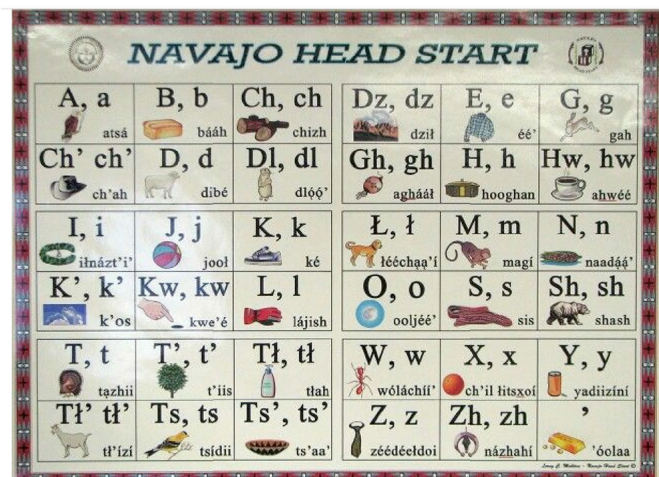


Learning the heritage language

Written by By Anna Redsand Guest Columnist
Friday, 04 February 2022 05:34



Zoom conference to teach Diné language started Jan. 21

The Diné language has been heard and spoken in classrooms across the Navajo Nation since 1968, when the Bilingual Education Act was passed. Since the 1970s, the Navajo nonprofit organization, Diné Language Teachers Association has been on the scene supporting teachers with innovative ideas and training. However, despite the fact that Diné is being taught in schools, the number of fluent speakers is rapidly declining. Since 1980, the percentage of fluent Navajo speakers has dropped from 93 percent to an alarming 57 percent in 2017, according to an article in the “Navajo Times.”

And the rate of decline has increased, so it is estimated that by 2030, only 10 percent of the tribe, its oldest members, will be able to speak the language.

Clearly, teaching the Diné language in schools, while it is vitally important for several reasons, is

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not enough to keep the language alive. At this stage, Diné is not being spoken on a regular basis in most Navajo homes, which is where fluency in a language most naturally develops. One reason for this is that many young parents, and even some grandparents, are not themselves able to speak the language.

When the W. K. Kellogg Foundation awarded DLTA a small grant in 2020, it was obvious from this evidence and from a survey among the organization's long-time conference attendees, that something more and different needed to take place. The DLTA team researched various approaches to reviving languages that are disappearing, especially among Indigenous peoples. They settled on the mentor-apprentice approach, in which the mentor is a fluent speaker of the language, and the apprentice is an Indigenous person who knows none or very little of their heritage language. During the summer and fall of 2021, the DLTA team pilot tested and refined the use of this approach with two groups—a pair and a family group.

In a nutshell, the mentor-apprentice team meets frequently and regularly (in this case a minimum of five hours a week) with a goal of speaking only Diné, after learning a few “survival” phrases.

The apprentice is responsible for determining what she or he wants to learn and for making sure they use only Diné. The only qualification for the mentor is that they be a fluent speaker, although also being an experienced educator can be an asset. Sessions can be held anywhere and during any activity—at home, at the laundromat, in the car, on a hike.

This mimics the way we learn our first language by being immersed in it in all kinds of activities. This way of learning a language is natural and communicative, rather than formal, as is often the case in a classroom. Each mentor-apprentice team was supported by a coach, who was an experienced educator and also fluent in the language.

The DLTA team learned a lot from the pilot test about what really works, the pitfalls and obstacles—some being scheduled around people's everyday commitments; unexpected events, such as an illness; and, as always, being surrounded all the time by English. Something unexpected and exciting happened in the team that was a pair. As they practiced (over Zoom, incidentally), other family members got interested and engaged—partners, siblings, and young children. The natural home setting, lent itself to spreading the language even more than anticipated.

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Now the apprentice's toddler daughter calls the mentor, Shimásání, instead of Grandma. The apprentice's stepsister chimes in with advice in Diné that maybe no one knew she knew! This is what the DLTA team hoped would happen, but it was still a surprise.

The goal now is to get others to form mentor-apprentice teams. DLTA has hosted an annual fall conference for the past eight years, except for 2020, due to the pandemic. Attendees have included Diné language teachers, school administrators, parents, school support staff, and some teachers of other subjects. This year, again due to the pandemic, the conference will consist of a series of Zoom sessions.

The first, scheduled for Jan. 21, was designed to present an overview of the pilot project and mentor-apprentice approach. It is designed to inspire at least 10 more teams to engage as mentor-apprentice teams. This will be followed by two practical training intensives, also on Zoom.

The training will be based on the detailed handbook, "Implementing a Diné Mentor-Apprentice Program or Family Mentor-Apprentice Program," developed by the DLTA team during the pilot project. Participants will receive the handbook and will be eligible for stipends based on their hours of work.

DLTA's great hope is that the mentor-apprentice approach will multiply exponentially—that the two pilot teams will become twelve teams—that each of the twelve teams starts another team, and another, and another. The ultimate goal is for every member of the Navajo Nation to once again be fluent in their heritage language.

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