

Yup'ik Language Programs at Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bethel, Alaska

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Since 1970, for 35 years, there has been a language shift throughout the Lower Kuskokwim School District, as well as a climate shift in terms of attitudes toward language retention and revitalization. From 1979 forward—at the time the district became a regional school district—each village site and community has had the option of determining its destiny in terms of language programs. In the 70s and 80s, little doubt was voiced in most communities regarding the status and role of the Yup'ik and Cup'ig language and culture in both their village and their school. The bilingual transitional and maintenance programs, closely modeled after the BIA programs, attested to this support.

With the advent of television, increased air traffic between villages, snow machines, and boats making access to Bethel easier, and the number of privately owned vehicles traveling up and down the ice road in the winter, many of the villages no longer exist in the same level of geographic and linguistic isolation as they once did. More local village members hold jobs, increasing their ability to travel outside the area to both Bethel and Anchorage. Increasingly, young people travel outside the area for Job Corps, military, and college opportunities. Venturing outside beyond their villages to visit, study, live, and work, has broadened peoples' interaction with English, and has increased the use of English, bringing more and more back to villages, making it a much more common language of communication than previously. In addition, the length of time the public schools have been in existence with English speaking teachers moving in and out of villages, has increased, impacting the amount of English language use for social interaction and academic instruction.

The status of the home/indigenous language has been threatened as well, by attempts to impose English-only laws, English testing requirements by third grade in Yup'ik instructional environments, and professionals from outside the area identifying the Yup'ik language as the “flaw” preventing students from succeeding in the western schooling system. Parents and communities, in some instances, are holding their language and culture in less esteem, and valuing it less in the school programs and school environment. Meeting the No Child Left Behind requirements at the cost of their heritage seems to be a price some families and communities are willing to pay.

The current language programs in the Lower Kuskokwim School reflect the changing times. Although communities and school boards continue to support the use of the Yup'ik language and culture in the school, they do so without the strength of conviction or energy of earlier days. Fewer and fewer children are speaking Yup'ik with proficiency in their homes and in school. Concurrently, the number of children fluent in English (having attained academic proficiency) has increased, but not significantly as measured by the Limited English Proficient testing instruments required by the State of Alaska.

The continued decline of Yup'ik in the homes, communities, and schools has placed some villages in a subtractive rather than an additive program position. The cultural component exists in the schools, but is constantly threatened because of students needing tutoring time to meet academic standards and to eventually meet graduation requirements. At the same time, the district struggles to find workable, effective models for promoting a strong English language development curriculum.

Yup'ik Language Development Programs

Yup'ik Language Development Programs are still the most prevalent of program types, currently existing in 14 of the 23 villages. It was previously known as the Yup'ik First Language Program, modeled after the original BIA Primary Eskimo program. Students' initial literacy instruction occurs in Yup'ik. Reading, writing, and math instruction as well as content instruction occur in Yup'ik. English language development starts orally in the lower phases, beginning orally, increasing incrementally until students transition to an all-English program by grades three or four.

An English Language Development (ELD) program occurs concurrently with this program. As the State of Alaska ELD Standards are developed, this program is being aligned with them. English instruction initially is oral, working with children in developing their oral language skills in English; developing the language of school, social language, and the language of textbooks and readers. At the early phases, students have only 15-20 minutes of oral English instruction daily. This increases in phases three and four. When they have reached the ability to read and write in Yup'ik with grade level proficiency, English language instruction transitions from oral to reading instruction. Almost to the child, the transfer of reading ability is immediate if the oral skills and phonemic awareness exists in Yup'ik. Reading transfers, and this has been observed and documented. (Christopherson & Rearden, 2004)

Two-Way Immersion Program: This program model is new to the district, and has been selected by only one village site. This requires that literacy skills be taught in Yup'ik and English from grades K-6. Since the two languages are shared equally, research and practice indicate that students will not gain the skills in either language unless the program is continued through at least grade six. The reluctance to embrace this model stems from: 1) the limited staff and materials available to

provide instruction through grade six; 2) the length of commitment to the Yup'ik language, in the fear that it will interfere with student's acquisition and learning of English. For such a program to run its full course, it requires a true commitment to the Yup'ik language by both the community and the school. A long term objective to engage literacy in both languages must be part of the focus.

Full Early Immersion Program: Two schools in the district have selected this program; the small village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island and the Bethel Ayaprun Elitnaurviat. Both schools have a similar purpose, but a very different make-up.

Mekoryuk: The community of Mekoryuk is quite small as is the school, Nuniarmiut, with 48 students. All the children come from Cup'ig heritage homes and from a community where very few speakers remain. Mekoryuk is the only place in the world where this particular dialect of Cup'ig is spoken. Nine years ago they began their mission; writing grants, translating books, getting training in immersion instruction, restructuring their school, moving forward. Beginning in kindergarten, all instruction, except for the ELD component required daily, is in Cup'ig up through grade four. Material, teachers, financial support, and the continuing pressure of NCLB and adequate yearly progress limit the program.

Ayaprun Elitnaurviat: This Yup'ik Early Immersion Program has received considerable acclaim over the years, because of its accomplishments. The majority of the children enrolled in the program are not Yup'ik speakers. The intent of such a program is to reintroduce the language in a community where the culture exists but the language is not spoken by most of the parents or children. Parents are not in a position to teach the language in the home. Ten years ago the program began with a grassroots movement of concerned parents, both Native and non-native, and now has an enrollment of 190 students K-6, and a staff of 13 certified instructors teaching in Yup'ik and five certified instructors teaching in English for the English component, with nine paraprofessionals.

How Success is Measured

Test scores in English? Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress for NCLB? Parent and elders showing pride when their children perform in Yup'ik at the Winter Carnival? Students continuing to request Yup'ik classes in their schools?

Success from our perspective is indicated by the following facts:

1. The district supports the training of Native teachers, both through scholarships, on-campus and distance delivered teacher-training programs.
2. Sixty-seven (about 18%) of the 358 certified teachers in the district are Alaska Native.
3. Four of the district's certified Alaska Native teachers are enrolled in a Master's degree program; 13 more applicants are pending.

4. Under a grant with the University of Alaska Fairbanks, 12 undergraduate employees are pursuing their degree in education.
5. Thirteen of the 23 village schools continue, after 30 years to support their Yup'ik Language Development (PEP, YFL) program. Based on assessment of Yup'ik proficiency testing, language growth is occurring at every site. Students are becoming stronger speakers, as well as readers and writers of Yup'ik/Cup'ig.
6. Bethel Ayaprun Elitnaurviat Immersion School has an enrollment of 190 students, K-6.
7. Communities continue to observe traditional activities, speak the Yup'ik language and value their subsistence life style.
8. The seven schools that met Adequate Yearly Progress in the district for 2004 all had strong Yup'ik language and culture program, especially at the primary levels.
9. In 2005 two schools, one with full early immersion, and another with an YLD program, met AYP for the second year and are at Level 0.
10. Many parents participate in family nights, work in schools as resource people, get their children to school on time, help them with homework, keep them clean, feed them, and clothe them, and continue to speak Yup'ik in the homes and communities.

What Has Led to Success Through the Schools?

Curriculum and materials development has provided the structure and direction needed for implementing an effective and successful Yup'ik language and cultural program. The literacy, math and cultural curriculum guides, along with assessments have provided teachers and paraprofessionals the consistent and concrete direction needed. High academic standards and pacing in the primary Yup'ik programs have had a strong impact as well, allowing teachers, parents and students to know that Yup'ik is a language of instruction and that academic concepts can be shared and learned in Yup'ik as well as in English. When the standards and expectations are high, students meet them.

1. There is a strong well-defined curriculum at the K-3 level for reading, writing, and math.
2. Books are written and illustrated in Yup'ik by local artists and authors. Other readers have been translated, leveled, and "pasted-over." A book leveling system has been developed and all "paste-over" and locally published books have been leveled for instructional purposes.
3. A Yup'ik reading assessment system has been developed consisting of high frequency word lists, informal reading inventories, identification of leveled books for each "phase" level (grade equivalent).
4. A Yup'ik Developmental Writing Assessment guide is used to assist teachers in following the growth of children's written Yup'ik.

5. A writing curriculum has been developed to guide teachers through the instructional stages of teaching writing in phases one-seven (grades K-3).
6. A Yup'ik math program parallels the standards required in an English math program, preparing students to meet the state Grade Level Expectations.
7. An English Language Development program provides oral language development so that students can more easily transfer into an English curriculum by grade four.
8. The Upingaurluta Curriculum prepares children in science and social studies at the primary level, and provides teachers with a daily, weekly curriculum in Yup'ik for implementation.
9. Standards for the Yup'ik program are high. The schools that meet AYP with Yup'ik instruction at the primary level have strong academic programs with students meeting academic proficiency in Yup'ik reading, writing, and math prior to the same expectation in English.

Recommendations

Challenges remain, probably the most significant one being the need for respecting those who want to maintain their language and culture, and want to involve the schools in the process. Hopefully those not affected personally by languages other than their own or by language programs will not be threatened or fearful of their existence, and will be open to the fact that additive programs have existed and do exist in harmony with monolingual speakers and programs around the world. Languages can allow people to express themselves more freely and honestly. Language programs need not be divisive, but instead, inclusive.

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Reference

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