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The Evolution of Bilingual Education in an American Indian Community: A Decade of Evaluation as Applied Anthropology

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Abstract. Applied anthropology has much to offer the educational evaluator role, especially in cross-cultural settings concerning language and bilingual education programs. This study examines the evolution of an elementary school Indian language and bilingual education program in a small, northern plains American Indian reservation community, the use of anthropological research methods, and the role of the external evaluator. Findings suggest that evaluation and change recommendations are more likely to be accepted when they are derived from the participants in the program rather than from an external evaluator.

For well over a half century, some anthropologists have engaged in practical applications of principles which have emerged from the discipline. Foster (1969:57) has defined applied anthropology "as a functional relationship between an anthropologist and an organization engaged in directed cultural change." Opportunities to employ applied anthropology in educational change settings have increased considerably in the past two decades. Chambers (1985:127) has underscored the contributions made by applied anthropologists to educational curriculum development, "most particularly to those related to problems in bilingual education." The need for the evaluation of bilingual education programs has also afforded educational anthropologists to practice applied anthropology.

The purpose of this article is to trace the evolution of an elementary school Indian language and bilingual education program from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s in a small, northern plains American Indian reservation community. I will also examine the use of anthropological research methodology in my role as the external evaluator. My background in both anthropology and education enabled me to conduct the evaluation research with access to an ample repertoire of resources. At times, however, the dual background created unresolvable paradoxes.
Anthropologists generally employ ethnographic research techniques which fall into a larger class of techniques labeled qualitative research. Most of this type of qualitative inquiry is inductive in nature rather than deductive. The inductive approach is strengthened by an emphasis on the "emic," or insiders' perspectives, in which, according to Bee (1974:18), "the subjects' own perceptions, motivations, and so forth become the basis for analytical conclusions." By contrast, the outsider's or researcher's perspective is referred to as the "etic."

Anthropologists primarily utilize participant-observation and interview techniques for collecting data which lead to description of a cultural domain, answering the broad question, "What is going on here?" (Wolcott 1994:12). The orientation of analysis is to identify the salient features and how these relate to each other, "in short, how things work." Wolcott also suggests that in evaluation analysis that the researcher may address the question "how it might be made to work 'better'." Finally in the interpretation stage, the researcher addresses meanings: the question "what is to be made of it all" (Wolcott 1994:12). With a slight variation, Patton (1990) counters description with a combined analysis and interpretation activity. This type of research approach is especially well-suited to the "study of classroom dynamics in bilingual situations" (Mehan 1981:46). Linguist Hymes (1981:68) promotes the use of this approach "to document and interpret the social meaning of success and failure in bilingual education."

In terms of evaluation research, this study comprised both formative and summative elements (see Weismantel and Fradd 1989). It is formative in that the study focused on a limited time period in each of the three distinct stages. It is summative in that all three stages were re-analyzed and re-interpreted together as a long-term whole. At times collaboration with members of the language and bilingual education programs in the evaluation process was necessary and beneficial. Weismantel and Fradd (1989:150) stress that "effective evaluation depends on the collaborative efforts of school personnel from the collection of data to the discussion of information revealed by the evaluation." Saravia-Shore (1992:285) promotes the term "participant evaluation, which acknowledges the importance of the program participants as evaluators." The role of the evaluator then becomes more of a research manager rather than an external expert.
Bilingual Education in an American Indian Community

The Community and School

Blue Plume, a community of about 200, is located on a reservation on the northern plains. It is situated in one of several districts on the reservation associated with one of the tribes residing there. People from the other tribes also live in this district for employment purposes and because of intermarriage among the groups. The combined elementary and high school in Blue Plume serves 130 students on average. The student population reflects the community and surrounding area population except for the Euro-American residents, most of whom removed their children from the school when the school board composition became Indian in the early 1970s. Because unemployment throughout the reservation is high, the schools in most of the communities serve as primary employers.

During this evaluation research period, the superintendent was a non-Indian. The elected school board members, the school custodial and food service staff, teacher aides, and most of the elementary teachers were Indian, primarily affiliated with the dominant tribe of the Blue Plume area. The high school teachers, then and now, are mostly non-Indian. This difference between the numbers of Indian elementary and secondary teachers is due mainly to the several federally funded elementary teacher education programs for Indians in the state during the 1970s. The Bureau of Indian Affairs directed the school during the evaluation decade. Only recently has the school become tribally controlled.

The Evolution of the Language and Bilingual Programs

The evolution of the Blue Plume language programs in the elementary school was very complex, but for ease of reference I will refer to them in three phases: Phase I Indian Language Renewal (mid–late 1970s), Phase II Bilingual-Indian and Standard English (early 1980s), and Phase III Bilingual-Standard English (mid 1980s). The funding sources for each of these phases changed the emphasis, the direction, and composition of the school’s language education. Phase I was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Education. Funding for Phase II and Phase III was provided by the U.S. Office of Education, Title VII Bilingual Education. Due partially to the political change to a Republican administration, the shift to de-emphasize the Indian language brought about a distinction between Phases II and III.
The goals and philosophies evolved almost in a unilinear fashion throughout this decade (mid 1970s to mid 1980s). Clearly, the goal of Phase I Indian Language Renewal was to breathe new life into a community’s Indian language, which was threatening to become extinct. Few, if any, of the school children were learning more than a word or two in the traditional Blue Plume language. Their parents and most of those who were middle-aged understood some of the Indian language when it was spoken to them, but did not speak or read it. Most of the elders could and did speak and read the Indian language, but had made little attempt to consciously pass it on to the younger generations. This was due, in part, to years of Bureau of Indian Affairs regulations in the boarding schools forbidding the use of any language except English. Although there was general support for this goal of language renewal, there was also confusion among the adults. One elder asked, “Why are they teaching this to our kids now, when we were punished for talking Indian when we were in school?”

The teaching of the Indian language during Phase II as a shared goal with that of English was sustained by the general aims of Indian Self-Determination. The underlying rationale for continuing to teach the Indian language as part of bilingual education was that students would more easily learn standard English by learning the structure of both languages. There was never any attempt to research or to recognize the dialect English which was and still is the actual language that the children and most adults know and use. In effect, neither of the two languages, Indian and standard English, taught in the bilingual education program are commonly used in Blue Plume. The goal during Phase III stressed the learning of standard English with little effort toward teaching the Indian language. This may have resulted, in part, from a Reagan Administration interpretation of Self-Determination as a return to a policy of assimilation into the American mainstream. While the Indian language was gradually de-emphasized during Phases II and III, an advocacy for traditional and contemporary Indian culture replaced the Indian language goal.

Language staff changes occurred throughout the three phases. The part-time director and researcher of the Indian language program in Phase I was an anthropological linguist and a non-Indian fluent in the Blue Plume language. His role in the program extended into Phase II but as the Indian language decreased in importance, his role had disappeared by Phase III. Originally, those employed in the school were a semi-fluent Indian language certified teacher, a fluent elder, and a language program aide who was in the process of learning the Indian language in a college class. During Phase II, the
certified teacher who was semi-fluent was retired. The part-time director/linguist was less involved, having been partly replaced by a non-Indian curriculum specialist with training in both linguistics and education but unfamiliar with the Indian language. By Phase III he had become the program director. Before the end of Phase III, the aide who had become more proficient in the Indian language left the school to pursue a college degree. By then, a fluent Indian elder only occasionally came to school to provide instruction in the Indian language. Classroom teachers who had become more involved in the program felt inadequate to teach the Indian language and felt saddened that their students missed this instruction. Many students also expressed disappointment that they were no longer learning the Indian language. However, one teacher indicated, “I don’t miss it because I was overloaded anyway.”

Curricular and instructional changes occurred in the language programs as well. In Phase I, curriculum materials consisted of a comprehensive, expert-developed manual for teaching the Indian language with several published books and booklets of traditional stories in the Indian language and in English for the students. Some elders had been concerned that these stories had taboos associated with them, but most considered that these were “modern times” and that having them published negated the taboos anyway. These were used by the certified teacher, the elder, and the aide visiting regular classrooms for 15 minutes of instruction per day. For the most part, the classroom teachers were minimally involved in the Indian language program. Some teachers at that time said that they would try to reinforce a word or two of the Indian language in their regular classroom activities “now and then.” The published student materials were still being used in Phase II, but the aide and the curriculum specialist were developing material for specific classrooms which included worksheets and picture and language cards. They were also creating resource collections to be used by classroom teachers in developing units for their own classrooms. Instructional time devoted to the Indian language had evolved into segments by grade level: 15 minutes per day for K–3, 20 minutes for three days per week for 4th grade, and one-half hour for two to three days per week for the 5th and 6th grades. Curriculum development and instruction in Phase III emphasized several areas. Classroom teachers were engaged in developing whole language (see Goodman 1986) curricular materials and teaching strategies in standard English. The bilingual staff concentrated on actively involving students in traditional and contemporary Indian cultural activities. These included having the students produce yearly calendars with Blue Plume Indian cultural content, producing a periodic
newsletter, and having an elder supervise students in traditional buffalo butchering and pemmican-making. Many of the activities centered on computer usage by staff, teachers, and students. An extensive Indian language dictionary by the original director/linguist was published during this phase, but Indian language instruction was so diminished by then that its impact was negligible.

The Evaluator's Role

From the beginning, I viewed my evaluator role within an applied anthropological framework. I had conducted previous evaluation projects in a similar manner and was influenced by the applied anthropological literature of the period, especially Foster (1969) and Bee (1974). Within the context of evaluation, I sought to elicit from the participants their own "emic" evaluation of the program changes and their suggestions for improvement. I met periodically throughout the three phases with the bilingual staff, teachers, administrators, and school board members to report the formative findings of the evaluation study and to hear their responses. While I accomplished this throughout the decade, my added background in education occasionally compelled me to insert "etic" evaluation and recommendations.

I employed anthropological field methodology (ethnographic techniques) to the extent that I was able. Total immersion in the Blue Plume community culture was not possible because of my part-time obligations to the university during Phase I, but I did become a participant-observer in many facets of the community and school. I was able to observe in all of the Blue Plume elementary classrooms for many days during periodic visits. I was also an occasional participant in the language program teacher training workshops and in the college credit course in the Indian language taught by the original linguist. I accompanied the staff, students, and teachers on Indian cultural-related field trips, attended powwows and other community gatherings such as funerals, and spent time in community members' homes. When Phase II began the early 1980s, I had been hired full-time at the university which limited my availability for participation to a greater degree. In Phase I, I had spent more time observing and interviewing in the broader community of Blue Plume. By the end of Phase III, I was spending much more time with the language staff and the classroom teachers than with any others. In other words, my research focus narrowed gradually from the wider cultural context to the specific context of the school. There was also a shift from an emphasis on observation to one using key informant interviewing as a primary source
of data collection. LeCompte and Goetz (1984:44) have suggested that key informants be “chosen because they have access—in time, space, or perspective—to observations denied the ethnographer [researcher].”

During Phase I, my orientation remained somewhat neutral and objective. I did not feel that I had a vested interest in the program although I personally favored an attempt to renew the Indian language in the school. In Phase II, I became actively involved in the changes occurring with the bilingual program. The relationship between myself as evaluator and the bilingual staff and teachers became increasingly collaborative. Based upon suggestions from the language staff and classroom teachers and on a few of my own perceptions of what a good bilingual program should deliver, I designed and organized two semester-long graduate courses for the Blue Plume staff and teachers. Components of the courses which had teacher ownership included Whole Language Learning, Computer-assisted Math, Culturally-based Science, and Parent Involvement. My university colleagues agreed to teach these components as workshops in the Blue Plume school during Friday evenings and Saturdays. I interjected a Multicultural component and devised a modest plan for Blue Plume teachers to involve their students in a language and cultural exchange with Indian students in a southern plains community comprised of people who were linguistically and culturally related to the people of Blue Plume. I had even found a teacher contact in the southern plains community school with whom they could arrange the exchange. I encouraged the staff and teachers to move beyond a bilingual/bicultural perspective to a multicultural one. This included not only learning more about other tribes in the area but also about their Euro-American neighbors and then extending that learning to a national and international arena. Those course components which addressed the staff’s and teachers’ stated needs were implemented with some ease. My own agenda was nearly rejected out-of-hand. Some multicultural activity was developed, but the language and cultural exchange with the southern plains community idea apparently died before the workshop was over. Later one teacher did have her students briefly correspond with a student in Germany. By Phase III, I had become close friends with the bilingual staff and at least one of the teachers. I had also been around long enough to alienate an administrator and a couple of school board members, a situation for which I cannot account through the research. In fact, I had seemingly so alienated the administrator that in the final year of evaluation, he contracted with a full-time professional bilingual evaluator to write the final evaluation report at six times more money than what I had been offered by the program director who had left by then.
Recommendations were included in the reports that I wrote near the end of each of three phases. The recommendations in Phase I addressed the language staff activities. The basis of most of these was from the "emic" perspectives, and nearly all were acted upon to some extent. The major exception was the recommendation to extend the Indian language classes into the secondary level which was never accomplished during this particular decade. The majority of recommendations in Phase II included the "emic" perspectives of the classroom teachers as well as the bilingual staff. Curricular and instructional recommendations of an "emic" nature were well received. I could not resist making a recommendation based upon my own "etic" ideas concerning extracurricular activities which could reinforce the Indian language learning in a natural language setting (see Little Soldier 1989) as opposed to the more artificial classroom experiences. For example, in 1984, I suggested the following:

Teachers and other school personnel should be encouraged to learn specific [Indian language] phrases for giving students directions, greetings, comments, or announcements. This behavior would reinforce for the students the importance of the [Indian language] as well as standard English in situations other than direct instruction. The school name might be translated and written in the [Indian language] with some consistency to include its use on school stationery, posters regarding extra-curricular events, bulletin boards, or student t-shirts. School lunch menus could be presented in the [Indian language] and English. (Ahler 1984:9)

By the end of the evaluation decade, none of these suggestions had been realized. In my final report for Phase III in 1987, I had learned the lesson of the futility of "etic" recommendations and presented only those which reflected an "emic" perspective. I should have lent more credence to Foster's (1969:6–7) admonitions about the tendency of professional planners to define change within their narrow professional contexts and the probability of cultural resistance to or rejection of those changes.

**Conclusion**

The Indian language and bilingual programs at Blue Plume evolved into both successes and shortcomings. The integration of a whole language approach into the core curriculum has enhanced the learning of standard
English. The bilingual staff, teacher, and student involvement in developing and implementing Indian cultural curricular materials and activities has promoted community relevance in the school curriculum. Teachers in the school who had been earlier considered average have since won a state teaching award, a national award for classroom computer use, and regional recognition for whole language implementation.

As for the shortcomings, it is conceded by both the school and by outsiders that the aim for Indian language renewal has not been achieved. Referring to Indian groups who support language renewal, St. Clair (1982:16) has asserted:

The challenges that they face are great. Language renewal can succeed when a nation is free and independent; however, under the guise of internal colonialism and the multifaceted networks of control and dependency that were initiated and maintained by federal interests, the promise of language renewal appears to be fighting against some very heavy odds.

Leap (1991) has identified at least nine barriers to Indian language literacy; and Bernard (1992:83) is of the opinion that “without popular literacy, all but a few native languages will soon disappear.” It is my own evaluation that failing to recognize the importance of the local English dialect and to incorporate its study into the curriculum remains a barrier to total whole language development in the school. Leap (1982:150) has noted that dialect or “Indian English has now become the first language and may remain the only language acquired by its speakers, particularly among the younger members of the reservation community.” Bilingual programs at Blue Plume continue to evolve today so there can be no final evaluative conclusion.

I learned several valuable lessons about the evaluator’s role within an applied anthropological framework. The “etic” (outsider) intrusion into assessment and recommendations proved to be mostly ineffective. Overall, suggestions for improving the language and bilingual programs which were derived from the “emic” (insider) perspective of the staff and teachers were more nearly achieved while those that were solely my own were largely ignored. This accentuates the need to acknowledge the importance of “ownership” among participants in a change setting. Johannsen (1992:74), in discussing the applied anthropological role vis-à-vis post-modernism, has proposed going beyond traditional behavior to “assist people by helping to provide them with the means for producing and communicating their own
self-representations.” Collaboration between an evaluator and the program participants can only lead to a greater understanding of the change setting. Without the continued input of the language and bilingual staff and teachers, I could not have become an active learner as an applied anthropologist and evaluator.

Notes

1. The use of the term “Indian” is acceptable in this reservation community. Anonymity was assured for any publication purpose.

2. Blue Plume is a pseudonym.

References


