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11/4/15



Importance of Language: Grassroots Efforts to Revitalize the Diné Language

Students in Valencia Edgewater's Navajo literacy class taste the words as they form on their tongues.

Mimicking their teacher's facial expressions, students form wide circles with their lips for the "a" sound or grit their teeth for the "i." The sounds change slightly as Edgewater adds diacritical marks: the high tones, hooks or glottal stops that signal rising accents, nasal overtones or other variations.

"Everyone knows language is important," Edgewater said during a break from a recent class in Piñon, Arizona. "We talk about it all the time, but we're not doing much about it."

Edgewater, a graduate student in the Diné Dual Language Teachers Professional Development Project at Northern Arizona University, teaches a variety of classes at the community level. Courses include youth immersion, language acquisition,

teaching strategies for parents, and literacy for speakers.



Students of all walks of life gather in classrooms, chapter houses and community spaces to take their language skills to the next level. It's all part of a community-based, grassroots effort to reclaim and revitalize the Navajo, or Diné, language.

"Everyone has different levels of knowledge and fluency," Edgewater said. "Some people use the language just for conversation. Others understand the root of it all."

Edgewater is a program coordinator for the Piñon Unified School District, a small, rural district on the Navajo Nation in

reservation were sent to boarding schools where they were punished for speaking Navajo.

Even now, the language is fodder for political debate. During last year's presidential election, one candidate was disqualified over allegations that he didn't speak fluent Navajo, a requirement for the tribe's top two elected officials. In a special referendum vote in July, the Navajo people amended the election code to allow voters to determine fluency.

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The debate raised questions about the future of the language and its value among the younger generation. It also reflected deep—and perhaps irreversible—changes in the culture.

Edgewater's classes come in the aftermath of the language debate and as similar classes are cropping up across the 27,000-square-mile reservation. Yet Edgewater believes language is something that should not be debated at all.

Her approach to teaching comes from [Darrel Kipp](#), a language activist and member of the Blackfeet Nation. Kipp, co-founder of the [Piegan Institute](#) of the Blackfeet Nation, advised language instructors to “never ask permission, never beg to save a language” and to “never, never debate the issues.”

“If people want to learn the language, they will come,” Edgewater said. “When they have that hunger, they will seek it out.”

Edgewater teaches all her classes with a “Navajo perspective.” That means she helps students change the way they think as they learn to speak, read and write the language. For example, when she teaches terms for body parts, she starts at the feet and works upward, mimicking the growth of a corn plant.

“It's not just learning to speak, but also to connect that to our way of thinking,” she said. “We cannot separate language and culture.”

For Phyllis Gene, a mother of four from Low Mountain, Arizona, the literacy class provides a way for her to connect not only to culture, but also to her children. Gene speaks fluent Navajo, but never learned to read or write in her Native language. Her youngest son, a second-grader, is enrolled in a Navajo immersion program at school where, Gene said, he is outpacing her.

“He's becoming more fluent than I am,” Gene said of her son. “I'm taking this class to keep up with him.”

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Source URL: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/11/04/importance-language-grassroots-efforts-revitalize-dine-language-162117>