

Aligning Native Language to State Standards

Amy Fenning describes how the Tulalip Tribes of Washington is striving to save the Lushootseed language by aligning its instruction with state standards



Considerable pedagogic and linguistic energy is devoted to vibrant, living, “global” languages such as English and Chinese, but what of languages in peril, used so seldom amongst dwindling numbers of native speakers? UNESCO estimates that 50 percent of the 6,000 languages throughout the world are endangered or moribund, and 96 percent of those languages are spoken by only four percent of the population. According to Ethnologue, 66 of roughly 517 of the world’s ‘nearly extinct’ languages are Native American. At the Tulalip Tribes in Western Washington, the tribal language department is working to revive the Lushootseed language, a member of the Southern Coast Salish family. Lushootseed has a northern and southern dialect, and the Tulalip Tribes focuses on a blend of the two, with a tendency towards Northern Lushootseed. On the Tulalip Reservation, there are less than 20 intermediate and advanced speakers, and there are a few elders who remember the language heard in their childhood. Though preservation efforts began as early as the 1950s, the Lushootseed Language Department in its current form was founded in 1994. The department employs eight full-time language teachers, a manager, a master teacher, and a program developer. The language teachers, who keenly feel the burden of passing on the language to the tribe’s youth and community, spend 20-40 minutes per day in 14 classrooms at Tulalip Montessori, which is 100 percent tribal and tribally governed, and Tulalip Elementary School, a public K-5 school which is part of the Marysville School District.

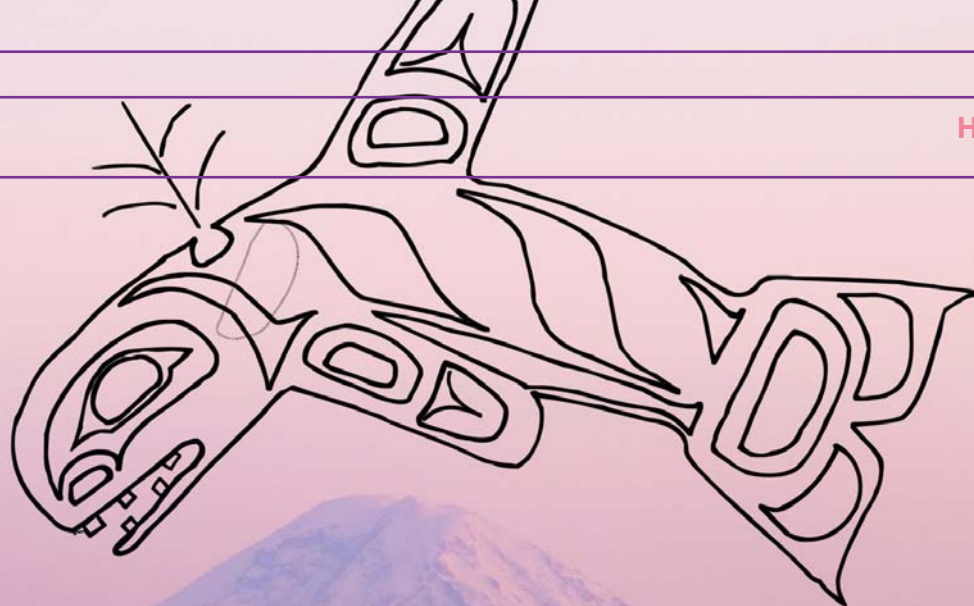
Although tribes in general enjoy positive relationships with the urban communities they border, forging a strong partnership between the school districts and the tribal language/culture programs has been more of a challenge. Tribal language departments throughout the region are concentrating their efforts on establishing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with their respective school districts. MOUs, while not necessarily legally

binding, typically outline a good-faith relationship between tribal language and culture programs, and school districts. Some tribes have been successful in building good relationships — the Lower Ehlwa Klallam Tribe has a cordial relationship with North Kitsap County School Board, and they sit down regularly to discuss curricular issues, including the language and culture program. The Tulalip Tribes is one of several tribes undergoing curriculum renewal programs which involve aligning their curricula with the state’s standards — a positive step towards mutual cooperation and, ultimately, a service to students, who will benefit from a more streamlined curriculum. This article reviews the issues involved in building relationships between tribal language/culture programs and school districts with schools on tribal land, and further explains this tribe’s process of shaping their curriculum and aligning it with Washington’s state standards.

Forging relationships through MOUs

A public school on tribal land is not unusual. Currently 34 school districts in the state of Washington have schools within tribe boundaries. Most tribes, regardless of dialect and level of language endangerment, have a tribal language and/or culture program which reaches out to their tribe’s youngest members through the public school districts. The tribes of the region are close, and meet frequently to share knowledge and successes/challenges with their respective school districts, and to lobby for legislative changes. On an aggregate level, MOUs exist between tribes and universities, tribal organizations and boards of education, and tribes and state interior departments. MOUs are legal gray areas, and entering into such an agreement should not be taken lightly. Both tribal language programs and school districts are right to hesitate if they do not agree on the terms.

The Tulalip Tribes Lushootseed Language Program’s MOU, drafted in



tribe to create a curriculum in consultation with mainstream teachers, to require that tribal teachers undergo supervision, observation and professional development training, and to document and monitor the progress of students receiving tribal language and culture education. In return, the tribal language program requests that the school district sanction a certain number of hours per week with the students, adequate classroom facilities for tribal teachers, and education specialist access to classes for observations. Other stipulations clarify copyright of language/culture materials and the sovereign right of the tribe to control the tribal language instruction on the reservation and in the community. There are plans to update the MOU to reflect recent changes in the program outlined in this article.

The challenges in forging good relationships

The memoranda on the surface are not unreasonable and are an excellent avenue towards collaboration, but they are a challenge for a variety of reasons. One is the misunderstanding that tribal teachers are not properly “qualified” with state certification credentials to teach in the public school arena. As of this year in Washington State however, House Bill 1226, the First People’s Language and Culture Certificate bill, was passed after a four-year pilot program. This allows tribal teachers who would otherwise be unable to teach the tribal language and culture due to stringent state certification requirements to apply for a tribal certificate through the state’s Professional Education Standards Board. This certificate comprises a background check, health and safety training, and professional development to be determined by each tribe. As of March 2007, 20 teachers in Washington are certified to teach eight tribal languages. Teachers at the Lushootseed Language program not only work to meet the state’s FPLC standards - three are currently certified and several more are working towards it - but also spend time attending training events to professionally develop and become more aware of pedagogical theory underlying the practice.

In addition to the stereotype of being “unqualified,” there is a perceived lack of cooperation from some mainstream teachers, who do not understand such a heavy focus on the Native American curriculum. If this were a situation such as an American international school in Shanghai, Chinese culture would likely be an integral part of the curriculum, but a public school on a reservation does not qualify as “cultural guest,” or even cultural partner status in the eyes of many mainstream teachers. Finally a great challenge to positive relationships is the No Child Left Behind Act. Recently released 2007 statistics once again place Tulip Elementary on the list of 24 schools in Snohomish County which fall short of state standards. State-wide statistics do show steady improvement among the Native American population over recent years, but on the local level it is a concern. In spite of continued efforts by the language department to prove the value of tribal language instruction and its positive impact on the students, it is difficult for school districts to justify more time for it when they are faced with the need to focus on preparing students for state-wide exams and Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks.

Curriculum Renewal

Thus, keeping in mind local concerns for federal guidelines, the Lushootseed language program has set out to create a curriculum with scope and sequence as well as clear language and culture objectives which align with Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs). The EALRs, written as a result of the state’s 1993 Basic Education Act, dictate learning standards for most content area for grades K-10 at three benchmark levels: elementary (4th grade), middle (7th grade), and high school (10th grade). EALRs, not unlike state education systems throughout the U.S., lay out clear goals and “grade level expectations” for each grade. At the Lushootseed Language Department,