

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES FROM COLONIAL TIMES TO THE PRESENT

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## Introduction

The main feature of Native American language education in the United States today is the pervasiveness of tribal involvement in bilingual programs that tries to raise the level of English as the main language, while at the same time preserving native languages to maintain ties with tribal cultural heritage. However, it has not always been like this. A number of scholars (Adams, 1995; DeJong, 1993; Reyhner, 1992) have argued that the history of Indian education, as it was influenced by Euro-American educational values, has really been tantamount to miseducation with an evolution based on erroneous assumptions. From colonial times to well into the twentieth century formal education (including language education) was designed mainly to acculturate. Only the last 35 years have shown a significant change toward recognizing what American Indians want in the education of their children.

In order to understand how Indian language education arrived at where it is today in the United States and what prospects it may have for the future, it is instructive to look at how it evolved from the time of earliest contact with the British in the seventeenth century to the present. This paper not only summarizes the primary characteristics of Native American language education, but also explores the motivations, policies and forces that shaped it during each period of its history.

## Traditional Indian Education

In the early centuries of European discovery of North America, some enlightened French in Canada exchanged young children with the Indian tribes in the hope that sharing languages and customs would establish better relations for the future. This interchange was probably the first serious attempt to change the way in which Native Americans educated their children. In their part of North America, the British and later the Americans were not nearly as subtle, often indoctrinating the Indians in the English language, culture and Christian theology. Not much seemingly changed in the intervening centuries as the British and then the Americans attempted to modify traditional native educational practices by imposing their own values on Indian children (Waldman, 1985).

Before contact with Europeans, North American tribes spoke about 500 different languages, practiced their own religions and lived in different ways. However, all had similarities in child-rearing practices, and gave education and transmitted language informally through parents, relatives, elder members of the tribe, and religious and social groups. Indian children learned by application and imitation rather than by the memorization of principles, and placed supreme value on sharing and cooperation rather than competition and

individualism. This form of education provided the child with the necessary qualities needed to function within the tribal social structure. Through ceremonies, games, role-play, storytelling, and apprenticeship, children not only expanded their language skills but also learned the culture and history of their parents and tribe. This was no trivial affair because Native American tribes had no written language as a means of transmitting culture (Waldman, 1985).

### **Education in the British Colonies: 1607-1783**

The complex structure of traditional native education was seriously threatened by the arrival of the Europeans in the New World. To the British colonizers, Native American languages and institutions were considered inferior, and believed the Indians would happily give up their native languages and tribal values to embrace the English language and civilization.

While the colonists wanted to acculturate the Indians by teaching them English and the virtues of western culture, the preference was to keep the Indians separated from colonial society. Christian mission schools were the instruments of imperial policy to accomplish this. Christian groups were supported by the political institutions within each colony to bring formal English education to the Indians. However, in reality, the main purpose of teaching English was to facilitate religious conversion and the training of Indian missionaries. While some students were converted, the rote language learning, reading, writing and the daily classroom routine were resisted by many Indian students, who were used to oral tradition and experiential learning (Szasz, 1988).

There were exceptions to using English as the medium of learning. In 1710, for example, British missionaries were invited to establish schools among the Iroquois tribes of New York, with the requirement that students had to be instructed in their native language. Parts of the Bible translated into the Mohawk language using the Roman alphabet were among the texts used (Szasz, 1988).

### **Early Indian Education in the New Republic: 1783-1875**

With independence from Britain, one of the most urgent issues for the new republic of the United States was deciding the future status of the Native Americans. In 1803, President Jefferson believed that the interests of both races were converging. It was reasoned that Indians having an abundant supply of land, needed civilization rather than their inferior tribal cultures; whites possessed civilization but needed land for settlement. An informal federal policy slowly emerged to acculturate the Native American tribes by exchanging the English language and civilization for their land. As more treaties were negotiated, provisions for educating and civilizing increased, sometimes at the request of the tribes who foresaw that they would have to change to survive (Prucha, 1984).

In 1819, the United States Congress passed the Civilization Act, which provided financial support to religious groups interested in living among and teaching the Indians

(Reyhner, 1992). The main objective was to encourage the Indians to become settled, practicing farmers and to abandon their native traditions. Toward this goal, the schools were to use the government funds to teach religion, English reading, writing and elementary mathematics.

From 1819 to 1875, when federal support of mission schools was ended, the Christian schools were the primary source of English education to the Native American tribes. Curriculum and methods were left entirely to the mission boards to decide. As a result, there were as many different kinds of education as there were missionary organizations, many of which subordinated the formal educational part of their work to the religious. As during the colonial period, English language was enthusiastically taught if it furthered religious goals. According to missionaries, it took three to four years of regular school attendance and learning mainly by rote for Indian children to master the rudiments of English reading and writing.

### **The Five Civilized Tribes: 1830-1900**

During this long period of Christian-oriented language education, it is important to consider the unique experience of the Five Civilized Tribes of the southeast United States (Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole). These tribes applied treaty funds from the federal government to the earliest system of self-directed education for Native Americans. Educational funding was conditioned upon the tribes' removal west into the Oklahoma Territory. Following passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and the forced westward migration of the Five Tribes, these tribes applied treaty funds to develop over 20 bilingual schools for their students. Where the tribes were unable to meet the higher educational needs of their members, tribal funds were used to send students to some of the most prestigious American universities. Tribal control lasted until Oklahoma became a state and the whole system was abolished (DeJong, 1993).

The tribally controlled educational system operated very successfully, providing an education in Indian languages that satisfied the needs for functioning in the tribal communities, and English to protect their interests in dealing with the federal government and white society. In addition, the system educated an Indian population 90 percent literate in their native languages and used bilingual materials to the extent that Oklahoma Indians had a higher English literacy level than the white population of either the state of Texas or Arkansas (DeJong, 1993).

The Cherokee tribe was especially prominent among the Indians of the United States in that it developed the only true Native American phonetic written language. The tribal newspaper was the first bilingual newspaper to be published in English and an Indian language. A non-English-speaking Cherokee, Sequoyah, created a syllabary consisting of 85 symbols representing sounds in his language. In addition to providing the Cherokee tribe with educational access to white civilization, Sequoyah used his writing system to help preserve Cherokee heritage and religion (Waldman, 1985).

## **Government Boarding Schools: 1875-1928**

By the mid-1870s, the acquisition of large tracts of Indian territory in the West and continued religious rivalries of mission schools led to a re-evaluation of policies toward Native Americans. Federal policy became increasingly coercive in its goal to assimilate the Indians. Government-operated boarding schools became the means of civilizing the Indians and eliminating their native languages and cultures. The government later complemented this with a land allotment policy in 1887 that sought to detribalize the Indian nations, force them to become farmers and re-distribute excess native lands to white settlers (Waldman, 1985).

In the boarding schools, an English-only language policy and long-term separation from the native language influence of parents were key elements in the process of transforming Native American children. In theory, the children would learn English and American civilization, which would completely replace their native languages and cultures. They would gain the skills needed to live in the white-dominated society. The theory held the belief that all Indian boarding schools had to be uniform in curriculum, methodology, and dress (DeJong, 1993).

The first priority was to teach the Indian children how to speak, write, and read English. The objective method of showing objects and drilling the word pronunciation was used at all schools to teach basic English vocabulary. The students eventually progressed to reading simple sentences in concert and copying sentences on their own. The pace in the beginning was very slow. Within a year, however, some students were able to go on to presenting memorized dialogues, answering questions put to them from conversation cards, and writing letters to their parents. Instructors did not seriously attempt to teach grammar for two or three years. Once students began to comprehend English, teachers advanced on with other areas of the curriculum such as arithmetic, geography, nature study, physiology and United States history. This instruction immersed the students in an environment that allowed them to build on the English they had already learned, and to acquire the knowledge of civilization and citizenship (Adams, 1995).

In practice, many students struggled to learn the new language. There are several obstacles that explain the difficulty students encountered in learning English. Particularly special was the vastness of the linguistic gap separating the students' native language from English. The Indian student confronted a language that was completely outside his or her native morphological and syntactical frame of reference. Many Indian languages place little emphasis on time or verb tense; others make little distinction between nouns and verbs or separate linguistic units; others include in a single word thoughts that in English can only be expressed in an entire sentence. In addition, when it is considered that each classroom was filled with students speaking a diversity of native languages, each having its own unique linguistic elements, and that teachers hardly ever spoke or had any interest in understanding the unique traits of a student's native speech, only then is it possible to appreciate the problems confronted in learning the English language (Spencer, Jennings, et al., 1977).

A second explanation was the problem students had in relating language to cultural context. Learning English required a new way of thinking and a new way of looking at the world. Cultural priorities reflected in native language grammar are different from those found in English. In addition, students had problems comprehending the meaning of words for which there were no coinciding equivalents in their native language. Thus, it was one thing for an Indian child to mechanically pronounce words, but it was quite another matter for the student to really understand what he or she was reading. Words and concepts could not be separated from cultural context (Spencer, Jennings, et al., 1977).

With the belief that Indian students would never become proficient in English unless forced to use it as the exclusive means of communication, the school service demanded the enforcement of an English-only rule, and required proper punishment for those who disobeyed. Some schools developed strategies to encourage compliance, while most administered punishments, such as spankings, mouth washings with soap, or locking the child in a closet (Crawford, 1990). Despite such measures, many students learned English as best they could but resisted giving up their native language.

How successful was the boarding school system at teaching English? Schools located far from Indian reservations tended to have greater success than those located on or near the reservations (Adams, 1995). Off-reservation boarding schools had several advantages over the other schools. For one thing, they tended to be more intertribal in their composition, a factor that both contributed to the use of English as a common language and made the 'no Indian' rule easier to enforce. Students at off-reservation schools were also placed in much closer contact with white English-speaking communities. Moreover, off-reservation students were prevented from reverting back to their native speech during summer vacation.

Perhaps the most prominent advantage of the off-reservation schools was the development of an 'outing' system whereby Indian students were placed on white farms for home stay during the summer months. The eastern boarding schools benefited most from the fact that many were surrounded by farm families, many of them Quakers, who were sympathetic to the objectives of the schools. In these areas, the outing program accomplished several things. First, it promoted the acquisition of English by forcing the students to apply their newly found language skills in practical work and family environments. Furthermore, it gave the students the self-confidence to use and expand their language skills. Finally, students were better able to learn the subtleties of civilized living, the little nuances of speech and behavior that could never be fully acquired in the superficial atmosphere of school (Adams, 1995).

The outing program proved less effective and rewarding in the western frontier schools. The western outing programs were often exploitative. Ranchers and farmers were constantly pressuring the schools for laborers and nothing more. In such cases, the students often worked long days in the fields and slept in outdoor quarters with minimal contact or verbal communication with the white families.

The boarding school experience left a deep impression on students. Although many students rejected the school's teachings out of hand, many others adopted them, if only on a selective basis. In one way or another this latter group returned to their homeland in the position of cultural intermediaries between tribal and white society. Because of their acquaintance with the white 'outside,' returnee students were ideally situated to help tribal elders in adapting to changing conditions (Szasz, 1994).

One of the most pervasive results for students attending an off-reservation boarding school was an expanded sense of identity as 'Indians.' The students' native languages were completely different, but English provided a common means of communication. This helped the students from diverse Indian cultures to overcome tribal barriers. In another sense, the students learned that the administrators and teachers made no allowances for tribal distinctions; Indians were simply Indians. Ironically, the very institution designed to destroy Indian identity may have in fact contributed to its very persistence in the form of twentieth century pan-Indian consciousness (Adams, 1995).

After almost 50 years of coercive educational policy, the boarding school system had failed to produce what it had promised: an educated English-speaking person who was fully assimilated and ready to become a member of American society. The government had wanted to destroy the Indian languages and ways of life, not simply modify them. The boarding school system reinforced a tendency toward cultural disintegration and language extinction among Native American tribes that has continued to the present time. However, acculturation has often taken various directions without total cultural replacement. The federal policymakers could not foresee that many students, caught between the competing claims of native and white outlooks, were not ready to give up one in the process of acquiring the other. While a boarding school education might win some students to convert completely to English and white culture on the one hand, so it was just as likely to produce bilingualism and the bicultural personality in the middle, or total rejection of white civilization and maintenance of native culture at the other end (Hoxie, 1992).

### **The Indian New Deal: 1928-1945**

Growing public criticism after World War I persuaded the United States government to reconsider its Indian policy. A series of reform commissions during the 1920s culminated in the release of the Meriam Report in 1928, which condemned all aspects of the government's coercive policies toward Native Americans. While the boarding school system had tried to remove the Indian child as far as possible from his or her home environment, the Meriam Report emphasized relating children's education to family and community. In other words, students should be educated in their tribal community, where educational methods and materials could be adapted to individual abilities, interests, and needs. It was recommended that the community day school provide the foundation for American Indian improvement, and that government boarding schools be phased out (DeJong, 1993).

In these community schools, the notion of a uniform curriculum was abandoned and teachers were allowed to collect material from the cultural life of the Indians of the tribe being taught. As a result, children could proceed in learning from the known to the unknown and not be immersed at once into a world where everything was unknown and unfamiliar. Implicit in this notion was that bilingual methods and materials could be used to gradually move the students from using their native languages to learning English.

As the United States entered the Depression, the in-coming Roosevelt administration implemented numerous New Deal programs to help the economy. The proposals of the Meriam Report were implemented in 1934 through the Indian Reorganization Act, which in effect gave the Native Americans a New Deal of their own. Reversing the policies of allotment and assimilation, this law gave legal sanction to tribal landholdings; encouraged tribal governments; extended the Indian trust status; and provided for the development of reservation day schools (Szasz, 1977).

In practice, some boarding schools were closed and the operation of reservation community schools was expanded. The curriculum of the community schools was dominated by English language instruction, but for the first time a few native language textbooks were written, and a greater emphasis was given to teaching Indian cultures and languages in the classrooms. The first government sponsored bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) training programs were initiated to meet this growing need. In addition, anthropologists were brought into the Native American communities to improve school operations and relations (Szasz, 1977).

### **Termination: 1945-1969**

After World War II, Cold War anti-Communist sentiment brought new appeals to set the American Indian free. It was argued in a conservative Congress that the Indian Reorganization Act had forced a communal lifestyle on the Native Americans. It did not seem to make a difference that Indians had lived this way for centuries (Waldman, 1985). Moreover, it was believed that tribal control and governmental regulations continually reminded the Indians of their inferior status in society. Basing education on community day schools was criticized for encouraging Indians to remain as Indians rather than encouraging them to assimilate into American society. It was also felt that reservation schools fostered an active antagonism or indifference to the virtues of an English education (Szasz, 1977).

As a result, the government decided to solve the Indian problem by terminating the federal trust status as guardian of the Indian reservation system. Implicit in this was the elimination of support for tribal governments; the development of assistance programs to help Indians relocate and find jobs in urban centers; and the re-orientation of Indian education to give primary responsibility and funding again to federal off-reservation boarding schools and, as an addition, to state public schools (Prucha, 1984). In effect, termination marked the return to a policy of coercive assimilation of the Indians into the cultural mainstream of America.

In language education, greater emphasis was given to English study programs to the widest extent possible. The use of native languages in federal schools decreased significantly, but was not completely abolished as under the old policy of the late nineteenth century. Schools were directed to provide activities to encourage students to use English in their daily association in the classroom, in the dormitories, and on the playgrounds. However, Indian children were not to be punished for speaking their native language (Reyhner, 1992).

By the late 1960s, it was becoming clear that the policy of federal control with almost complete emphasis on English study was not working. Toward the end of the termination period, a special 5-year bilingual program was undertaken for Navajo students. In this program, classrooms were staffed by teachers with experience on the Navajo Reservation and Navajo-English speaking teacher-interpreters to clarify English meaning. The program was highly successful and served to offer a viable alternative to the virtual English-only approach (Reyhner, 1990).

### **Self-Determination: 1969-2002**

The rise of the African American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s also affected the treatment of other minorities that included Native Americans by the end of this period. The Indian tribes eventually established a leadership that could tell the United States government what the tribes wanted. This leadership was almost in complete agreement in opposing termination and recommending a tribal self-determination policy as an alternative.

The Indian Education Act of 1972 that followed required Indian parent committees to participate with tribal governments in the planning of special educational programs, supported the formation of community-operated schools, and emphasized culturally relevant and bilingual curriculum materials. In developing this policy, supporters argued for the use of bilingual education (as opposed to an ESL education) because a bilingual approach allows Indians to maintain a link to their past. Studies have shown that Indian students and their parents accept the need to study and learn English, but also support learning tribal languages to restore and maintain their cultural heritage (Szasz, 1977). Secondly, value reinforcement in a bilingual curriculum provides familiarity and skill in the management of different cognitive systems.

The value of bilingual education as the most successful approach to Indian language education may be gradually accepted given the success of model programs like that at the Navajo Rock Point Community School in Arizona. Under the Rock Point bilingual curriculum, students begin with 70 percent of the instruction (including reading) in Navajo, and gradually decrease to 25 percent by grade 12. Students start English reading instruction in second grade. Instruction in the two languages is separate but complementary. Instruction is not repeated in each language, but concepts introduced in Navajo are reviewed in English. Some teachers teach only in English and others only in Navajo. In the early grades, mathematics is taught first in the Navajo language, and the specialized English vocabulary is learned later. Since content area subjects are taught in the primary years in Navajo, Rock Point



students are not held back in those subjects until they learn English. A hands-on, non-textbook approach is used such as experiments in science. Such methods make content subjects more adaptable to both Navajo and English instruction. In grades 7-12, students spend a quarter every year in Navajo writing, English writing, computers, and performance. In each quarter, an award winning bilingual school newspaper is produced. Students learn to type both Navajo and English in the computer class and the newspaper is now laid out with computers. In the performance class, students are trained to use video equipment, give speeches and act in both Navajo and English. Their productions are broadcast on the school's television station (Reyhner, 1990).

In the program's evaluation, it was decided to use standardized tests to determine how the performance of Rock Point students compared to students in surrounding schools, in the state, and in the nation. It was found that by eighth grade Rock Point students out-performed Navajo students in nearby public schools, other Navajo speaking students throughout the reservation, and other Arizona Indian students in reading and grammar skills. In any given year, they score near or above the national average for all students in the country. Thus, at Rock Point it was found that instruction in the students' native language aided rather than retarded Native American students (Reyhner, 1990).

In spite of such programs, native languages are increasingly dying out. Today only 150 Indian languages survive from the 500 languages once spoken in North America. Linguists predict that as few as 20 of those languages will be spoken 50 years from now (Boseker, 1994). In realization of this, the passage of the Native American Languages Acts of 1990 and 1992 has belatedly reinforced the federal government's commitment to preserve and promote the rights of American Indians to use, practice and develop native tribal languages. This law provides funding for projects to teach native languages to translators and interpreters; develop native language teaching materials; and record and transmit native languages throughout the tribal communities.

The growth of the English Only Movement over the past 15 years has threatened to reverse native language restoration through its demands that English be adopted as the official national language, and that bilingual programs in public schools be eliminated. This movement has arisen as immigration (mainly Hispanics) and minority empowerment have expanded. So far, legislation supporting this in various states and at the national level has exempted Native Americans, but it is uncertain at this point what will happen in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Only during the Indian New Deal period and in the last 30 years of the twentieth century has language education policies and practices reflected the wishes of Native Americans through the self-determination of tribal governments. This happened only after a long history in which education was imposed by forces outside tribal structures for the purpose of religious conversion in colonial times and in the first century of the American republic, and more coercively, acculturation and assimilation in the boarding school era and

the termination period. The success of the tribally controlled bilingual education system of the Five Civilized Tribes in the nineteenth century shows what might have happened if the federal government had been more enlightened in its approach. These Indians wanted to learn English and the ways of white civilization, but they also wanted to protect their linguistic and cultural heritage. Instead, the government became more coercive in its effort to assimilate all Native Americans. In recent years, the success of bilingual programs like that at Rock Point has served to point toward a new direction in Indian language education. The present tribal interest in restoring Indian languages has not been promoted as a substitute for learning English. English is still the highest priority. However, Native Americans want education to be an additive process, where learning both languages is recognized. The federal government has generally agreed with this view and has taken steps to help restore tribal languages. However, with the resurgence of the English Only Movement that threatens both bilingual education and native language restoration, Indian activists are trying to prevent a return to the old subtractive process of using language education for assimilation. At this point, the future is uncertain but hopeful.

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