

Indigenous and Regional Language Preservation in the U.S. and France

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Personal Note

What if the phrase “I love you” was outlawed?

Tammy De Couteau, Director of the Association of American Indian Affairs’ Native Language Program asked this question in 2004 in the *Tribal College Journal*. This analogy made perfect sense to her audience of self-identified American Indians whose families have lived through a history of systematic language repression. The Dakota language presents an example of language loss; “mitakuy owasin” is now translated as “all my relatives” to those who do not understand the language very well. Yet to native speakers, this phrase actually literally represents a lost way of acknowledging that every pebble and blade of grass in the universe is a relative (AAIA).

A threat much worse than losing a single meaning is the loss of a whole language. As a child, I created my own languages, so I cannot picture a world where a child is beaten for speaking its native tongue; a tongue that holds secrets, meanings, and perspectives that should be treasured and taught to others. Yet, I live in a country that has historically oppressed many cultures’ ways and tongues. When I taught English in France, I was introduced to the uncomfortable idea that I was perpetuating a *lingua franca* instead of revitalizing endangered tongues that are native to France. The need to research the history and recent preservation efforts of indigenous and regional languages in both the U.S. and in France arose from my heartfelt desire to heal the past and protect whole ways of understanding. This paper presents a review of literature and popular movements in this field in both contexts. I chose the popular theory perspective to observe what impact native speakers’ desires and actions have on reversing damage done on the governmental level in the past.

Introduction

Indigenous languages in the U.S. have made it on the public and activists' radar in recent decades. These languages have even been integrated into formal and public education systems in reaction to the history of oppressive linguistic policy. In France, too, the regional languages (RLs) have suffered a repressed past and have been recently integrated into regional curricula. These recent changes in linguistic policy, both in France and the U.S., can be analyzed through popular movement theory, which examines phenomena through the actions and desires of the people. This occurs when tribal members realize that only the elders in the community speak the tongue fluently and they initiate linguistic heritage preservation advocacy on a local and national level. As they voice their opinion to politicians and academics, and the political atmosphere becomes more conducive to such advocacy, these activists began to impact governmental and educational policy. As evidence of this popular movement, many organizations and websites exist for informally preserving indigenous languages in the U.S. Even more encouragingly, some recently developed educational initiatives that have even received governmental support.

This paper will investigate the linguistic history of indigenous languages first in France's regions and then in the U.S.'s native communities, including the effects of national-level oppression and how modern preservation initiatives have come to be implemented. After reviewing the literature and media available through the perspective of the popular movement's impact on national-level curriculum and policy, the comparative question can be asked: can the two countries learn from each other?

Brief History of Indigenous Languages in France

Understanding how the people and governments have reacted recently to the predicament of endangered regional and indigenous languages is equally as important as appreciating the significance of the oppressive history.

Evolution of Linguistic Policy in France

During the history of the territory now known as the nation of France, the people were conquered and influenced by many cultural groups, including the Gauls (or Celts), the Greeks, the Romans, and the Franks (of Germanic origins), all of whom influenced the languages of the land. Latin became the language used for official business, and later, French became the language of the kings. In 1636, l'Académie Française was created to codify the French language in a proper manner, and it was still used exclusively by the elite members of society. French was only taken as a common language by popular movement at the time of the French Revolution as a functionalist tool to unite the people. Evidence of the linguistic fragmentation of the territory and its linguistic unification during this time is found in Barère's 1794 speech:

The voice of Federalism and of superstition speaks Breton, the émigrés and those who hate the Republic speak German. The counter-revolution speaks Italian; fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us smash these instruments of damage and error... For our part we owe it to our citizens, we owe it to our republic, in order to strengthen it, that everyone on its territory is made to speak the language of the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

(Judge, 2007, p. 21)

In fact, Barère's list was not a comprehensive categorization of the *patois* (a rather derogatory term which can mean "informal speech, dialect, or language). These and more RLs persist in France, and the situation remains complicated. The traditional RLs are Flemish, Mosellan (or Franconian), and Alsatian (from the Germanic languages), Breton (Celtic), and Catalan, Occitan, Corsican, and Franco-Provençal (a Romance-influenced language), and Basque (a non-Indo-European tongue of disputed origin) (Judge, 2007, p.63). The following map represents the RLs, divides them into "strong" and "weak" categories, and even states the number of school children learning these languages in the formal schooling system in 2012 (see statistics in third row of each RL).

Les langues régionales en France

Langues à «forte vitalité»

(enseignement bilingue comme option)

- Alsacien - Francique-Mosellan
- Basque
- Breton
- Occitan (langues d'Oc)
- Catalan
- Corse

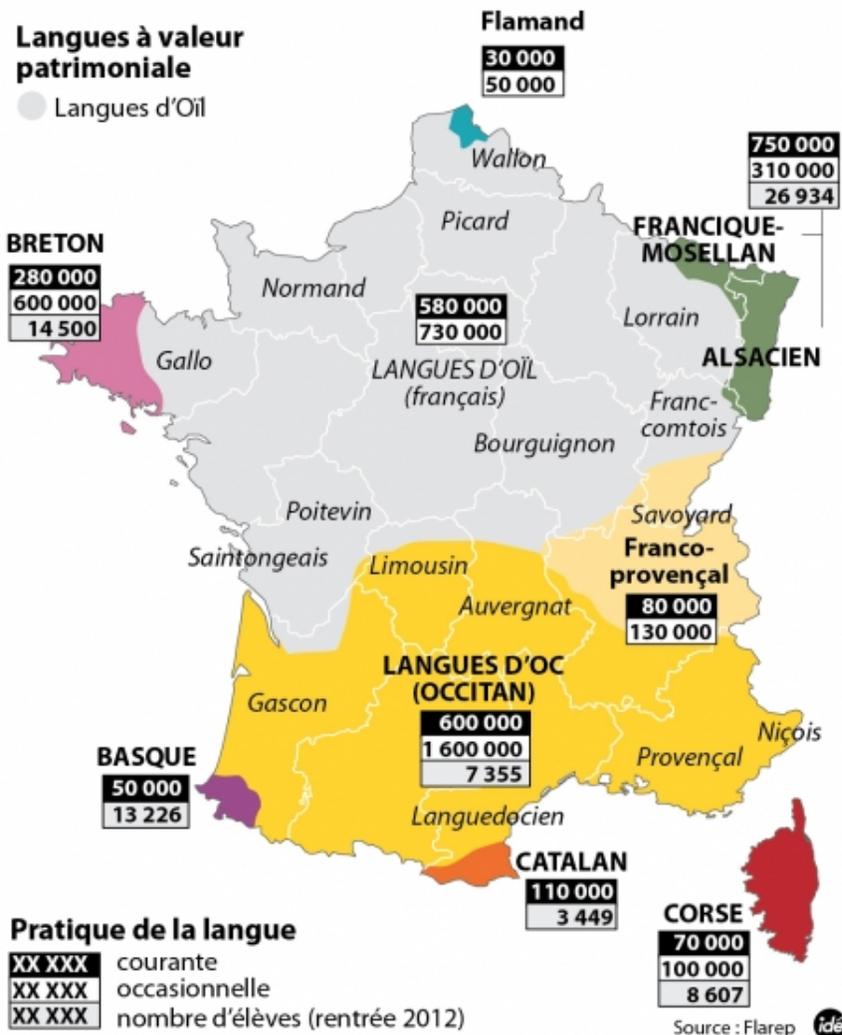
Langues à «faible diffusion et grande dispersion»

(enseignement dans un nombre limité d'établissements)

- Flamand
- Franco-provençal

Langues à valeur patrimoniale

- Langues d'Oïl



(Francebleu, 2012)

Unfortunately for the indigenous language communities, between the codification and standardization of French as the “national” language in France and the modernization of technology and transportation, by the 1940s there were no new monolingual speakers of the RLs. In the 1970s, due to English language influences, the French language went on the defense by

passing laws to ensure that all official documents were in French. In the 1980s, RL speakers became more vocal and politicians began to make unfulfilled promises in response to this popular movement. (In fact, the French Constitution still does not include reference to RLs.) Due to legal discrimination issues of the pro-French governmental policy movement, the Toubon Law of Plurilingualism (1994) was passed, stating that all children in schools should be taught at least two foreign languages (Judge, 2007, p.27). Despite these political efforts, it was and remains difficult to get attention at the national level for an endangered language; often, the language's challenges are recognized only at an international level, which happens when an RL straddles a national border. Judge states:

It is clear that the vitality of a language is not automatically linked with the number of its speakers or the size of the area it is spoken in...such trends may be reversed [by adopting] suitably robust official policies in favor of the endangered language, particularly in terms of education. (2007, p.92)

Currently, Western Flemish, Alsatian, and Mosellan are being overpowered and absorbed by the domination of official languages in their other countries. Catalan and Basque have gained official status in Spain, which may help the popular movement in France, or to gain more legal rights or independence. The international climate seems to be very influential in helping grassroots movements for linguistic preservation.

Popular Movement for RL Preservation in France

Plenty of evidence of the popular movement of language preservation can be found in the regions of France. Immersive schools teaching the RLs were founded and run originally by parents completely in the RL in the 1960s and 1970s (the *bressola*, *calendreta*, *ikastola*, and *diwan* schools), until the *parité scolaire* was mandated and language time was devoted equally to the RL and French (Costa & Lyster, 2011, 57). The organization for the *Défense et Promotion de Langues d'Oil*, which was founded in 1981, keeps its audience up to date on the

news and successes of the language preservation acts around France. A recent victory was the signing of the Alsatian language Charter signed in Savèrne in 2014 after years of active advocacy by the Alsatian Citizen Initiative. This was a huge success and serves as an example of the direct impact on governmental policy after “thirty years of combat” of advocacy, and was accomplished through pressuring politicians to follow the guideline’s of the European Union’s (EU) Charter for Regional and Minority Language (DPLLO).

Activists have achieved small victories in the political sphere, but it is important to examine the government’s attitude toward the existence of RLs. In *Les politiques des langues en Europe (The policies of languages in Europe)*, a work created jointly by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and Communication, it appears that the government has a rather functionalist and perhaps Weberian perspective on language. It matter-of-factly presents the fact that, in the legislative sphere, the “language of the republic is French.” (Article 2 of the French Constitution, August 4, 1994, Délégation, 2007, p.60). This law is applied to the domains of consummation, work, teaching, sciences, audio-visual media, and administration. The republic recognizes that certain minority groups in its regions do not feel that the law is in favor or even recognition of their regional languages. However, it believes that since the languages are now presented to the families as one of the “langue vivante” (“living language”) among foreign language options in school, that sufficient effort has been made for the integration of RLs into the nation-state. Furthermore, the government seems to imply that enough progress has been made as it specifies in its report that more than 400,000 students took regional language in school in 2005-2006 (Délégation, 2007, p. 61).

Dennis Ager explains these exclusive social tendencies having such impact on the formation of French language policy due to “fear mixed with guilt” and calls the situation a “myth of inclusion” (1999, p.86). The French nationalism and identity formation has been

formed as a reaction to dividing influences, both internal and external – a fear of regional languages and of “franglais.” In the end, Ager concludes that, ironically, the only threat the French language is under is the overprotection of itself (1999, p.88-89).

It is important to note the political atmosphere in the background of the French v. RL situation. The EU has also been advocating for inclusive multilingual policy, and its research and policy project LINEE (Languages in a Network of European Excellence is an example of this. Its purpose is to:

To focus on the role and implications of linguistic diversity in European populations, and in particular on the efforts to create a European Knowledge-based Society which respects cultural diversities and cross-cultural understanding’.

(LINEE Annex I 2006: 4, 11)

Multiple researchers and policy-makers are investigating the situation of the inclusivity of minority tongues. One of these scholars, Rosita Rindler Schjerve is concerned with European multilingualism since it actually results from the intersecting endeavor of policy making and scientific research; she argues that the EU must overcome the major discrepancies of its linguistic diversity politics by developing into a multiple inclusive society beyond the nation-state in order to seriously unfold European multilingualism as a political goal (2012, p.60). Another example of the evidence of communities developing European multilingual policy is found in Claude Truchot’s work *Le plurilinguisme européen*, a summary of a tri-lingual colloquium in 1994. Great minds have been approaching this topic for decades, now. One might wonder why politicians and those in the pro-French movements would resist multilingual citizens. Béatrice Jeannot-Fourcaud argues for the human capital gained in RL education. She states that encouraging students at a young age to be bilingual does not just enable them to find their identity but improves their language-learning skills in general. It is precisely this competence that raises their capital. She states that French parents are taking in account the

material or symbolic profit that their children will gain by learning their regional language. She also shows that enrollment of students choosing to study their regional language as one of their “*langue vivante*” in the curriculum increased every year, at least in the early 2000s (Jeannot-Fourcaud, 2009, p.106-7). Clearly this educational policy is filling a need in the regional level of France.

A Case Study in Breton

Around the 1950s, the use of regional languages was forbidden in school, but in 1977 a project of bilingual Breton/ French education started, based off the *ikastolak* model from Basque country. This project involved the total immersion of 2000 students from kindergarten through high school in various educational sites in Bretagne. In 1982, even public and Catholic schools began to propose teaching bilingual classes (of Breton and in Breton) from kindergarten to high school, which involved about 10,000 students out of 250,000 Breton speakers.

Costaouec’s ethnographic interviews and data from the 1988 TMO surveys revealed insight into locals’ perspective of formal Breton educational initiatives. It is evident that Breton is thought of as a language for intimacy and informal settings, sentiment and humor, rather than a formal and written one, and that these speakers of various Breton dialects are also bilingually fluent in French. The elders who use Breton everyday did not involve themselves in this formal teaching of Breton, believing that formal Breton is not “real” Breton and expressed the paradoxical nature of trying to transmit it in school. When teaching and formalizing an indigenous language, there is always the challenge of how to do so without turning it into another functional and codified tool. There are those who advocated the establishment of a unified and purified Breton language during the “Breton movement in the 19th and 20th centuries (Avezard-Roger, 2007, p.16, 24). In this example of Breton, the people advocated for curriculum and public rights but discovered new challenges once they received outside support.

Activists are still making progress today; in March 2014, the major governmental buildings in the town of Rennes have donned trilingual signs (French, Breton, Gallo) (DPLO 2014).

Linguistic Policy History in the United States

In the United States, 135 of the 155 indigenous languages spoken today are in danger of dying out due to Anglo-European colonization, Christianization, and physical, cultural, and linguistic genocide (McCarty, p.125). A language being “spoken” just means that someone, often only an elder, still understands the language. Below is are the statistics for most common indigenous languages found in the U.S. from data gathered by the US Census in 2006-2010.

Table 1.

Most Common Native North American Languages and Residence in American Indian or Alaska Native Areas for the Population 5 Years and Over

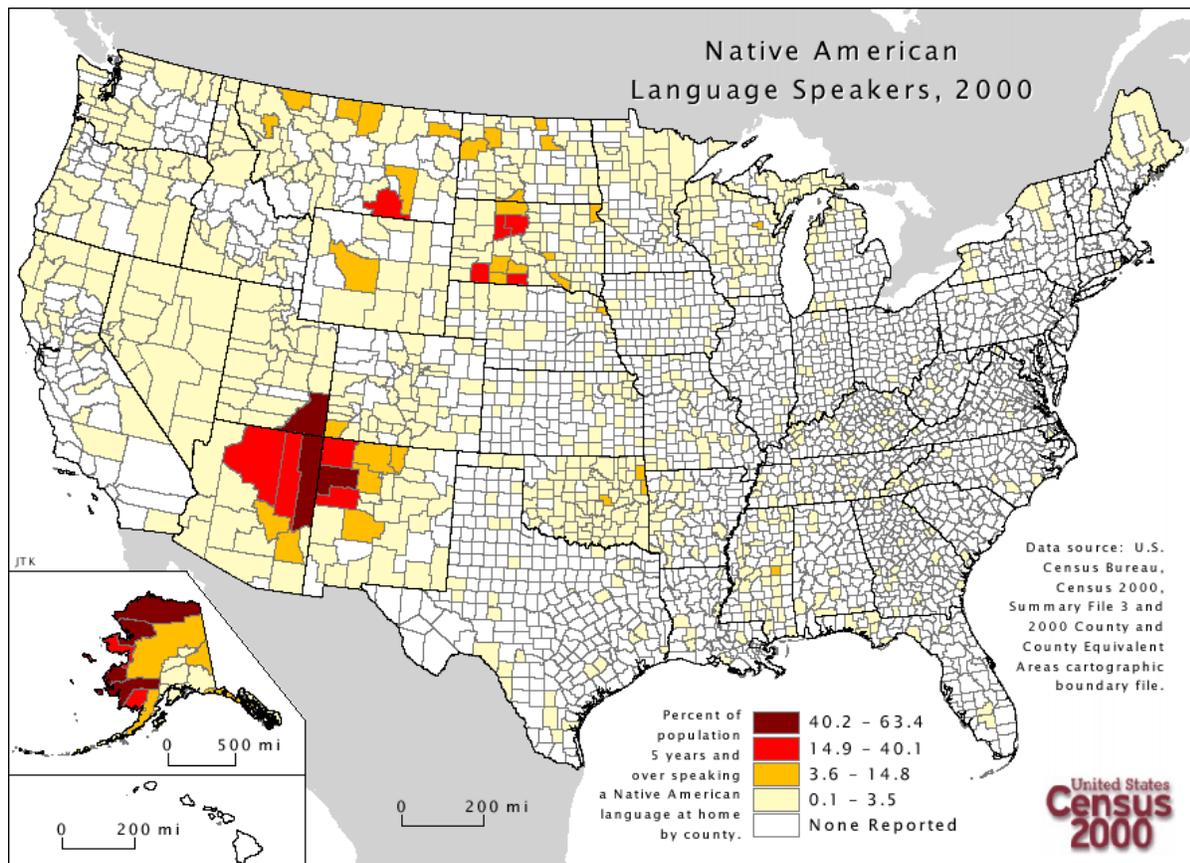
Language spoken	Speakers of Native North American languages			
			Residence in American Indian or Alaska Native area ²	
	Estimate	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Estimate	Margin of error ¹ (±)
All Native North American language speakers ...	372,095	4,897	237,391	3,465
Navajo	169,471	3,571	112,482	2,628
Yupik	18,950	687	16,019	502
Dakota	18,616	1,201	9,592	795
Apache	13,063	928	10,664	785
Keres	12,945	932	9,979	685
Cherokee	11,610	967	4,685	541
Choctaw	10,343	870	6,546	747
Zuni	9,686	1,280	8,647	1,280
Ojibwa	8,371	622	3,298	390
Pima	7,270	726	5,363	648
Inupik	7,203	517	5,707	450
Hopi	6,634	967	4,570	676
Tewa	5,176	569	3,649	402
Muskogee	5,064	598	3,054	389
Crow	3,705	511	2,816	434
Shoshoni	2,211	385	1,319	267
Cheyenne	2,156	427	1,167	179
Eskimo	2,076	262	1,492	216
Tiwa	2,009	474	1,466	323
American Indian language (not specified)	8,298	696	2,025	346
Other Native North American language	47,238	1,713	22,851	996

¹ Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimates, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

² For the purposes of this brief, American Indian or Alaska Native areas do not include native Hawaiian homelands.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2010 American Community Survey, 2006–2010 Puerto Rico Community Survey.

The total estimate is a staggeringly low number: 372,095 indigenous language speakers. The map below is a representation of the location and density of Native American language-speakers taken from the United States Census in 2000.



(US Census, 200)

It is hard to believe that all of these languages could lose their vitality, until one recognizes the long and brutal history of oppression of nature culture and language in the U.S. Civil rights lawyer Sandra Del Valle states that “Native Americans have the disheartening distinction of being the first victims of US xenophobic language and educational policies,” the forerunner of the still prevalent English-Only initiatives and attitude (2004, p. 275). She describes the treatment Natives received for speaking their own language during mission education and controlled education of the tribes; rinsing children’s mouths out with soap was one of the lesser punishments. This horrific obliteration of native (and immigrant) tongues was a reaction as the newly arrived “Americans” began to nation-build around communities of natives and flow of

immigrants. States began voting for Official English legislation as early as 1807 (Louisiana, as a condition of acceptance into the U.S.) and 1920 (by popular vote in Nebraska). Today, thirty-one states have “Official English,” although the degree to which this is applied varies (Pro English). From the above information, then, it is not at all surprising to hear Tatalovich critiques the U.S.’s national language policy as morally conflicted, as based on “racism, ethnic rivalry, economic class, and political” (1995, p.26). Tatalovich’s hypothesis is directly applicable to indigenous language oppression and revitalization and based on a review of state and national legislative policy (English Only).

Popular Advocacy Progress:

Eventually, in 1966, the first all-Indian-governed Indian school was founded (the Navajo Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona), which focused on educating students on their clan membership and building native language fluency. By 1975, the Indian Self-Determination Act was passed and a dozen more schools were able to sign with the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs to create their own schools. The Native American Language Act of 1990 and subsequent revisions of this brought national attention to the plight of indigenous languages, and later, more funding was provided to enable the implementation of these directives. This included a grant system in 1992 and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, which added \$12 million to its funds in 2009 (Del Valle, 2004, 288).

However, these initiatives faced the obstacles of responding to the (often misconceived) idea from external stakeholders that teaching a native tongue would be detrimental to English comprehension (and English standardized test scores). In Hawaii and Wisconsin, some schools have met the challenges of maintaining sufficient testing scores on English standardized state-wide tests as well as using immersive techniques and connecting students to their cultural heritage (Dicker, 2003, 167-8). Many schools are attempting to circumvent the need of certified

teachers in order to use elders to teach when they can to teach the language that is dying out. For this reason, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is advocating for a waiver to the requirement for teachers to have a B.A., be state-certified, as well as necessarily fluent in the native language. This solution from the people themselves would transmit more culture and indigenous ways of knowledge-sharing along with language education. Even so, the indigenous communities are aware that they are still currently letting their children be educated to be “non-native” (Cultural Survival).

The multitude of websites, databases, informal language courses and learning tools available to everyone with access to the internet is evidence of popular movements in the U.S. The Leadership Conference is one organization that shares resources regarding the political side of heritage language education and civil rights. Its offerings including the following:

- [The Center for American Indian Languages](#)
- [The Indigenous Language Institute](#)
- [Fighting for Validity: The Credentialing of Native Language Teachers- Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival - 2008](#)
- [Teaching American Indian and Alaska Native Languages in the Schools: What Has Been Learned](#) - Education Resources Information Center - December 1999
(Leadership Conference)

Another demonstration of the current popular movements toward the preservation of indigenous languages in the US and Canada is the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages (Malone). This colloquium shares presentations of implemented projects in this field. The participants also included some activists from outside the region in order to be able to compare and contrast the issues and challenges of Native American projects in the context of North America with the issues and challenges facing indigenous and minority language communities in Southeast Asia. One presentation was focused on *firstvoices.com*, a website for indigenous language teaching (informal) in Canada; yet another, was a plan for preserving indigenous languages in California. It touches on advocacy, curriculum and teacher preparation, and the application of technology to

this cause. The Native Languages of the Americas site provides access to specific informal heritage indigenous language education resources (including worksheets and pronunciation guides to many indigenous tongues). Clearly there are several organizations across the U.S. that are researching, presenting, and informally educating the public in the field of indigenous language preservation.

Just as the influence of popular movement can be seen in policy and curriculum in France, a convergence of popular and national ideas on linguistic policy is evident in the U.S. It is not only visible through acts such as the Native American Languages Act (NALA) but also projects and associations formed to endorse and support “democratic pluralism.” Contrary to the example of English Only, The English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) was started back in 1987 under the auspices of the National Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Form and the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) and it includes over a hundred groups representing the advancement of language study in the U.S. (Tatalovich, 1995,16). In recent years, small and innovative initiatives are receiving funding from the federal government, an affirmation of the significant effect of the burgeoning popular movement.

Case Study in Navajo and Shoshone Immersive Indigenous Language Schools:

In 1986, people were “shocked” at the idea of teaching a Navajo course in an English school with a large population of Navajo students; Teresa McCarty describes her experience as a teacher in a school with Navajo students, and how the times have changed. With time, progress emerged and the school evolved into its own K-8 Navajo-mediums school called Tséhootsooí Diné Bi’ólta. This is proving to be a success, since students in the immersive school are scoring as well, if not better in both English and their native tongue by fourth grade. McCarty even conducted ethnographic interviews with the students themselves to understand their perspectives on heritage-language learning, and found that ‘good practices’ in a bi-lingual

Native-tongue context include immersive classes and is greatly needed (McCarty & Skutnab, 2009 p.133-4).

Another recent case study of the culmination of popular movement is found in Idaho. The Department of Education funded a public school, independent of any school district, on the Shoshone-Bannock tribes' Fort Hall Reservation. According to the U.S. Census, the U.S. has just 2000 Shoshone "speakers," but the tribe consists of 6000 members and so the natives were justifiably concerned. They confirm that the endangered state of their tongue is due to the fact that previous generations had been taken to boarding schools, and taught strictly in English (and punished if they spoke in Shoshone). In recent times, the tribal government had consistently offered language classes, but the tribe members realized that immersive learning tactics were necessary to achieve real change. Since they were without financial resources, they successfully asked the government for funding and the Chief Tahgee School was founded. However, it is obvious that these schools (which are rare, and usually privately funded) face a humongous challenge: how to identify and recruit certified teachers who are also fluent in the indigenous language? (Boise State Public Radio)

Comparative Discussion

Looking at the examples of the RL schools and newly established tri-lingual signs in France, and the government-funded Shoshone school in the U.S. is heart-warming. Both countries are progressing towards more multilingual and inclusive societies with both government and locally supported native language-teaching initiatives, despite existing challenges in implementation. When non-native speakers as well as native speakers come together, the impact for linguistic preservation initiatives can be much more successful. Even in nations where there are pro-monolingual attitudes, such as France and the U.S, it is possible to change national policy through popular efforts.

James Costa, an expert on language revitalization in France, states that France has been and still remains reticent toward any type of system that might undermine the status of French as the sole language of education (Costa & Lyster, 2011, p.56). While this is certainly true, RL preservation advocates in France have an older history of oppressive linguistic policy and a much smaller territory to cover. This impacts their advocacy efforts and feasibility of RL education in a positive way and sets a precedent. RL classes have now been integrated into many levels of public schools as well as privately-run programs, and university students can even choose to study RLs. Many French citizens personally speak an RL or know native RL speakers. This personal interaction can also help the campaign for minority language rights.

Many American citizens, on the other hand, do not know any indigenous language-speakers personally. Most are not even aware of indigenous peoples and the history of English-Only action. The large territory, low number of remaining native speakers, and sheer number of indigenous languages in the U.S. makes the challenge of language preservation even more difficult than France's. The U.S. government has not produced such a prevalence of curriculum initiatives, although it has provided some legislation and funding in recent years. The country is also struggling with a larger scale of language defense; as France fears English, America fears Spanish. For not having established an "official national language," the country as a whole has only recently started to provide opportunities to minority language speakers. However, progress is being achieved as time goes by; more and more organizations, free online educational materials, conferences, and immersive schools are formed, and government funds are allotted for immersive indigenous language-learning initiatives. Communities in the U.S. could cultivate more communication between indigenous-language speakers and work on establishing more parent-run immersive schools like France started decades ago (and learn about the successful examples in France). Although the situation is different from France in many ways

(including the fact that many tribes live on reservation land in the U.S.), the U.S. could still learn from France's integrative curriculum and small achievements. In the U.S. activists are working to cultivate greater respect for the indigenous language; this too could be acknowledged outside of borders with bilingual street signs and shifts in attitude, as it is in France.

Conclusion

Both France and the U.S. have a wealth of indigenous and regional languages and a history of oppressing them. From just the few examples in both the U.S. and France, it is easy to see that preservation is indeed possible if enough people are aware of the plight of these tongues. With awareness and advocacy, people can influence governmental policy and funding recommendations. In order to convince nations, it is necessary to cultivate more statistics on the benefits of indigenous language education initiatives. It is recommended that annual studies on the learning outcomes and test scores of English and indigenous language-learners be conducted, since there really could never be enough research published to prove the value and human capital of such education. As long as the people advocate for their rights and the rights of their neighbors, maybe there is hope. According to Ager, "the traditional regions still retain large enough populations to provide an adequate base for language maintenance or revival" (2008, p.89). Yet, one might wonder if these current methods are only achieving the preservation of endangered languages, and not the revitalization. Perhaps when there are enough native speakers to communicate fluently and teach non-indigenous learners their language, the spread of the language would truly qualify the languages as being "revitalized." What would happen if there were books to learn indigenous languages available in stores for a wider population? What would happen if people learned other ways to communicate and view the world, other ways to view all parts of the earth as "relatives?"

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