among all generations. For visibility, corpus planning can potentially disseminate cultural information via the language throughout the community. This feature of language planning, which relates to the actual plans to codify and stabilize the language, also addresses the implementation of indigenous language education, both in the schools for younger children and in programs for adults (Cantoni, 1997; Greymorning, 1997). Herein, the indigenous language ought not to be offered only as a course in the curriculum, but also as the language of instruction throughout the curriculum. Through the combined force of these efforts, reversing language shift advocates can (a) raise awareness in the community about the deterioration of the language (Adley-SantaMaria, 1997; Trujillo, 1997), (b) increase its contexts for use (Peterson, 1997; Ka'awa & Hawkins, 1997), and (c) work with the schools to help institute the language through education (McCarty, Yamamoto, Watahomigie, & Zepeda, 1997).

Language Teaching Efforts Under Way

Currently, a wide range of efforts are under way within indigenous communities that can function as examples for others wishing to initiate their own reversing language shift efforts. For instance, several communities are engaging in immersion education.

Examples of this type of language instruction can be seen among the Arapaho (Greymorning, 1997), Yup'ik (Lipka & Ilutsik, 1995), Hawai'ian (Ka'awa & Hawkins, 1997; Stiles, 1997). At a recent American Indian Language Development Institute,[1] Navajo educators outlined a program to begin complete immersion in the Head Start programs across the reservation. The newly adopted Navajo Head Start Curriculum (Diné Nation, 1998) outlines a plan for the sole use of Navajo in communication from the time the children are picked up by the bus until they return home in the afternoon. Suggestions are also made for supplemental language use in the homes with parents.

Other tribes have implemented bilingual education programs in schools, such as the Navajo (Begay, et al. 1995; McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998b) and Hualapai (McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998b; Stiles, 1997; Watahomigie, 1995; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1997). The Rough Rock Demonstration School, for example, determined to initiate instruction in both Navajo and English in an effort to preserve the heritage language and the culture's prestige. Steps were taken to increase the use of Navajo in the school and, as a result, increase the fluency of the children. Studies have shown that the increased use and visibility of the language in the schools has been effective in improving student involvement as they gain a greater respect for their language and culture through the school's validation (Begay, et al., 1995; Jordan, 1995; Vogt & Au, 1995). The Hualapai community provides another example of this increase in language dissemination via an inside-out approach. This approach required establishing a stable core of local bilingual teachers, enabling the indigenous teachers to take ownership of the school and begin implementing educational reform. This further positions the school to initiate language reversal and extend it into the larger community. Having established a

bilingual/bicultural curriculum and program some years ago for the grades present on their reservation (K-12), the Hualapai boast a Category A language. Though there is currently some evidence that this may be changing due to the ever-increasing encroachment of Anglo culture, the Hualapai affirm that reversing language shift can be achieved even if initiated as part of a school program (McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998b).

In contrast to inside-out approaches (Begay, et al., 1995), it is also possible to start from the community. In Hawai'i, for example, parents sought ways to extend their children's exposure to the language into the schools. Through lobbying at the local and state level and their collaboration with the university, they gradually brought about the enactment of complete Hawai'ian immersion education from preschool to high school and reinforced their community efforts through their children's education (Ka'awa & Hawkins, 1997; McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998b; Stiles, 1997).

In California where there are more than 50 indigenous languages, the Master-Apprentice Program has served to pair an elder speaker of the language with a younger non-speaker (Hinton, 1994). In this program, the two will often live together for a period of time, providing the learner with constant exposure to the heritage language in a variety of contexts. This method of language transmission has been proffered as an ideal situation where the language can be "picked-up" naturally, much as children acquire their first language. However, research has identified differences between the processes involved in first and second language acquisition such as the advantages of instruction (Doughty, 1991). While first language learning occurs naturally, studies have shown that certain elements in second language learning are actually accelerated and

enhanced by explicit instruction. Additionally, learners within the same community can have a variety of learning styles that call for a varied approach (Oxford, 1993).

Enhancing Language Learning through SLAT

Educators engaging in these various program models could benefit greatly from the study of SLAT. For one reason, many principles underlying contemporary immersion and bilingual education assume an isomorphic relationship between first and second language acquisition. Research, however, indicates that fundamental differences exist between these two processes (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Mayberry, 1993). Bley-Vroman (1989) presented a series of arguments outlining those differences, including the fact that the very cognitive, affective, and social differences that underscore the individual learner differences and ultimate attainment often cited in SLAT are irrelevant to children's acquisition of their first language. Since the majority of American Indian/Alaska Native children are not learning their tribal languages as their first languages, but as second or subsequent languages, approaches to language teaching and learning that address the individual differences of the learners must be considered.

SLAT researchers and practitioners state that theory and practice must exist in a reciprocal relationship, informing and being informed by one another (Richards, 1990; Wright, 1990). This relationship calls for teachers to vary and modify their practices through the identification of individual learner needs. Effective second language teaching, then, begins with an approach that is theory-driven, learner-centered, task-based (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), and flexible (Brown, 1993; Oxford, 1993). Connecting to SLAT theory would enable indigenous educators to adapt their practice as needed to increase effectiveness.

Among the other advantages of SLAT, it is possible to cite the innovations in teaching techniques that are already being implemented in indigenous language education. An example of these innovations is the Total Physical Response (TPR: Asher, 1966, 1969, 1972), a technique used to link the concept of a word or phrase to a physical response performed by the learners. In this way, learners are believed to internalize the vocabulary being taught. TPR has been recommended by some American Indian/Alaska Native educators as an ideal technique for introducing the heritage language to children (Adley SantaMaria, 1997; de Reuse, 1997; Hoffman, 1992) and, when used with a variety of other techniques, can aid in the acquisition of vocabulary. Of other innovations that have been made as a result of SLAT research, current theory and practice advocates a communicative approach to language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). The communicative approach comprises techniques that employ the near exclusive use of the target language in meaningful, authentic contexts, similar to the concepts underlying the Master-Apprentice Program and other methods advocated for indigenous language teaching (McCarty & Shaffer, 1992). It has been determined that increased input in the environment linked to contexts will lead to increased intake in the learner's developing grammar. Contrary to traditional methods in language arts education, however, which have focused primarily on teaching the grammar of the language, SLAT may also be more culturally compatible with American Indian/Alaska Native educational processes.

Second Language Acquisition & Teaching "Is" Compatible

In a recent curriculum developed for the Hupa community in California (Bennett, 1997), principles were espoused that have long been considered fundamental in SLAT. Among these are:

- language learners need to use the language in order to learn it;

- language should not be taught devoid of its culture; and

- language learning happens in stages.

Addressing these principles one at a time, examples are drawn from American Indian/Alaska Native communities and from sources in SLAT research in order to demonstrate their compatibility.

In contemporary SLAT approaches, active student participation via interaction is seen as crucial to the process of acquisition (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Nunan, 1991). Consequently, acquisition occurs through students' use of the language in meaningful communication (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). This principle can be effective in all types of indigenous language programs cited where meaningful contexts for language use enhance student understanding and facilitate acquisition.

SLAT professionals have advocated the use of task- or theme-based instruction where language is used as the mode of communication rather than the object of study (Long & Crookes, 1992; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Additionally, many believe that

culture *is* and *should be* a necessary component of second language instruction (Kramsch, 1991; Lafayette, 1993). Thus, the call for authenticity and meaning in the language classroom is consonant with the connection of the target language to cultural beliefs and values (Vogt & Au, 1995).

The final principle has been considered especially central to language instruction through the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis advanced by Stephen Krashen (Ellis, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In effect, the hypothesis suggests that students learn in stages where progress is facilitated by a teacher, or more fluent speaker, who continues to provide input slightly beyond the level of the student. Thus, learning is a collaborative process that is enhanced through interaction (Cummins, 1992; McCarty & Shaffer, 1992).

As a further benefit for American Indian/Alaska Native educators, SLAT teacher preparation prepares teachers for a student-centered classroom (Jordan, 1995; Littlebear, 1992; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Teachers are trained to implement various types of syllabi, including those generated by student needs and interests (see also McCarty & Shaffer, 1992, for a discussion of "explorer classrooms" in American Indian/Alaska Native education). Furthermore, SLAT teacher education prepares the instructor to be flexible by recognizing the different learning styles of individuals and altering classroom practices to accommodate those differences.

A final note on the benefits that SLAT research, more specifically its pedagogical approaches and techniques, can have for indigenous communities relates to those communities with an oral tradition. Contrary to traditional approaches to foreign language instruction that focused almost exclusively on grammar teaching via

translation, current second language education seeks to develop a communicative competence (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Knowing the rules of the language is not the immediate focus of instruction. Instead, being able to use the language in its appropriate contexts is the goal (cf. Benjamin, Pecos, & Romero, 1997). This is clearly compatible with the need to "shift our focus from teaching our children words and phrases to passing on to them the ability to think and effectively communicate in our . . . languages" (Greymorning, 1997, p. 29). With the focus on communication, although having written material may be deemed helpful in promoting language learning in some contexts, it is not considered primary or necessary for the understanding and use of the indigenous language.

The reasons mentioned above would place SLAT in a framework that is culturally appropriate for indigenous cultures. Consequently, those tribes with an oral tradition, as well as others that may be in the process of developing an orthography and those that already possess a written form of their language, will be able to commence reversing language shift in their communities through approaches and techniques that have been found effective for all ages and different cultural contexts. All things considered, SLAT is positioned as a field that can benefit educators in their efforts to reverse language shift and revitalize indigenous languages in the schools and the larger community.

Lawrence N. Berlin, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and the English Language Program at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. He is a graduate of the Interdisciplinary Program in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Arizona. His research interests include multicultural education and reversing language shift.

Endnotes

[1] The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) is a summer institute held annually at the University of Arizona for the specific purpose of helping educators and community members to create, develop, and enhance efforts to teach in and through indigenous languages, both at home and in the schools.

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