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Indigenous Language Revitalization in United States Public Education

Introduction: [maaciiyohkantaawi](#) (Myaamia- “Let's begin to do it!”)

This paper was researched and written on Chochoeny and Lenape land. I do not claim any ethnic or ancestral relation to the Indigenous groups of the Americas. This paper is from the perspective of an outsider to the Indigenous community and may lack certain nuances to which Indigenous peoples may be more privy.

The United States of America is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries on Earth. Home to hundreds of languages (Mithun), the Indigenous languages of continental North America are particularly incredible. In a crowded stage of thousands of languages spoken, shouted, and sung on all corners of the globe, North America's Indigenous tongues stand out as some of the most sonically unique, grammatically complex, and pragmatically rich forms of communication known to humankind. Despite the millions of Indigenous people in the United States, only a very small minority of Americans can speak the language of the land on which they reside. Due to colonization efforts from various European powers, centuries of systemic Indigenous oppression, deliberate assimilationist policies, and widespread casual bigotry towards Indigenous Americans and minority language speech

communities, nearly every Indigenous language in the United States is considered to be endangered. After centuries of suppression, Indigenous activists and linguists are currently fighting to preserve and reinvigorate the words of their ancestors. In this paper, I strive to not solely relay demographic statistics and regurgitate assessments of government policies. Rather I hope to explore the hopeful story of how a small but diverse choir of voices endeavors to chant louder.

In this paper, I will outline my area of focus, and I will develop my view on the role of language revitalization through the lenses of several disciplines within the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and public policy. First, I will outline my area of focus by touching on the defining features of indigeneity. Next, I will explore the concept of language revitalization both generally and in the context of public education, the motivations for and benefits of language revitalization projects, the rhetoric surrounding the topic of endangered language, and the ways to gauge the extent to which a language is endangered. Then, I will provide more detail into the various languages and language families of the North American continent, their structures, and their sound systems. In the following section, I will detail the methods by which one can revitalize a language and the various ways minority languages can be instituted into schools. I will then explore some examples of successful revitalization efforts and implementations of minority languages into schools, and I will compare the role of minority language classes to the role of Ethnic Studies curricula in the public school environment. I will conclude by analyzing the purposes of both Indigenous language education and ethnic studies education, and what actions can be taken in the future of Indigenous language revitalization and minority language education.

For the purposes of my research, I have decided to only focus on the languages of North America that can be traced to pre-colonial times. Although there are some languages whose

origins began in North America, if their parent language(s) originate in the Old World, such as Geechee Gullah or Louisiana Creole, I will not be discussing these languages in depth. Although the focus of my research will be Indigenous languages, many of my assertions about the benefits of institutional support for minority languages will still apply to minority languages that did not originate in what is now the United States. According to Amnesty International, there are 475 million Indigenous people on Earth, speaking roughly 4000([Amnesty International](#)) of the world's 7000 languages ([Ethnologue](#)). "About 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages; conversely, about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by about 3% of the world's people"(UNESCO).

Indigeneity, and its relation to race and political status is something that is hard to define. In the United States, many Indigenous people may be enrolled members of a recognized tribe – a legal distinction recognized by the federal government. However, a significant number of people of Indigenous descent are not enrolled in the tribe or tribes with which they identify, and numerous tribes with long-lasting historical precedent are not federally recognized (NPR). Therefore, Indigeneity cannot be defined by governmental recognition. Rather than using a singular definition, many scholars prefer to classify Indigenous groups from around the world as having a number of shared traits. These traits may include but are not limited to: strong historical connection to the land of a certain geographic region, historical connection to a pre-colonial era or to a time prior to the arrival of peoples from differing backgrounds, distinct cultural values and belief systems, and most relevant to my research, historically speaking a shared language. One of the most important factors in identifying Indigeneity, however, is self-reported identity and acceptance within a community that collectively identifies as Indigenous ([Amnesty International](#)).

One of the defining reasons why many Indigenous languages are endangered in North America is due to the legacy of boarding schools. For generations, Indigenous children in the US were largely forced to attend boarding schools where they were prohibited from speaking their ancestral languages and coerced into adopting European-American-style cultural habits. This practice mostly began in 1869 with the Peace Policy of 1869 and continued well into the twentieth century ([boarding school healing.org](http://boarding-school-healing.org)). Residential schooling and explicit assimilationist policies did not officially end in the United States until 1978 with the Indian Child Welfare Act (edsources). Many survivors of this cruel system are still alive today and the impact of boarding schools deeply scars Indigenous communities. Hoopa Valley High School in California, where the Yurok language is taught today, stands on the land where Hoopa Valley's boarding school operated from 1893 to 1932 (Gellman). The awful history of assimilation and subjugation of Indigenous peoples in the United States is long and complex, and I cannot do it justice in this paper. Although this project is not centered on the history of schooling in the United States, one must acknowledge this history in order to examine the present and future role of Indigenous language and culture in education.

About language revitalization: e ala, ua ao, ua mālamalama. (Hawaiian - "Wake, it is light, it is bright").

One may wonder, should we even revive languages? As I will explain in later sections, I believe that my gathered evidence suggests that the effects of language revitalization have the potential to be quite beneficial to endangered language speech communities. However, this view is not universal. The decision to revive or revitalize a language lies with the community to which the language belongs, and not all Indigenous American communities are interested in revitalization. With hundreds of Indigenous communities and thousands of community members,

come hundreds and thousands of perspectives on the role of language in Indigenous life.

Ultimately, as someone who does not belong to an endangered language speech community, it is not for me to determine what a given community *should* do. Rather I am interested in exploring what *can* be done.

The extent to which one is fluent in an Indigenous language does not equate to the amount of positive benefits that one can experience from learning an Indigenous language, though these things may be somewhat related. In this paper, I will evaluate the effectiveness of various forms of language education in terms of their likelihood of resulting in fluency for their students, but I would also like to emphasize that students can reap a great number of positive effects from exposure to Indigenous languages without necessarily gaining fluency.

My research has led me to the conclusion that supporting revitalization efforts is important to keep up a base of fluent speakers, but the process of learning these languages, even if one can only speak a few words, can dramatically improve feelings of belonging, cultural connectedness, and pride in one's culture. The improvements to a speaker's self-esteem and their opinion of their community and culture may matter more than fluency when observing the positive effects of learning an Indigenous language in a formal educational context. Students who learn their ancestral language are likelier to have higher self-esteem, which tends to lead to improved academic and personal outcomes. Something that scholar Mneesha Gellman emphasizes is that the positive outcomes of teaching Indigenous languages are not always easy to measure. Some students may see improvement in areas of their lives that cannot be quantified, but that may not be reflected in their academic performance and that "those [kids] get left out when we're measuring successes. We [only] want to look at how many kids we send to college" (Gellman). Nonetheless, achievements like an improved relationship between the student and

their family, community, or self-image are still valuable results, even if they cannot be easily measured.

A common criticism of language revitalization efforts is that the revitalization of endangered languages is a futile effort. After all, countless languages have died throughout the course of history, so why would the deaths of languages in modern times matter? What proponents of this perspective may not fully consider, is that no language exists in a vacuum. Languages are not simple compendiums of words and grammar rules that materialize at random. Every utterance in every dialect has a story unto itself. For Indigenous languages in particular, revitalization often represents the embrace of Indigenous culture and history. In many communities, the act of speaking an ancestral language is an act of pride and even a display of a greater political will. Scholar Leanne Hinton explains that “Indigenous efforts toward language maintenance or revitalization are generally part of a larger effort to retain or regain their political autonomy, their land base, or at least their own sense of identity” (Hinton). As I will address in this paper, in the discourse about language revitalization, there is a possible benefit to promoting endangered languages that has been mostly overlooked. Through my research, I have come to the conclusion that the institutional promotion of endangered languages, particularly in education, has the ability to have a tremendously positive effect on students in a range of age groups.

On the rhetoric surrounding revitalization:

When discussing the revitalization of languages, especially indigenous languages, it is necessary to consider the numerous rhetorical missteps that one could make that may actually hinder the progress of revitalization efforts. While non-Indigenous linguists, anthropologists, and activists may use rhetoric when addressing non-Indigenous audiences that can be potentially

persuasive, certain common statements may alienate minority language speech communities.

Linguist Jane Hill famously identifies some harmful themes in Indigenous language rhetoric. I will be focussing on two of them that are particularly common and potentially offensive.

1. “Universal Ownership”

Advocates often try to persuade others of the importance of language revitalization by asserting that linguistic diversity benefits everyone on earth. This framing appeals to the concept of a unified human race and universal inalienable rights, which allows the advocacy surrounding language revitalization to be very palatable to those who care about human rights. Thus, the concept of Universal Ownership can be effective, it relies on dangerous assumptions. This can be seen as insulting to the speech communities of these languages, as it implies that outsiders with no connection to their culture have the same claims of ownership over their ancestral language as the people who have lived within those communities for their whole lives.

2. “Enumeration”

This can be defined as the use of sensationalist statistics in statements like “half the languages on earth are dying”. Salacious statistics about language death are used as a call to action. This can easily instill a sense of urgency in an audience, but it often alienates speakers of these languages, and these claims are logical fallacies. Enumeration implies that numbers of languages and numbers of speakers can be counted, which is fundamentally untrue. While quantifying languages may seem intellectually sound to laypeople, linguists understand that there are often no clear boundaries between where one language ends and another begins. When related dialects have significant but incomplete mutual intelligibility, it may be unclear whether researchers should classify these dialects as separate languages. There is no universally accepted criterion for the difference between languages or dialects of one language. Therefore it is not

honest to quantify languages, dialects, or speech communities. At the same time, I must emphasize that it is still often helpful for researchers to survey numbers of speakers in various speech communities. Although these statistics are not fully accurate, they are still useful for gauging language shifts, attitudes towards a given language, and the successes or failures of any revitalization programs.

A particular distinction that I will make throughout this paper is that the death of L1 the last remaining speakers of an endangered language does not equate to that language itself “dying”. Although it is a common term, using the epithet of ‘dead’ to refer to a language without native speakers can convey ignorance. Scholar Mneesha Gellman writes on the topic that “[r]endering Indigenous cultures, including language, as “dead,” “unimportant,” or “vanished” is a tactic of validation for genocide and culturecide, and alleviates White guilt for things like land appropriation” (Gellman).

While one may possibly view this section as simple pedantry, I believe that it is necessary to engage with the rhetoric surrounding endangered language with a certain level of caution and care. In general, the academic community concerned with language rights issues must avoid being salacious about language issues. Using moderate and measured phrasing may not always make for good headlines, and it may fail to pique the interest of the general public, but it is better than explicitly or implicitly insulting disadvantaged speech communities.

A Background to the Major Language Families of North America:

Two factors contributing to the difficulties in reviving Indigenous languages in the United States, is the typological contrast between the Indigenous languages of the contiguous United States and English, as well as the diversity of languages Indigenous to the United States. The Indigenous languages of North America are incredibly diverse [...]. This incredible diversity

leads me to the conclusion that the conditions for revitalization in the contiguous United States are unfavorable to the more standardized national revitalization initiatives seen in other countries where the Indigenous language is less varied, like Maori in New Zealand or Irish Gaelic in Ireland.

Some of the most prominent language families in North America are Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit (also known as Na-Dene) family with roughly forty known languages, the Uto-Aztecan family with roughly thirty languages, and the Salishan family with an estimated 23 languages. As mentioned previously, it can be difficult to quantify the number of languages in a given family, but it is undeniable that these language families are significant and expansive (Mithun). Of course, many languages native to North America are currently dormant, but in pre-contact times there were an estimated 300 or more languages spoken. Currently, roughly Indigenous languages 165 languages are still spoken ([Linguistic Society of America](#)) by a population of less than 400,000 people in the US ([census.gov](#)) and less than 300,000 people in Canada ([Statistics Canada](#)). For reference, there are an estimated 230 languages spoken in Europe ([Linguistic Society of America](#)) by a population of over 700 million ([European Union](#)). With great diversity in language families comes great diversity in grammar and structure. Many Indigenous languages of North America tend to be synthetic or polysynthetic, meaning many of these languages differ dramatically in grammar from English and many of Earth's most commonly spoken languages. In short, polysynthetic languages are languages in which a single word can carry enough inflectional and derivational morphological markers to convey the meaning of a concept that would be expressed in a full sentence in a language like English. For example, the sentence 'I can't hear very well', would be one word –

tusaatsiarunnangittualuujunga – in the Inuktitut language, which is spoken across parts of Canada and is closely related to languages spoken in Alaska and Greenland ([Klavans, 2018](#)).

In addition to great differences in grammar between Indigenous American languages and English, there are also great differences in sound systems. Language families of the Western United States and the Pacific Coast region – especially the Pacific Northwest – such as Athabaskan, Salishan, and Wakashan language families, have large very large consonant inventories with many crosslinguistically rare sounds. Languages of the east, such as those of the Algonquian and Iroquois families, have smaller consonant inventories. A number of languages in North America have tone or pitch accent to some extent, like Dine, more commonly known as Navajo, and some related Athabaskan languages, which is also a feature that does not exist in English in the same manner (Mithun). Being that many prominent grammatical, syntactical, and phonological features of these Indigenous languages do not exist in English or related languages, learning these languages may be significantly less intuitive for L1 English speakers than learning languages that are more typologically similar to English.

Ways of gauging the extent to which a language is endangered:

There are numerous metrics that one may use to measure the extent to which a language is endangered. One may assume that the extent to which a language could be considered endangered could simply be gauged by counting the number of individuals with knowledge of the language. However, this is often quite misleading. As discussed previously, counting speakers, or even partial speakers, of a minority language is a difficult task that will rarely be an accurate measure of the speakership of a language. Many scholars instead focus on the extent to which children are learning the language from their parents or other family members. A language

can have millions of speakers and still be considered to be threatened if it is not regularly spoken by children or young adults. Meanwhile, it is possible for a very small speech community to be fairly safe from reverse language shift, under the right conditions.

Various scholars and institutions devised measurements to measure the relative “danger” faced by a given language. One well-known scale is that of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The scale created by UNESCO was largely inspired by the methodology of scholar Joshua Fishman, who gauges language vitality by studying intergenerational transmission. At the International Expert Meeting on the UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages, Paris, 2003, scholars consider both intergenerational transmission and the absolute number of speakers to measure the extent to which a language is endangered ([UNESCO](#)).

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
Definitely endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
Severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
Critically endangered	1	The language is used by very few speakers, mostly of great-grandparental generation.
Extinct	0	There are no speakers.

While this scale is a good starting point, it lacks some nuance. Some language activists take issue with referring to languages that are no longer spoken as being “Extinct”. Calling languages “Extinct” or more colloquially, “Dead”, ignores the extent to which communities can reconstruct and revitalize languages that ceased to be passed down generationally. Ideally, UNESCO could improve upon the nuances of their scale by creating a distinction between languages with no native speakers that have the possibility of revival – dormant languages – and

languages that would be fully impossible to revive – truly extinct languages. Due to the positive example of Wampanoag, I have reason to believe that any language with ample documentation and/or the ability to be reconstructed from related languages is dormant and not extinct, and can be revitalized with enough effort.

Ethnologue is a catalog of languages that list estimated numbers of speakers for many endangered and under documented languages. Although Ethnologue is one of the largest and most comprehensive resources available to linguists and laymen alike, it is not an unbiased resource. Ethnologue is run by SIL, a “faith-based” non-governmental organization. Although Ethnologue is generally considered to be a useful tool that is used by many linguists, the motivations of this organization should be taken into account before consulting its data (more on this in section 2 of appendix). Ethnologue uses Lewis and Simons (2010) Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), which is also based on Fishman’s 1990 Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (see figure x in appendix). I personally find the scale used by the Endangered Languages Project to be the most simple and practical scale for our purposes. The project simply defines languages as being “at risk”, “endangered”, “Severely endangered”, “dormant”, “revived”, and “status unknown”(endangeredlanguages.com).

Revitalization efforts and US policies: HA-NEH-AL-ENJI (Dine - “Making talk; communication”)

Language Planning and Engineering:

For the revitalization of many Indigenous languages, especially the revival dormant languages, a process known as Language Planning or Language Engineering is used. Language

Planning entails purposely developing new vocabulary or systems of nomenclature for a given language. A language that is primarily spoken in limited domains, such as in ceremonial settings or with older relatives in a domestic setting, the language is likely to have lexical gaps for certain categories of items. If one wishes to expand the domains in which a language is used, such as expanding the use of a language from a household setting to a public school classroom, linguists and/or community members may decide to invent new terms that apply to new domains. In particular, many Indigenous languages may lack scientific and technological vocabulary (Hinton). In his 2007 PhD dissertation, Wesley Leonard describes Daryl Baldwin's process of reviving the previously dormant Myaamia language. Leonard described how Baldwin engaged in language planning to describe modern items and concepts in his language. He did this by observing other living related languages operated in newer domains and applying the same naming conventions in Myaamia. Baldwin used the phrase "nintaya keetooipiita (literally, 'my pet is thirsty'), a calque from Kickapoo, that in context means 'my car needs gasoline' after learning that related language communities referred to their vehicles as 'pets'" (Leonard). I will discuss the circumstances surrounding this language in depth in a later section. Language planning is a necessary part of the revitalization process when a language is expanding into a new domain. In the majority of scenarios of Indigenous languages being used in K-12 education, some degree of planning is a step that a teacher or speech community can take to ensure that a language can be spoken fluently in a classroom environment.

The types of revitalization used in the American education system, in order of age groups:

Pre-Kindergarten:

For communities that wish to have their language spoken by young children, a good option may be the creation of an Indigenous language preschool program. The Department of Health and Human Services funds Head Start Preschool programs. These programs exist across the country in a vast array of communities. A number of these schools are situated on or serve the residents or reservations where language revitalization efforts are in place. This is where one may find Indigenous language immersion or bilingual education for the youngest community members ([edsource](#)). For more information about Indigenous children in Head Start programs, see appendix section 5.

K-12 education methods ranked in order of subjective perception of the likelihood of fluency for students:

Immersion is the most effective method for creating and maintaining fluency in the target language. Examples of successful immersion schools for Indigenous languages can be seen in Hawaii for the Hawaiian language and in New Zealand for Maori. Unlike other language programs, children in immersion programs are much more likely to use the target language when socializing outside of the classroom, which is also a boon to fluency. Although immersion can be extremely effective, communities do not always find it to be practical. Due issues surrounding finding fluent adults as teachers for all subjects and grade levels, and the need for language engineering as mentioned previously, immersion in minority languages may be easier for lower grade levels (Hinton).

Bilingual education:

Bilingual education is a relatively popular option in the United States and has been practiced for decades. This method is best suited for communities where children still speak the language at home. Bilingual education has had strong legal precedence in the United States for

about 50 years. Lyndon Johnson signed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968 as part of Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Hinton). Funding and access to bilingual education in American public schools have been assured thanks to the 1974 Supreme Court case known as *Lau v Nichols*. After an influx of Chinese immigrants to California during the mid-twentieth century, thousands of Chinese-speaking young people were enrolled in San Francisco public schools. These schools failed to provide these students with proper instruction and accommodations, causing many of them to suffer academically. In a unanimous decision, the court concluded that San Francisco's public schools perpetuated discrimination "on the ground of race, color, or national origin", thus violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ([Department of Education](#)). However, the kind of bilingual education outlined in *Lau* is not the same kind of bilingual education that will benefit Indigenous American students. In fact, it is nearly the opposite of what may be most beneficial to Indigenous students, as the goal of traditional bilingual education in the US is to "transition" students away from their first language and towards the exclusive use of English in their education.

There are two main types of education practiced in the US in the decades following the *Lau* decision. The "transitional" model is typically used for ESL students, such as the students that inspired *Lau v Nichols*. There are two commonly accepted models of transitional bilingual education practiced in the United States: the early transition model and the late transition model. Early transition entails using non-English instruction from kindergarten until third grade or fourth grade, and using English-medium instruction from then on. Late transition entails using non-English education for roughly six years, or until 5th grade ([Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#)).

Another model of bilingual education is known as the Maintenance approach. Rather than “transitioning” students from their native language to English or another language, students are taught in such a manner that they can “maintain” both their first and second language. This is practiced in some schools in the Navajo Nation, with the Navajo language and English. *The Green Book of Language Revitalization* by Leanne Hinton explains that:

“Rock Point, on the Navajo reservation, is an example of one way in which such goals were carried out. Primary classrooms were divided in half, with Navajo objects, decor, books, and tapes in one half, and Anglo-American objects, decor, books, and tapes in the other half. Children and teachers alike were expected to always speak Navajo when they were on the Navajo side of the room and English on the other side of the room. The goal was to educate children to be bilingual and bicultural, with pride in their background.”

While many communities might find maintenance education to be useful, governments may not be interested in using funds to support this method, as maintenance is more expensive than transitional education.

Summer camps and afterschool programs:

Summer camps and summer intensive programs can be very useful options for language skills development and maintenance. These methods are used in minority speech communities across the country. The First Nations’ Native Language Immersion Initiative is a language preservation and revitalization program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and other sponsors such as Wells Fargo. The program in turn funds language-intensive programs across the US. The Initiative touts that participation improves academic outcomes for Indigenous students. 2023 grant recipients include funding to the Santa Rosa Band of Cahuilla Indians in California to fund an after-school program for children aged 5-12 and to improve its language program, and the Salish School of Spokane to fund the training of 30 Colville Salish adults in the Salish language so these adults can themselves become teachers and mentors of others ([Native Language Immersion Initiative](#)).

The following is a list of K-12 language exposure methods ranked roughly according my subjective judgment on the extent to which fluency is likely to be achieved, inspired by Hinton:

Immersion	Pros: very likely to ensure fluency
	Cons: language must be adapted for higher levels, can be expensive to implement, parents may be concerned about English abilities, maybe hard to convince others of practicality
Bilingual education (Late Transition)	Pros: gives a stronger background in minority language while allowing students to develop technical skills in English (comparable to L2 English education in parts of Europe and Asia), don't need adapt the minority language as much
	Cons: more expensive, does not incentivize socialization in minority language
Bilingual education (Early Transition)	Pros: cheaper (federal funding), less likely to politically contested due to legal precedence
	Cons: can encourage assimilation and loss of minority of language past early childhood
Bilingual education (Maintenance)	Pros: Allows for strong language exposure into high school, allows for the development of larger vocabulary in both minority language and English
	Cons: more expensive, may require linguistic engineering for higher level subjects
Language as a subject	Pros: easier to implement, works well for schools with mixed student demographics, no concern about development English abilities skills, less expensive
	Cons: no fluency – students don't take these kinds of classes seriously (Gellman found high school students taking Yurok as a subject in Northern California were often distracted during class)
Summer Intensive programs	Pros: Can be paired with any form of education during the school year, many skills can be developed in a few months of intense focus in annual installments, can be funded through the National Endowment for Humanities
	Cons: should be supplemented with other activities to maintain the language skills during the school year
After school programs	Pros: these programs can be used to develop the language in a non-academic context, can be paired with any kind of schooling during the day
	Cons: these programs may lack the standardization of public education or the intensity of focus found in summer intensive programs

On college programs and adult learning:

It is a popular belief that learning languages fluently as an adult is immensely difficult and rare, nonetheless many of the most successful revitalization programs began with adult second language learners. Though committing oneself to fully learning a language in adulthood –

especially an endangered language – can be a daunting task, it is necessary for many in revitalized languages to have a significant L2 speaker base if that community has the goal of raising a new generation of L1 speakers as children. In the last 30 years, a number of previously dormant Indigenous languages have not only been revived with a community, but now have young L1 speakers. As mentioned previously, the Myaamia language spoken by the Miami community in Ohio, Indiana, and Oklahoma is estimated to have become dormant in the 1960s. Thanks to the work of a devoted father and the Ohio Miami community, there is now a young generation of L1 Myaamia speakers once again (Leonard). Additionally, as I will discuss in a later section, the teaching of Indigenous languages in higher education may be likely to have many benefits similar to those of teaching Indigenous languages at the K-12 level. While these collegiate level language learners may have a somewhat different learning experience due to their age and educational context, learning Indigenous languages appears to still be a worthwhile endeavor for these students.

Roadblocks to revitalization:

As previously stated, the diversity of languages native to the North American continent all but ensures that revitalization efforts will be small-scale and decentralized. Doing revitalization efforts on a small scale is not necessarily a negative thing, but these efforts are likely to lack funding. Disagreements about differences between dialects, sometimes languages must be consolidated for the sake of revival (Hinton).

It is difficult to understate the extent to which many of the Indigenous languages of the United States linguistically contrast with American English. It is interesting how Hawaiian is arguably one of the most successful Indigenous language revitalization projects in the United

States and also has a super small phonemic inventory. Of course, the Hawaiian language has strong institutional support on the state level and other significant factors leading to its success,, but I believe that its typology is worth discussing. The phoneme inventory of a given language probably is not the defining factor in terms of whether or not a language has a successful revitalization program, but it still can contribute to native English speakers experiencing increased difficulty in learning certain languages. To illustrate the potential challenges posed to revitalization efforts of certain North American languages with complicated sound systems, I will provide tables containing the consonant inventories of Hawaiian and Lushootseed, respectively. Lushootseed is a Salishan language historically spoken around the Puget Sound region of the Pacific Northwest, including what is now Seattle. There are no L1 speakers of Lushootseed, though the language is well-documented and revitalization efforts are active. Lushootseed has 37 consonants, 9 of which are ejective, resulting in a high consonant to vowel ratio (see figure 3 in appendix). It may be difficult for many English speakers to even hear the difference between some of the phonemes in Lushootseed, let alone reproduce the sounds ([WALS](#)).

Hawaiian, conversely, has an incredibly small consonant inventory of 8 phonemic vowels (see figure 4 in appendix). While Hawaiian phonology does not fully overlap with the consonant inventory of most dialects of American English, Hawaiian pronunciation is likely to be much less discouraging for English speakers than languages with comparatively more complicated phonology like Lushootseed. According to the World Atlas of Language Structures, Hawaiian has a particularly low consonant-to-vowel ratio, contrasting strongly with Lushootseed. For reference, English is also considered to have a low consonant-to-vowel ratio, owing to the large number of vowels found in English. This is also the case for French and German. Therefore,

speakers of Western Indo-European languages may find some aspects of pronunciation in Austronesian languages like Hawaiian much less daunting than those of many languages of the contiguous United States thanks to typological structures in common.

The United States has no official language, though English is the de facto language of all levels and branches of the government. Throughout the history of the United States, however, many politicians and citizens have advocated for institutional enforcement of English language in many spheres of public life, especially in public education. Many of these pro-English policies set out to hurt more dominant languages of large immigrant groups like Spanish and Chinese, but these policies almost always inadvertently hurt Indigenous languages as well. A particularly prominent blow to bilingual education was the English First movement of the 1980s. This largely began in California when immigrant groups from countries like Mexico were perceived as a threat to the hegemony of white cultural dominance. California and twelve other states declared English as an official language. The attacks on non-English school curricula continued in California with Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education on a state level. This was reversed in 2016, but the legacy of forced English immersion persists (Gellman). One may wonder what advantages legislators in a country like the United States would see in imposing institutional barriers to the promotion of minority language, other than bigotry. According to Leanne Hinton, the promotion of the majority language may be seen as useful for nation building, creating a common identity for those of a shared nationality, and is viewed as something that can shore up patriotism. Unfortunately, this comes at the cost of disenfranchising minority speech communities through a lack of access to government services in their native language at best and violent policies of forced assimilation at worst (Hinton). Some policymakers and laymen alike are of the opinion that a single shared language can decrease

inequality and conflict, though this view is not universal. Nonetheless, pro-English policy has remained popular throughout the history of the United States. Although English is not the official language of the United States, various individual states have adopted legislation defining English as an official language on the state level ([Wall Street Journal](#)).

In recent times, Ethnic Studies has become an academic subject that is increasing in popularity on the pre-collegiate level. Unfortunately, the teaching of race and culture in the United States is frequently a politically fraught topic in public education. A 2010 legislative challenge to an Ethnic Studies program in Arizona has arguably set a modern precedent for the creation of newer politically-motivated obstacles to culturally-responsive public education. In response to a Mexican-American studies class at Tucson High School, state lawmakers John Huppenthal and Tom Horne passed HB 2281 limiting Ethnic Studies curricula in schools. The lawmakers claimed that the program was “Marxist” and “indoctrinating students”. In response, Curtis Acosta, a teacher of Chicano-American literature at Tucson High School affirmed that his students were “doing really controversial things like reading and writing well”([NPR](#)). Indeed Tucson High School had reported a positive relationship between ethnic studies courses and academic achievement. According to US News and World Report, 84% of students at Tucson High are racial minorities, and the vast majority, 68.8%, are Hispanic. As of 2017, 100% of students who partook in Mexican-American studies classes at Tucson High graduated from high school, and 85% planned to attend college. This would be significant at nearly any public school in the United States, but this is particularly notable at Tucson High School which has a student population of over 3,000 students and a graduation rate of 84%. Even more strikingly, as of 2021, only 32% of Hispanic Americans aged 18-24 were enrolled in college ([Pew Research](#)). While it is useful to note that Tucson High School is a Magnet school and has the advantage of

being situated in a significant metropolitan area, which may provide greater resources to students than students in smaller rural schools, Tucson High School is a recipient of Title 1 funding, thus implying that students do not have a financial advantage over the average American public school ([US News and World Report](#)). It is difficult to definitively claim that the Mexican-American studies program has a causal effect on student achievement, as it is possible that such ES courses attract academically motivated students. Contrasting with the SFUSD ES program, reverse causality is a very possible explanation for the academic success of these students. In either case, however, the ES courses at Tucson High certainly did not have a negative impact on students and it is very unlikely that any students were at all discouraged from academic achievement through taking such ES courses.

Researchers Thomas S Dee of Stanford and Emily K Penner of UC Irvine studied 1,405 students of “five school-by-year cohorts” from the San Francisco Unified School District. 8th grade students with a GPA just below 2.0 were assigned to an ethnic studies course while students just above 2.0 were not. Dee and Penner reported that “Assignment to this course increased ninth-grade attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23”. It is crucial to note that comparable students that were initially somewhat more academically successful than the cohort in the ES course fared worse than their counterparts. This implies that ES courses have a causal relationship with quantifiable measures of academic success. If ethnic studies are good for students, and if speaking indigenous languages is a good thing, and if language is intertwined with cultural matters, then if we treat language classes as kind of being related to ethnic studies, then we could see great academic improvement (Dee and Penner, 2016).

In the United States education system, ES courses and world language courses are thought of as separate and distinctly different subjects. However, much of what may be learned in a minority language-speaking classroom may, purposefully or inadvertently, overlap with what may be taught in an ES course. One striking example of the confluence of beneficial effects of both ethnic studies courses and Indigenous language courses at the collegiate level can be observed at Miami University. The American Heritage Scholarship targeted at Indigenous American students began at Miami in 1974. The organizers of the scholarship particularly hoped to recruit students from the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma or the Miami Nation of Indians of the State of Indiana. For years, the scholarship received little attention from potential applicants, and the scholarship was not awarded to any students until the 1978-1979 school year when it was granted to a Wampanoag student. The first Myaamia students were enrolled in 1991. The scholarship has since evolved into the Myaamia Heritage Award Program and is much more successful in its current form thanks to the addition of the Myaamia Heritage Course in 2003. Recipients of the scholarship are required to participate in eight semesters of one-credit Heritage classes. In addition to classes about history, ecology, and current tribal issues, students take classes teaching the Myaamia language. Prior to 2003, Myaamia students at Miami University had a graduation rate of 56%. Since the establishment of Myaamia Heritage Courses, the six-year graduation rate has risen to 92% (Baldwin, 2022). For reference, the national six-year college graduation rate for Native American students is 41%, and the national six-year graduation rate for all students is 62.3% ([Bankrate.com](https://www.bankrate.com)). Although the Miami tribe of Oklahoma only has under 7,000 members, 106 Myaamia students have graduated from Miami University as of October 2022 ([Baldwin, 2022](#)).

While the high graduation rate may be partially explained by some financial burden of higher education being alleviated by funding, the dramatic increase in graduation rates during the twenty-first century appears to be highly correlated with the institution of heritage courses in particular. It is pertinent to note that it is estimated that the last native speaker of the Myaamia language probably died in the mid-twentieth century, around the time that the scholarship began. Although we cannot isolate the positive effects of the Myaamia language courses from the other heritage classes, the Myaamia community has shown increased interest and pride in their ancestral language in recent years, and a revival movement has gained traction. Revival efforts for the Miami language were largely spurred by community member Daryl Baldwin, when he began learning the language from older documentation of the language and speaking with his wife and children in the early 1990s. Mr. Baldwin held workshops for teaching the language to the community in the proceeding years. The Miami tribe developed a dedicated language committee in 2004 that included Baldwin and two trained linguists. While the Myaamia speech community is small, it is undoubtedly growing thanks to the dedication of highly motivated community members ([Leonard, 2007](#)). Therefore, while it cannot be assumed that the Myaamia language class alone is responsible for this improvement in academic achievement from Myaamia students, the data suggests that Indigenous language classes, in conjunction with other culturally relevant courses, may have a causal relationship with academic success for Indigenous American students.

From interviews with students from Eureka High School and Hoopa Valley High School in the work of Dr. Gellman, we can draw parallels between the benefits provided to students by ES programs and the experiences of students in minority language-as-a-subject classrooms. For smaller learning establishments, the courses selection for students tends to be quite limited.

Without any ES mandates from a state's government, many rural public schools simply do not have a large enough student body to offer classes beyond a standard array of subjects and curricula. Moreover, ES is a politically fraught topic in many communities, so a school board or administration has an incentive to not implement a potentially controversial class. For the students at EHS and HVHS, the Yurok class offered not only the opportunity to learn a language, but also the chance to understand a local Indigenous culture from a new perspective (Gellman).

Teaching minority languages is fully a worthwhile pursuit for many institutions, as it has the potential to make going to school at least a bit more tolerable for students who may be disenfranchised and disinterested in pursuing education otherwise. Language classes have the power to boost the morale and improve the cultural knowledge of students who aren't even part of the speech community of the language being taught. From my research, I have come to believe that outside of just Indigenous language courses and ethnic studies curricula, it is necessary for educational institutions to reflect the needs of their student bodies. Teaching Indigenous languages in the classroom is more than just a proactive policy decision, it represents an affront to the assimilationist history of the US education system. In the conclusion of *Indigenous Language Politics in the Schoolroom*, Dr. Gellman states "For deep change, decolonization cannot only happen within Indigenous communities but must be reflected in settler-colonial and ethnic majority communities and institutions as well" (Gellman). If done properly, language revitalization can be a radical act of restorative justice. Although this paper has mostly advocated in favor of revitalization within the institution of public education, one must acknowledge the benefits of promoting Indigenous language education derive not from the language by itself, but from the transmission of cultural pride represented by speaking the language. Treating second languages like a school subject, in the same vein as algebra or

chemistry, trivializes the weight of history carried by Indigenous languages. Leanne Hinton writes “If the language is learned solely in school, then it is school culture and school values that are learned along with it. Even when a conscious effort is made to teach traditional culture and values, the schoolroom agenda imposes its own culture on the students” (Hinton).

Next steps: Nek kee nerrmery ([Yurok](#) - “I’m going to sing”)

If I had the proper resources and approval, I would replicate a study that takes strong inspiration from the work of Mneesha Gellman as well as Dee and Penner. I would study students at schools that have implemented minority language classes that are relevant to the demographics of the student body, a culturally relevant ethnic studies course, both such courses, or neither such courses at schools with comparable student bodies in terms of student population, demographic makeup of student bodies, and average household income. Similar to Dee and Penner, I would track academic outcomes such as GPA, attendance, and graduation rates. I would also take inspiration from Gellman to document the possible qualitative benefits of such courses through anonymous surveys, focus group sessions, and classroom observation. Being that minority language classes may have some of the same benefits as ethnic studies courses, I am curious to observe the possible differences between the effects of ethnic studies education without relevant language education and vice versa, as well as the possible benefits of ES and language courses working in conjunction. I would also be interested in observing the differences between Indigenous language classes in the United States, Indigenous language classes in other countries, and non-Indigenous minority languages taught in the US.

I believe that it would be beneficial for many students for states to further institutional accreditation for minority languages in schools. For example, as of 2022 eight students have

earned the California State Seal of Biliteracy in the Yurok language (phys.org). Students who have earned a state seal of Biliteracy are more likely to seek higher education and attend college full-time than their peers (edweek). Therefore, there is strong reason to believe that reaching languages –Indigenous or otherwise – in American schools other than English has a positive effect on students academic outcomes in general. I assert that in secondary education, it would be greatly beneficial for Indigenous language classes to be weighted in a student’s GPA or count for honors credits. Being that the concern that many parents and students have has to do with the practicality of learning a minority language, giving extra credits for Indigenous language classes incentivizes students to feel that studying these languages is a useful path in their education. In addition to the aforementioned benefits of weighted Indigenous language courses, I must once again emphasize that Indigenous languages are often significantly more difficult to learn for English speakers than other more commonly spoken languages. The languages native to North America are so much more grammatically and phonologically distinct from commonly taught languages like French and Spanish, therefore, I sincerely believe that students should be rewarded academically for this great intellectual undertaking.

Although institutional support for minority languages can have the potential to have a positive effect for many communities, institutional support is not the sole factor that should determine a language’s legitimacy. Over the course of my research, I have come to realize that nearly all of the successful revitalization efforts, especially of previously dormant languages, have a common denominator: ordinary community members with an extraordinary passion for their language culture. Validation from the government and academia alone will not result in a generation of new L1 speakers.

Appendix:

Figure 1:

Expanded Graded Disruption Scale, adapted from Quakenbush and Simons, 2012:

Label	Level	Description
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.
1	national	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the nationwide level.
2	provincial	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.
3	Wider communication	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.
4	educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.
5	developing	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.
6a	vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.
6b	threatened	The language is used orally by all generations, but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children.
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves, but none of them is transmitting it to their children.
8a	moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.
8b	Nearly extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9	dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10	extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.

Alternative labels for other special circumstances (ethnologue.org):

Label	Level	Description
5	dispersed	The language is fully developed in its home country, so that the community of language users in a different country has access to a standardized form and literature, but these are not promoted in the country in focus via

		institutionally supported education.
9	reawakening	The ethnic community associated with a dormant language is working to establish more uses and more users for the language with the results that new L2 speakers are emerging.
9	Second language only	The language was originally vehicular, but it is not the heritage language of an ethnic community and it no longer has enough users to have significant vehicular function.

Section 2:

According to the organization, their areas of focus are “Bible translation, literacy, education, development, linguistic research and language tools” and they “love the Bible and support its translation so others can have the same opportunities to know God better” (sil.org). The resources compiled by SIL can be useful nonetheless, one must be cognizant of the possible ideological biases of their research.

Figure 3:

Consonant inventory of Lushootseed:

		Labial	Alveolar		(Alveolo-)palatal	Velar		Uvular		Glottal
			plain	sibilant		plain	lab.	plain	labio.	
Stop	voiced	b	d	dz	dʒ	g	g ^w			
	voiceless	p	t	ts	tʃ	k	k ^w	q	q ^w	
	glottalized	pʼ	tʼ	tsʼ	tʃʼ	kʼ	k ^w ʼ	qʼ	q ^w ʼ	ʔ
	lateral		tɬʼ							
Fricative			f	s	ʃ		x ^w	χ	χ ^w	h
Approximant	plain		l		j		w			

	laryngealized		l̥		j̥		w̥			
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Figure 4:

Consonant Inventory for Hawaiian:

	Labial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m	n		
Stop	p	t ~ k		ʔ
Fricative				h
Sonorant	w ~ v	l ~ r ~ ɻ		

Section 5:

“Across the United States, 45,175 children with AIAN heritage are served in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Region XI administers 148 tribal Head Start grantees and 57 tribal Early Head Start grantees that serve 47 percent, or 21,259, of the enrolled AIAN children. [...]Currently, almost two percent of enrolled children’s primary languages spoken at home are Native North American and Alaska Native languages (1.9 percent); one percent reported Spanish; and the majority reported English (95.7 percent). This shows a decrease from the eight percent enrolled children who reported AIAN languages as their dominant language in 2001 for Region XI. [...] President Obama’s early learning agenda included Executive Order 13592, which contains the objective of "increasing the number and percentage of AIAN children who enter kindergarten ready for success through improved access to high quality early learning programs

and services, including Native language immersion programs, that encourage the learning and development of AIAN children from birth through age 5. [...] The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 (Pub.L. 109-394), which amended the Native American Programs Act of 1974, provides for the revitalization of Native American languages through Native language immersion and restoration programs that are administered by the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), which is also a part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF)” ([Department of Health and Human Services](#)).

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