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Using Assessment to Inform Instruction in Cherokee Language Revitalisation

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Language loss is a concern for the Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma. As part of language revitalisation efforts, in 2001 Cherokee Nation opened the Cherokee Immersion Preschool in which teachers use only Cherokee throughout the day with their monolingual English-speaking students. Based on a study of the Immersion Preschool that spanned six months, this paper describes the positive backwash effects of assessment on practices of teachers in the programme. Specifically, we examine the role that classroom observation coupled with a formal language assessment – the Cherokee Preschool Immersion Language Assessment – played in identifying undeveloped aspects of the children's Cherokee language skills and targeting specific techniques teachers could use to encourage children to communicate more effectively in Cherokee. The findings suggest that beneficial backwash produced by meaningful and well designed assessments has the potential to positively inform teachers toward improving classroom instructional practice. The Cherokee Immersion Preschool's experience with language assessment has implications for Native American communities implementing early childhood immersion for language revitalisation purposes.

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Keywords: Cherokee language, language immersion, early childhood immersion, second language assessment, language revitalisation

Introduction

Language shift from Cherokee to English among the Cherokee people has occurred over the last three centuries, but the number of young Cherokee being raised bilingually has drastically declined since government policies in the 1950s forced removal of children from their Cherokee-speaking homes (Native Languages of the Americas, 2002). Brooks (1992: 116) notes that centuries of assimilation practices imposed both from the outside as official policy and from within the tribe itself have led to a 'laissez faire attitude towards the fate of the language, as if Cherokee were nice but not really necessary in modern life'. So, while being progressive in the establishment of a sovereign government, tribal schools and a strong industrial base, the Cherokee have witnessed a drastic decline in Cherokee literacy and speaking ability.

In fact, while Cherokee is relatively healthy in comparison to other indigenous languages in North America, with an estimated 9000 speakers in Oklahoma alone (Linn, 2004), a recent language survey of registered tribal members indicated only 11% of respondents considered themselves fluent in the language and most of those speakers were over age 40 (Cherokee Nation, 2003). More importantly, the survey revealed that Cherokee is no longer being learnt by children at home. Given this context, Cherokee is considered a 'Category C' language in Krauss's (1996) classification of language vitality or 'definitively endangered' in UNESCO's Language Vitality Scale of Inter-generational Language Transmission (2003).¹ The implication of this categorisation is that, unless something drastic is done to reverse language shift, there may be few fluent speakers of Cherokee within three decades.

Language teaching is not a new concern of the Cherokee Nation. For decades, Cherokee has been taught as a second language at community centres and in high schools throughout the Nation's 14-county jurisdictional area. But growing awareness of the rapid decline in Cherokee vitality has prompted action by the tribal government to focus language planning efforts on young children. As a result, since August 2001 when the first Cherokee language immersion preschool class opened its doors to 17 three- and four-year-olds, several preschool and kindergarten language immersion classes have been established in Tahlequah and neighbouring towns. More recently, the tribe has earned state approval for a Cherokee language teacher licensure programme through Northeastern State University that will train future teachers in Cherokee language and language pedagogy, making it possible for Cherokee to be taught in public schools by state-licensed Cherokee-speaking teachers.

Like numerous Native American communities throughout the USA such as Acoma, Arapahoe, Blackfeet, Mohawk, Navajo and Native Hawaiians (Hinton & Hale, 2001), the Cherokee Nation has begun to view childhood immersion as one of the best ways to impart language to learners in a meaningful context and to create a new generation of speakers (Hinton, 2001). Some of these communities, particularly Native Hawaiians, have met with apparent success in introducing heritage languages to children through the immersion approach.²

Despite an increase in language revitalisation immersion programmes, there is little information available on the effectiveness of these programmes in relation to their goals, especially in terms of language proficiency among immersion participants. Peter *et al.* (2003: 7) suggest that, in many cases, reluctance to test stems from 'knowledge that the results can yield politically, socially, or economically significant consequences' and from a general mistrust in the ability of assessments to reflect positively on the teaching and learning that has taken place. Whatever the reason for this lack of information on children's performance in heritage language immersion, whether or not fluent speakers are emerging or are likely to emerge from these programmes is not fully known.

Cherokee Nation's experience contributes to the growing field of language revitalisation by providing a model of how assessment can be as much *for* learning as it can be *of* learning, a distinction that Stiggins (2002) says is necessary for building healthy assessment environments and improving

instruction. In this paper we describe the positive backwash effects of the Cherokee Preschool Immersion Language Assessment (C-PILA),³ a language proficiency test developed uniquely for the immersion programme. Specifically, the findings presented here focus on the role that the C-PILA has had in shaping teachers' perceptions of 'immersion', the adjustments they made to their pedagogical techniques in response to C-PILA results and the ensuing improvement in Cherokee language skills among the preschoolers as demonstrated in daily language logs and on a C-PILA posttest.

Through a one group pre-posttest design, we used classroom observations and a mid-year administration of the C-PILA to identify aspects of the children's Cherokee language skills that were underdeveloped after exposure to the language seven hours a day, five days a week for five months. We then developed and implemented a series of professional development workshops for the five classroom teachers targeting specific pedagogical techniques designed to help children develop communicative language skills and followed the workshops with coaching, classroom observations and teacher reflections. Finally, children's language skills were documented through daily language logs and a posttest administered six months later.

Our findings indicate that, when used appropriately as a pedagogical tool rather than as a determination of programme success or failure, and when combined with the more informal and ongoing documentation of children's daily language use, the C-PILA has the potential to positively impact the practice of preschool teachers and ultimately the ability of the immersion preschool to produce new speakers of Cherokee.

Testing Backwash

The effect that assessment has on instruction, positive or negative, is known as 'backwash'. Negative backwash results when a testing instrument, as opposed to instructional objectives or curriculum, drives the nature of instruction (Cohen, 1994; Hughes, 2003). Cases of harmful backwash also include the use of assessments for unintended purposes or the over-reliance on test results for making high stakes decisions. Chavers and Locke (1989) note the negative effects of testing for Native American children in particular and suggest that over-reliance on tests of intelligence, achievement, attitude, language proficiency, reading and personality results in an absence of more appropriate kinds of assessment. Because of this, Native American scholars have called for reforms in assessment that make provisions for cultural differences in learning preferences (Bordeaux, 1995; Pewewardy, 1994, 1997).

By contrast, *positive* testing backwash can provide valuable information. Research in second language acquisition indicates that systematic assessment in the language learning classroom yields great benefits to the language learning situation (Cohen, 1994; Hughes, 2003). Assessment results provide teachers with information they need to determine the goals of their instruction and to make rational educational decisions. As explained in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (2001: 14), 'Ongoing, systematic observations and other informal and formal assessments enable [teachers] to appreciate children's

unique qualities, to develop appropriate goals, and to plan, implement, and evaluate effective curriculum'. In this context, formal assessments serve to reduce bias, provide a common yardstick for making meaningful comparisons and support good teaching habits while correcting poor ones (Hughes, 2003).

Hughes (2003) recommends several ways in which beneficial backwash can be achieved, including creating instruments that directly test the abilities targeted in the curricular goals, sampling as wide a range of specifications as possible and ensuring that the test is understood by teachers. The authors adopted Hughes' recommendations by working closely with Cherokee language specialists and classroom teachers to generate broad categories of language they used with children and by designing a variety of test items that would require children to perform precisely the skill they hoped to measure. The overarching goal was to design a method of assessment that had the greatest potential to foster the continued development of Cherokee as a second language among child learners while being sensitive to the Cherokee cultural context.

The C-PILA

Designing the C-PILA involved the authors⁴ working closely with classroom teachers and language staff from the Cherokee Nation Cultural Resource Center (CRC) to ensure that test items pertained to everyday classroom vocabulary and expressions while assessing overall skills needed to communicate in Cherokee in a proficient way. The expectation of the immersion approach is that children will be able to do more in the language than count to ten, name animals, identify colours and sing a few songs. Children are also expected to learn to use the Cherokee language in meaningful ways, to communicate their feelings, needs and wants, and to respond appropriately to others when spoken to in Cherokee. The C-PILA was therefore designed to assess the extent to which the children had achieved communicative competence – including knowledge of vocabulary, ability to comprehend verbal questions and commands, and ability to respond appropriately to questions and commands either verbally or through action.

The C-PILA comprises four general sections – Interview, Comprehension, Production and Storytelling – which assess a range of language skills. The first section, Interview, gauges children's ability to respond to basic greetings and questions about their name and age. The interview begins with the tester inviting the child to come and sit with her. The tester then engages the child in conversation using the following prompts:

Osiyo (Hello.)
Dohitsu (How are you?)
Gado detsado (What's your name?)
Hila itsadetiyyda (How old are you?)

In addition to assessing children's basic conversation skills, the interview serves to set the children at ease by starting with familiar items and establishing a friendly and unimposing tone for the assessment.

The Comprehension section comprises two subsections: Vocabulary Comprehension and Total Physical Response. The first subsection assesses children's ability to match a picture of an object with a Cherokee word they hear. This subsection contains three pages with 12 pictures each. For each page, the tester names nine vocabulary items and the child is told to point to the pictures of the words he/she hears. The remaining three pictures serve as 'distracters' that lessen the likelihood of the child guessing the word through the process of elimination. The Vocabulary Comprehension subsection closely resembles the kind of vocabulary-building activities that teachers engage the children in on a regular basis and the vocabulary comes directly from items the children have learned either as part of their thematic units (e.g. animals, colours and body parts) or as part of the daily preschool routines (e.g. soap, table and paper).

One lesson learned in the pilot administration of the C-PILA is that children with little more than a superficial knowledge of Cherokee vocabulary become easily distracted and frustrated by the demands of the test. Because of this, it was determined that children who do not successfully identify at least one-third of the items in Vocabulary Comprehension should not proceed to subsequent sections. Those who *do* meet this criterion proceed to the Total Physical Response (TPR) subsection, which gauges their ability to respond physically to common classroom commands (Asher, 1982). For this portion of the test, the tester directs the child to a number of 'props' spread on the testing table such as crayons, a small blanket, a toothbrush, a bar of soap, a Cherokee ribbon shirt and a book. The tester then gives the child a series of verbal commands and requests the child to 'play act' in response to the command. For example, when the tester says, '*tasuli*' (wash your hands), the child is expected to take the bar of soap and pretend to wash his or her hands. Similarly, when the tester says, '*witlvna*' (go to sleep), the child should take the blanket and pretend to sleep. The purpose of the Total Physical Response section is to provide authentic commands that teachers use daily in an immersion classroom while removing the child from the context in which that command is typically used. If, for example, children always brush their teeth after lunch as part of the daily preschool routine, then they may do so whether they understand the teacher's command or not. Removing the context of the classroom ritual allows the tester to determine whether a child actually comprehends the verbal command *dehinvdogv dinvgala* (brush your teeth) or is simply relying on the context-rich classroom environment to know what to do.

The Production section of the C-PILA has two subsections: Vocabulary Production and Question/Response. The first subsection, like the Vocabulary Comprehension section, assesses vocabulary knowledge but in this case measures the child's ability to *produce* the appropriate Cherokee item. The tester points to a picture and asks the child to say the corresponding word. Again, this activity mimics the classroom vocabulary-building activities teachers use to help children learn to say basic vocabulary related to classroom objects and the world around them. The Question/Response subsection delves deeper into children's comprehension and production skills by requiring them to respond to a question posed by the tester regarding a specific picture. A variety of question types is included in this section, such as:

- Yes/No:** *alisdayvhs gas tsisdu* (Is the rabbit eating?)
Choice: *kanogenis ale ganvsgeni uwehisedana* (Does the girl's arm or leg hurt?)
Open Response: *gado usdi doya* (What's [the weather] like outside?)

The purpose of this section is to identify children's strengths and weaknesses in terms of their ability to comprehend specific questioning cues and respond appropriately to those cues.

The final section of the C-PILA, Storytelling, provides an opportunity for children to draw from their repertoire of vocabulary and grammatical structures to 'tell a story' about a picture with which they are familiar, such as a family of rabbits eating carrots and strawberries at the dinner table or a father and his child doing chores on a farm. Upon showing children the picture, the tester instructs them, in Cherokee, *nihina skinohisi hinatsidatlilosti* (Tell me about this picture). With no other prompting, the children are expected to describe the characters and activities in much the same way they would during a circle time book reading session.

The C-PILA test kit contains a binder of laminated pictures and a box of TPR props as well as a testing handbook, score sheets and 'profile' sheets that teachers and administrators can use to record children's scores over time. The test is administered by two people – a tester and a scorer – and, depending on the abilities of the child, takes anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes. The scorer's job is to follow along with the tester and the child and make careful notations as to what the child did or said. For the two Comprehension subsections, a simple right/wrong notation on the score sheet is required. However, for the two Production subsections, in addition to noting if the response is correct or incorrect the scorer transcribes verbatim what the child says in Cherokee. This precise documentation allows further analysis toward a better understanding of what the child is able (and not able) to do with the language. Finally, the Storytelling section requires not only transcribing the exact language the child uses, but also assigning a holistic rating on a scale of one to four. A score of one indicates the child was capable only of naming isolated vocabulary words and a score of four indicates that the child was capable of stringing together several utterances into a coherent story relative to a three- or four-year-old's capabilities.

Since the original test pilot period, two versions of the C-PILA have been developed to reduce the effects of children 'memorising' the test after one or two administrations, and four preschool teachers and three CRC staff have received training in administering both versions of the test. While at this stage in the test development we are not analysing the language children produce for specific morphological or phonological features, the closer the scorer gets to recording precisely what a child says, the better the information we have about that child's language development. To increase the accuracy of transcriptions, all the assessments are recorded with both an audio and video recorder.

Testing for Learning

In January 2004, one preschool teacher worked with one CRC staff member to administer the C-PILA to seven preschoolers. Of the seven, six had been

enrolled in the preschool since August 2003 and so had been receiving immersion instruction for approximately five months. Their days in the preschool consisted of a typical preschool routine: arrival, free play, breakfast, circle time, activity centres, outdoor play, lunch, cleanup, nap, free play, snack, outdoor play, circle time, activity centres and departure. The authors' observations of classroom interactions during those five months indicated that teachers used Cherokee almost exclusively in the classroom for everyday, routine functions. The Cherokee taught explicitly during circle time consisted primarily of vocabulary items for categories such as animals, colours, numbers, family members, classroom objects and occupations; some phrases to describe actions of nouns; a handful of songs that combine Cherokee lyrics with English melodies such as *Mary Had a Little Lamb*; and selected letters from the Cherokee syllabary writing system. Observations also revealed that the children responded physically to their teachers' Cherokee commands. When told in Cherokee to follow particular directions such as 'Brush your teeth', 'Get your socks out of your cubby', 'Find a tissue' or 'Put your puzzle away', the children typically fulfilled the requests appropriately.

It was also observed that, although teachers spoke to children and to one another only in Cherokee, children replied to their teachers and classmates predominantly in English, a phenomenon that is consistent with Tabors' (1997) notion of a home language stage children in language immersion pass through when first initiated to the second language environment. So, while it appeared through their physical responses that children often understood what their teachers were saying, their *Cherokee* production was mostly limited to isolated words, a few routine expressions such as 'hesti' (stop) and 'ahena' (come here), and a number of songs. These observations were corroborated by the C-PILA pretest results (see Figure 1).

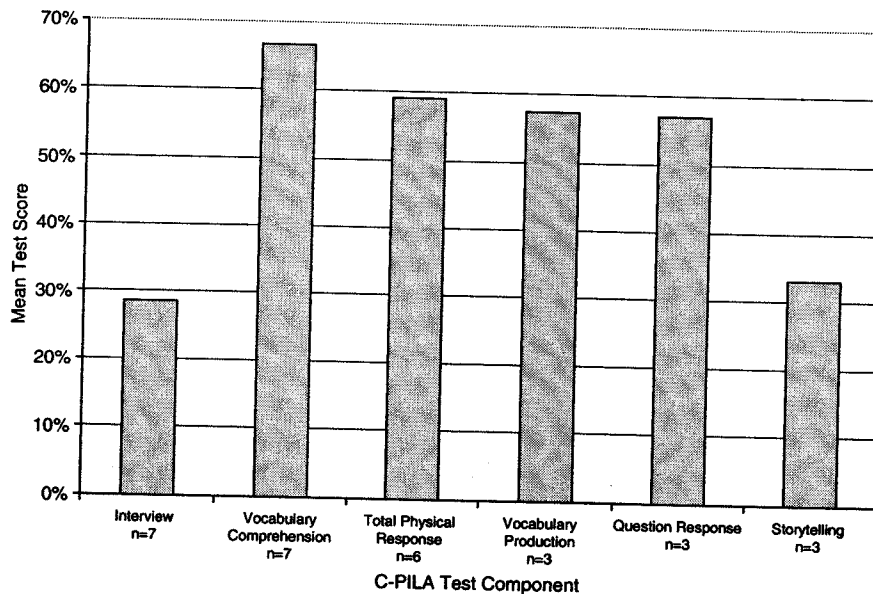


Figure 1 Mean pretest scores

While these results do show minimal Cherokee language skills, especially in the area of vocabulary comprehension, children did not perform to the level that teachers and preschool planners had expected based on reports from their Hawaiian counterparts that preschoolers in Hawaiian immersion begin communicating in Hawaiian within four or five months. In fact, the interview section, which consisted of a basic sequence of greetings and questions about the child's name and age, proved challenging for most of the children. When asked, for example, '*dohitsu*' ('How are you?'), two of the seven children gave no response and four of them simply repeated the phrase back to the tester, indicating that they were not decoding the input as a question requiring a response. It was also expected that children's performance on the TPR section would be high as the majority of their classroom activities involved responding physically to their teachers' commands. However, the results indicate that verbal commands alone did not provide sufficient input for children's comprehension of routine phrases. In other words, without the context of the classroom routine and without teachers' gestures or other children to imitate, four of the seven children had difficulty following commands such as, 'Brush your teeth', 'Wash your hands' or 'Put on the shirt'. Finally, it is worth noting that only three children met the requisite one-third threshold required on the Vocabulary Comprehension section to continue with the rest of the assessment. As such, the mean scores illustrated in Figure 1 for Vocabulary Production, Question Response and Storytelling represent only those three children with sufficient verbal skills to complete the assessment.

The results of the January C-PILA pretest were disappointing for the teachers and CRC staff. After five months 'immersed' in the Cherokee language, it appeared that children were not able to minimally engage in a basic conversation or respond to simple questions about everyday events. And surprisingly, even though the children seemed quite able to fulfil their teachers' commands in the classroom, when removed from the classroom context with all its paralinguistic support (gestures, modelling, routines), as a whole they could not execute the commands appropriately. These results were particularly discouraging given the teachers' efforts to stay true to the immersion ideal of using only the target language every hour of the school day.

Using Assessment to Inform Teaching

The authors' observations of the teachers' interactions with the preschoolers revealed possible reasons why the children were not progressing as rapidly as hoped. First, as Peter (2003) noted in her 2001–2002 study, that the children had high comprehension skills but lower verbal skills is not surprising and substantiates the notion of a 'silent period', or a period in which a language learner's output in the target language may be nonexistent or consist only of memorised phrases heard regularly but not completely understood (Krashen, 1985). A silent period does not necessarily imply passivity on the part of the learners – though rarely responding in Cherokee to their teachers, the preschoolers' physical responses to their teachers' Cherokee commands and statements showed their active involvement in the language-learning process.

The length of the silent period differs among learners, but it is expected that the period is temporary and within a relatively short time – anywhere from a few weeks to a few months – language learners will begin to produce simple, yet meaningful, utterances (Tabors, 1997). In the Hawaiian Punana Leo Preschool Immersion, for example, Nā'ilima Gaison, a veteran immersion teacher, reports that after just five months in the programme 'most of the children can express themselves [in Hawaiian] very well' (personal communication, April 19, 2005). All of this is contingent, however, on the *quality and quantity* of the language input they receive, two elements that language acquisition scholars have yet to define other than to say that, combined, they are an important condition for successful language learning (Honda & O'Neil, 2003). As Honda and O'Neil (2003: 1) put it, '[W]e know that children and adults acquire language through experience with language. There is very little to say about that experience except the obvious: It must be accessible (that is, usable) and sufficient'.

Given this, one possible explanation for the preschoolers' limited Cherokee productive skills after five months of immersion was a lack of 'accessible and sufficient' language. In other words, while the input teachers provided was sufficient for children to understand basic vocabulary and common classroom expressions, it was not necessarily accessible and provided little opportunity for children to respond verbally in Cherokee or form meaningful utterances themselves and therefore was not sufficient for a speaking stage to emerge. Classroom observations revealed that teachers relied heavily on rote vocabulary drills to teach lists of words but often did not provide opportunities for children to use or access newly learned vocabulary in meaningful ways. In a lesson about occupations, for example, children learned the Cherokee word for teacher, *dideyohvsgi*. Yet, shortly after the lesson, they continued to call their own teachers by the English word 'teacher'. Swain (1985) argues that comprehensible input is not sufficient for successful language learning and suggests that higher levels of acquisition are dependent on opportunities for 'pushed output', which is characterised by cohesion, appropriateness and accuracy. The implications of this finding for the Cherokee Immersion Preschool are that simply 'immersing' children in the Cherokee language may not have been enough for them to achieve the goal of sociolinguistic competence, and that teachers needed guidance on how to balance natural, comprehensible input with planned opportunities for communicative practice.

A second possible explanation for preschoolers' limited Cherokee production is that the preschool was not yet equipped with resources to adequately support a language-focused curriculum. While CRC staff worked diligently to develop quality Cherokee children's books, pictures and musical CDs, they could not produce materials as rapidly as the children were consuming them. So, unlike teachers of commonly taught languages such as Spanish, French or English, the Cherokee preschool teachers did not have an abundance of books, songs and games at their disposal, tools proven to be highly effective for early childhood language learning (Butzkamm, 1980; Cook, 2000; Medina, 1993). This lack of supplemental resources made it even more difficult for teachers to

provide interesting, age-appropriate and comprehensible stimuli necessary to elicit verbal language from the preschoolers.

The results of the C-PILA and information gleaned from classroom observations prompted the development of five professional development workshops to be delivered by the authors during preschool hours over the course of six months. Based on an adaptation of Kolb's (1984) adult experiential learning cycle, the workshops provided teachers new experiences in language immersion and encouraged them to reflect on these strategies in relation to their own classroom experiences before applying them on their own. Then, after the application stage, teachers judged whether or not the techniques or approaches they put into practice were effective in achieving their goals (see Figure 2).

The workshops were scheduled in two half-day blocks to allow half the teachers to care for the children in one classroom while the other half trained in an adjacent room. On-site training during regular preschool hours was effective because it allowed teachers and trainers to use classroom-specific examples and to even practise techniques on children when appropriate. The content of the first four workshops was chosen to address the issues unveiled by the C-PILA pretest. The final workshop was dedicated to language assessment in general and training on the C-PILA in particular (see Table 1).

Central to each workshop were the principles of Communication Based Instruction (CBI) (Supahan & Supahan, 2001), an instructional model that involves using the target language in a relevant and context-rich learning environment. CBI begins with teacher-centred instruction, develops toward more learner-centred, independent practice and ends with an evaluation of what the students have learned. In conjunction with implementing CBI,

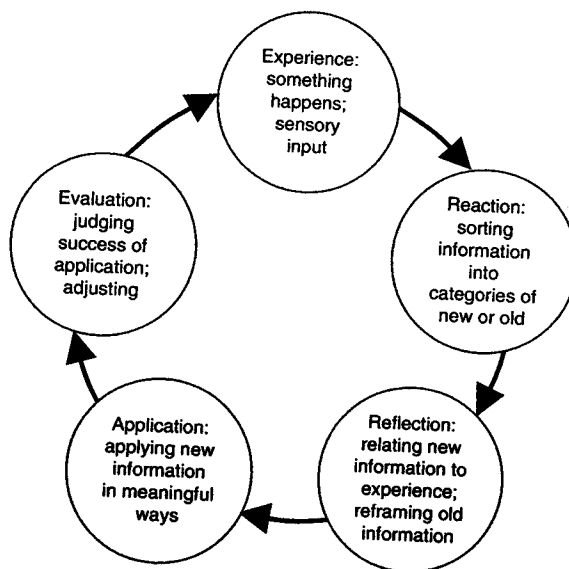


Figure 2 Experiential learning cycle

Table 1 Professional development workshop series

<i>Workshop topic</i>	<i>Objectives</i>
Using the Immersion Preschool Curriculum in a Communicative Way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To present strategies for implementing the curriculum in a way that encourages the development of productive language skills • To introduce the principles and practice of Communication Based Instruction (Supahan & Supahan, 2001)
Theory and Techniques for Immersion Language Teaching: Total Physical Response (TPR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To familiarise teachers with the principles underlying TPR and techniques to go beyond physical response toward genuine communication
Developing and Using Materials that Encourage Language Production in an Immersion Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To present strategies for creating materials that tie in to the curriculum and that focus on specific language skills • To present strategies for using these materials to encourage language production
Communicative Language Teaching: Using Games and Songs for Productive Language Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To demonstrate fun language teaching techniques that encourage children to produce meaningful language
Language Assessment: the C-PILA and Other Tools for Assessing Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To familiarise teachers with the purpose of assessment • To orient teachers to the purpose and structure of the C-PILA • To present strategies and practice for teachers to administer the C-PILA • To present informal ways to assess the children's language development

teachers were encouraged to begin using language logs to document specific language and activities performed by a child in a unique or unexpected way, perhaps for the first time. Teachers noted, for example, a specialised vocabulary word or grammatical structure that a particular child had never been heard to use before. Language logs included the child's name, the time, the date, the exact language observed including errors and omissions, and the context in which the child used the language. Maintaining language logs gave teachers greater responsibility for being constantly and consistently attuned to the children's developing language skills. It also gave them immediate feedback with regard to how the new techniques that they were implementing affected children's language production.

Results

At the end of the workshop series, the authors observed the immersion teachers and children having breakfast, engaging in free play and taking part

in structured circle time activities. There were notable differences between this observation and the one conducted six months earlier in terms of the teachers' skills in eliciting Cherokee from the children. Many of the observed changes reflected techniques introduced in the workshops, such as:

- encouraging children to replace things they said in English with comparable Cherokee expressions;
- requiring children to *tell* about things rather than to simply name them;
- consistently providing praise, feedback and modelling;
- encouraging children to take on the role of teacher;
- using language in a variety of forms that require not only physical responses, but oral responses, as well;
- providing opportunities for children to initiate conversations with one another;
- creating new games, songs, stories and using them to reinforce language;
- documenting children's daily language use in language logs; and
- using books and pre-literacy activities to encourage greater orality from the children.

The teachers' approach to immersion was not the only change noted after six months. The observation also revealed that children were using Cherokee almost exclusively, with their teachers and with one another. They used Cherokee during meal times and circle times when their teachers were present and, more importantly, they spoke Cherokee to one another during free play time, even when their teachers were not within earshot. The children were observed cooperating in Cherokee, assuming the role of teacher and even arguing with one another in Cherokee. And, as their teachers implemented CBI and assumed a more student-centred approach to teaching, children were more attentive and engaged in circle time activities than they had been six months earlier.

The C-PILA posttest results corroborate the authors' observations. Compared with the January pretest, children were much more verbal and could respond more easily to questions. The mean Interview scores improved by 46%; the mean Vocabulary Production and Question Response scores improved by 23%; and the mean Storytelling scores improved by 37%. Comprehension scores rose, too: the mean TPR score improved by 30% and the mean Vocabulary Comprehension score rose by 5%. And, of the six children assessed, only one was unable to complete the production sections of the assessments, compared with four of the children on the pretest (see Figure 3).

Notable changes in the children's language included not only a broader range of discourse skills, but also the beginning signs of what Canale and Swain (1980) call 'strategic ability', or strategies a language learner uses to compensate for his or her lack of ability in a particular area. For example, when asked a question, two children responded, '*diyawata*' ('I don't know'), showing that, at the most rudimentary level, the children were aware of being asked a question even though they were unable to provide the correct response.

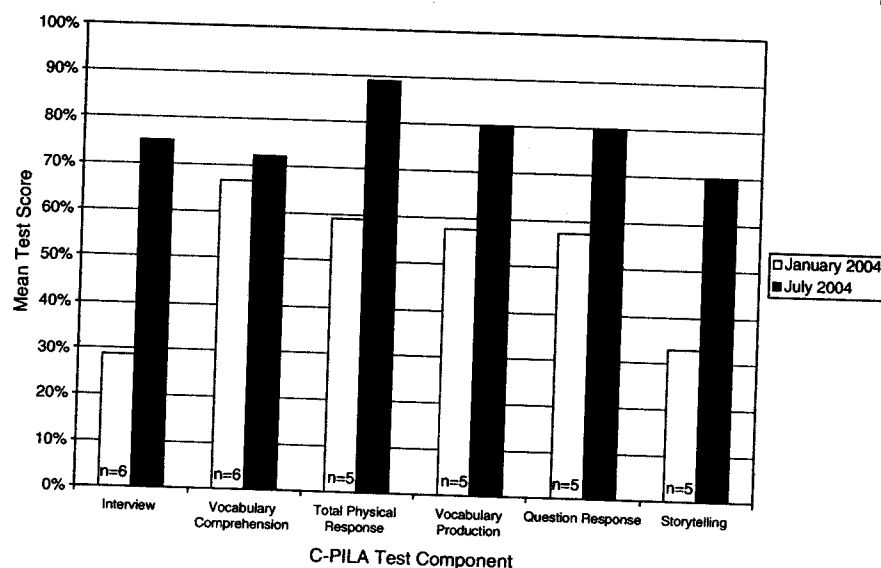


Figure 3 Mean pretest and posttest scores

Finally, the language logs teachers used to note their observations of the preschoolers' language use on a daily, informal basis demonstrate the inability of a single measure to capture the full extent of a language learner's abilities. The classroom teachers documented samples of children's language in daily language logs over the course of six months. Examples of language children were observed using include: '*osda tsigeyutsi*' ('I'm a good girl'), said while helping the teacher set the table for lunch; '*unegutsidi dideyohvsgi*' ('Teacher's mean'), said when the teacher threw a toy bear on the floor while playing; and '*eyu elisi usdi tsidu eyu diwenusu*' ('Grandma gave me a little rabbit'), said while showing her teachers her new toy. This documented production, combined with the C-PILA results, indicates that the children had gone beyond one-word utterances toward more complex combinations of Cherokee morphemes.

Discussion

The observable changes in the teachers' pedagogical approach to immersion in response to the C-PILA pretest results demonstrate the positive backwash effects of assessment on teaching and learning. Being relative newcomers to Cherokee language immersion, the immersion preschool teachers had limited formal experience with second language teaching techniques. In early classroom observations, it appeared that teachers were comfortable with the immersion goal of using the target language exclusively; however, they were less certain about how to provide structured, language-focused opportunities for children to use the language in meaningful and creative ways. This can partially account for why, after five months in immersion, the preschoolers were not as proficient in Cherokee as was expected.

The experiential workshop series focusing on Communication Based Instruction and other areas identified through classroom observations and the C-PILA pretest gave teachers the opportunity to hone their skills while adding to their repertoire of teaching materials. In addition, with a better understanding of assessment's role in informing decisions about what and how to teach, teachers redefined immersion as both staying in the language and providing opportunities for 'pushed output'. Finally, by combining posttest results with language data collected through daily language logs, teachers balanced everyday, informal observations and summative, formal assessments toward the goal of portraying the most accurate picture possible of the language development of each child.

Inherent in a one-group pretest-posttest design are factors that can potentially weaken the internal validity of a study, so this discussion is incomplete without an examination of these factors. Campbell and Stanley (1963) and Cook and Campbell (1979) note that there are both historical and maturational processes that occur between the first and second measurements that cannot be controlled for. In other words, it is possible, indeed likely, that even without the professional development training of the teachers, the children would have improved their performance on the C-PILA. It is also possible that the actual taking of the C-PILA as a pretest improved the children's test-taking performance on the posttest administered six months later. And, not all of the students were present on the two testing days and so the pretest and posttest groups were slightly different in their makeup. In interpreting the results of this study, we do not mean to imply that the teacher training workshops alone account for the improvement in the preschoolers' language skills. What we are suggesting is that when teachers understand the goals, benefits and responsible uses of assessment, and learn to develop and implement effective assessment strategies, they are more likely to positively influence children's learning and development, as the NAEYC *Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (2001) claims.

Cherokee Nation's language planning efforts have resulted in a number of important language initiatives including the Cherokee Language Survey, the Cherokee Immersion Preschool, an immersion kindergarten, and the Northeastern State University Cherokee Language and Teacher Education programme. One way that tribal language planners are attempting to ensure that the collective wisdom gained through these initiatives translates to best teaching practices is to engage in meaningful discussion about the role of assessment in the teaching and learning process. The positive results obtained through the C-PILA have informed this discussion, leading to the creation of other Cherokee language assessments that are reliable and valid, and that provide useful information about the abilities of Cherokee speakers of all ages in a variety of language-learning contexts.

The Cherokee Immersion Preschool teachers' experience with preschool immersion and the results presented in this paper have implications for Native American communities implementing early childhood immersion toward the goal of language revitalisation, particularly for groups with precious little time to develop concrete solutions to their rapidly declining languages. The findings suggest that beneficial backwash produced by meaningful and well

designed assessments has the potential to positively inform teachers toward the betterment of their practice. The end result in a language revitalisation context is improved outcomes for young children and a better prospect for the future of the language.

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Notes

1. UNESCO's 2003 document *Language Vitality and Endangerment* postulates nine factors to assess a language's vitality. The first factor is *Intergenerational Language Transmission*, with a scale ranging from 'Safe' (Level 5) to 'Extinct' (Level 0). 'Definitively Endangered' (Level 3) describes a situation in which the language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.
2. For a detailed description of Hawaiian immersion programs, see Wilson and Kamanā (2001).
3. Produced on site at the Cherokee Cultural Resource Center (Cherokee Nation, 2004).
4. Lizette Peter is an Assistant Professor at the University of Kansas with specialisation in second language acquisition and pedagogy. Tracy Hirata-Edds is a Doctoral Candidate in the University of Kansas' Child Language Doctoral Program specialising in children's language development.

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