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Language for tomorrow: teaching and innovation for language revitalization and maintenance

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Globalization impacts upon the quality of life of indigenous populations (Pietikäinen 2010). Research has shown that suicide, addiction, and domestic violence are higher, and health and education levels are lower among indigenous populations. For example, Hallett et al. (2007) found that for Canadian aboriginals in British Columbia a conversational knowledge of the indigenous language was linked to a six-fold decrease in suicide rate. In comparison to indigenous people in North America and Greenland, as Hassler (2005) pointed out, the overall health situation of the Scandinavian indigenous population, the Saami, is good. However, the Saami in both Sweden and Norway have been heavily pressured to assimilate with Swedish and Norwegian majority populations, which has not only contributed to a loss of ethnic identity, language competency, culture and religion, but also to disadvantages in socio-economic status, discrimination and prejudice (Kvernmo, 2004; Spein, 2008; Hirvonen, 2008). The favoring of assimilation was found by Spein et al. (2007) to be associated with higher levels of substance abuse. Yet, a strong ethnic identity and an environment supportive of that identity (including Saami institutions for education) were found to correlate with lower levels of substance abuse. In a comparative Norwegian study, Hansen et al. (2010) found that Saami respondents with the highest education and household income report better health than respondents with lower education and household income.

In spite of language being an important and core component of the ethnic identity of indigenous people (Phinney, 1990), it is often difficult to lay the foundations for the acquisition of the indigenous language. This is particularly the situation when the language is being revitalized. Since the revitalization of indigenous languages interacts with quality of life and is a driving force in the maintenance of a strong and vital indigenous culture, we expect the introduction of teaching and learning innovations using new technology to support language revitalization will have a positive impact upon the indigenous society.
Language revitalization and maintenance are recognized by international bodies: the UN, the Council of Europe and the EU have stated their support for indigenous languages, and support the development of plurilingualism. However, actions supporting revitalization and maintenance of indigenous languages have lagged behind policy and been criticized. Language revitalization is a complex matter that involves several components. Policies, attitudes in the majority, and benevolent legislation are prerequisites, yet not, per se, sufficient. For instance, while the Saami languages in Sweden have strong legal protection, as national minority languages, it is questionable whether this status extends to policies regulating the educational system.

In Sweden, in 1999 the law (SFS 1999:1175) only afforded the rights for Saami speakers to use their indigenous languages in dealing with the authorities and the law courts. This law however did not apply in areas where South Saami is spoken; the area covered by the law related only to regions where North Saami is spoken. It was not until the 2009 Language Law (SFS 2009:600) and the 2009 National Minorities and Minority Language Law (SFS 2009:724) had both come into force on Jan 1. 2010, that the area in which the Saami languages could be used in communication with the authorities and the right to schooling in Saami was extended. Coupling this with the national responsibility to protect and promote the national minority languages (SFS 2009:600 8§) with the right for those who belong to a national minority to be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use their minority language (SFS 2009:600 14§), the position of South Saami has legally shifted dramatically. However, a change in the legal context does not per se create a change in the language situation, improve the self-perception, or produce culturally relevant language teaching materials. Today, the language shift continues for South Saami, whereas it “has been stopped and partly reversed” (Huss, 2008) for the North Saami living in the Norwegian Sami core area. It is probable that the South Saami language would have been left to a slow death if it were not for the emergence of a grass root revitalization movement.

Currently, the primary setting for first language acquisition of South Saami is the home environment. The intergenerational transfer of South Saami in this context is problematic since parents can have limited or no knowledge of the language (Rasmussen & Shaun Nolan, 2011; Scheller & Vinka, in press 2013). This situation has partly arisen due to national policy relating to Saami language educational provision; the Saami languages became a component in the Saami Schools¹ in both Sweden and Norway in the 1960s. However, only children who spoke Saami were entitled to

¹ The Saami School is a school form directed at Saami children living in certain Saami core areas in Sweden. The Saami School has more emphasis on Saami culture and, to varying extents, languages than other schools in Sweden. In all other respects, the Saami School is subject to the same requirements as other schools in Sweden (www.skolverket.se). There are five such schools (www.sameskolstyrelsen.se), but none in the core areas where South Saami is spoken.
instruction, and because of matters of stigmatization, many opted not to participate. Recently, a study by the Saami Parliament (Sametinget, 2011) reported that currently psychological barriers to learning and using the language that stem from a long period of assimilation, discrimination and stigmatization are the most significant challenges to creating a stronger engagement with the language (see also Solstad, 2012).

In spite of the 1960s and later changes in policy regarding the provision of the teaching of the Saami languages, there is scarcity of South Saami language teachers that means that many areas cannot offer South Saami as part of the school curriculum. There has been little effort by national and local politicians to create a long-term policy that would result in schools being able to fulfill their legal requirement to provide teaching of South Saami with trained teachers who are (near-) native speaker of the language (Council of Europe, 2009; UN Human Rights Council, 2011:18). The result of this is that young language learners of South Saami are difficult to support in pre- and primary school settings. This is particularly an issue in settings where the child is isolated from other young speakers and learners of the language, and where the child’s parents/guardians do not speak or use the language at home.

Current praxis for Saami speaking and learning children in Sweden, both Saami and non-Saami, who do not attend the Saami School is to receive 45 minutes language teaching per week. This is the same amount of teaching per week as mother-language students who use, for example English, German, or Russian at home with at least one parent. Svonni (1992, 2008) in a study of North Saami children found that 45 minutes per week is far from sufficient to achieve proficiency.

The core innovation for indigenous language revitalization and maintenance is an innovative iPad package for use in pre- and primary school, and the home setting. The iPad, or similar tablet, facilitates formal and informal learning. Jahnke and Koch (2009) showed that one way to support informal learning is the implementation of social media and Web 2.0 applications and that the use of iPads results in new opportunities for learning. Janke et al. (2012) describe how an “omnipresent online presence” is affecting formal schooling in a way that is different to the laptop age. These affordances are the ones that lie at the center of the creation of a virtual kindergarten and primary school for South Saami children that most importantly facilitates the teaching and learning of South Saami in areas with no or infrequent provision. These virtual schools overcome the geographical distance between the young language learners caused by the disparateness of the South Saami population, and will ultimately facilitate at least one hour of language teaching per day which we expect will result in better proficiency that that found in North Saami by Svonni (1992, 2008). As it is a well-documented that successful revitalization involves actions starting in kindergarten, continuing throughout formal education (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006), this project starts with small children who
are easily able to carry around an iPad, or similar tablet. This facilitates active learning and interaction with the environment rather than passive learning in front of a stationary computer or laptop. For example kindergarten children are able to use the iPad to videoconference and have, for example, collaborative play, show and tell, cross-country classroom experiences and “engage in conversation with those outside of the physical classroom” (Puerling, 2012).

As both school and home have a central important role in literacy development, the methodology supports teacher, parent and child indigenous language use and learning in formal and informal settings. In this way, we overcome the tendency among individuals to pass on the responsibility for language revitalization to educational institutions by creating a strong engagement at the individual level. While expectations to learn the language are high, the younger generations often feel restricted by their own ‘insufficient’ knowledge and are often intimidated by criticism from older generations of fluent speakers and therefore choose to refrain from using the language (Rasmussen & Shaun Nolan, 2011). For these reasons it is paramount that revitalization is supported from as young an age as possible, e.g. kindergarten. The success of the most well-known and successful South Saami revitalization project, which was carried out at the bilingual pre- and primary school in the Norwegian hamlet of Elgå (Todal, 2007), has been attributed to the strong support it received from the local community, the children, the parents and the grandparents.

Initial experiences will be presented and discussed in relation to how the linguistic and educational outcomes of the investigation are applicable (a) for the creation of policy for and the teaching of other indigenous and minority language speaking groups, (b) for the supporting of home language teaching, and (c) for the maintenance of the languages of new migrants away from areas where their language is widely used.

References


