



Language learning tailored to endangered language communities

An example from WAYK & Aleut

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How can a learning methodology address the challenges unique to learning an endangered language?

Challenges in endangered language pedagogy

SPEAKERS few speakers, no speakers, aging speakers, no speakers who can teach, diasporic speaker populations, no space for immersion

RESOURCES no documentation, no teaching materials, no media in the language, no resources to produce new materials, no location for language learning

COMMUNITY stigma, devaluation of culture, fractured community relations, social problems, generational trauma, diaspora, low sense of efficacy, poverty

...etc.



CENTRAL
SIBERIAN
YUPIK

SIRENIK

NAUKAN
YUPIK

INUPIAQ

YUP'IK

ALUTIQ

UNANGAM TUNUU (ALEUT)

INUVIAALUKTUN

INUKTITUT

KALAALLISUT

Timeline of contact and endangerment

Russian period (1760s-1867)

- 75-90% population decline over 50 years
- Most dialects go extinct
- Relocation
- Most Aleuts bilingual in Russian and Aleut; monolingual Aleuts still exist

American period (1867-present)

- Boarding school system
- WWII upheaval and displacement

Current situation

- Two surviving dialects
- Diasporic population
- In a 2018 estimate, fewer than 100 speakers were counted (of both Eastern and Western dialects)

Resulting challenges in learning Aleut

- No place for immersion
 - Few speakers; all over 60
 - Diasporic population (of both speakers and potential learners)
- Lack of educational resources
 - No speakers are formally trained teachers
 - No dedicated classroom space
 - Few (effective, accessible) learning materials
 - No curriculum
- Mentality: general desire to learn Aleut, BUT...
 - Potential learners (youth): monolingual, Aleut looks prohibitively difficult, intimidated by elders (speakers), often low sense of efficacy
 - Speakers: experience attrition, feel insecure about their language skills, are English-dominant
- Broken community
 - General lack of resources, social problems, diaspora, etc.

Timeline of revitalization activity



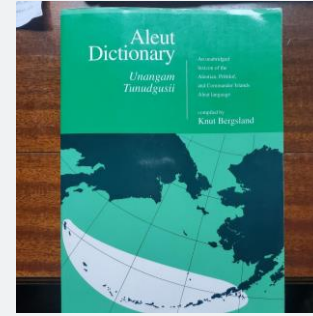
1800s: first documentation, development of a written language, Aleut education



1910s-20s: ethnographer Waldemaar Jochelson records narratives and does some documentation work



1970s: Bilingual Education Department of Alaska develops elementary Aleut readers



1990s: Knut Bergsland publishes the *Aleut Dictionary* (1994) and *Aleut Grammar* (1997)



2000s: Some language classes, educational materials produced

(Bergsland 1994)

Where Are Your Keys (WAYK)

- Language revitalization organization primarily operating in the Pacific Northwest
- Brought to Atka Island in 2016
- Expanded to teams in St. Paul and Anchorage
- An ongoing project




part of the WAYK team, including Evan Gardner,
founder/inventor of WAYK method

"You can play the game anywhere, anytime, with anyone, as long as you have a single fluent speaker of the target language, *preferably with no conventional teaching experience.*"

(Gardner 2009, "Where Are Your Keys?")



WAYK strategy to solve these problems

- Youth trained to do monolingual elicitation through a game called “language hunting”
 - Miniature immersion space; no comparison with English
 - Speakers no longer have to be teachers, and no textbook/materials necessary
 - Youth are the initiators and motivators of the learning process and decide what they want to learn to say
 - Gamification of language learning makes it accessible and fun
 - Youth record sessions, which become language lessons
 - Simultaneous language learning and curriculum building
 - Learners write the lessons and can subsequently teach them to new learners
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- Community-building
 - Reconnecting elders and creating a space for conversational Aleut
 - Teaching leadership skills to youth
 - Connecting the old and the young

Language “hunting”: *How to maintain a monolingual environment?*

- Learner select a “bite-sized” piece of language to target
 - E.g.: deictic terms, colors, adpositions, past tense
- Learner constructs context to elicit the target language (the “set-up”)
 - Using: props, acting, known language
 - E.g.: see pictures
- During the elicitation session, learner works to establish a short, repetitive dialogue with which to practice the target language
 - E.g.:
 - A: What color is this fork?
 - B: This is fork is red.
 - A: Is this fork red?
 - B: Yes, this fork is red.
 - A: Is this fork blue?
 - B: No, this fork is not blue. This fork is red.



set-up for colors



set-up for plurals

Language lesson “scribing”

-gi-

new vocabulary
(organized in
paradigms)

set-up

dialogue

3)

List 1

alugiisa
alugisaku
alugisaka

List 2

alugisagil
alugisagiku
alugisagilaka

List 3

alugilux
karandaasi

List 4

suxtal

An “A” is written in pen on one piece of paper, and in pencil on another piece of paper.

A: Wan tunux alqux suxtal alugisagil?

B: Wan tunux alugilux suxtal alugisagiku.
Ta: mmsy

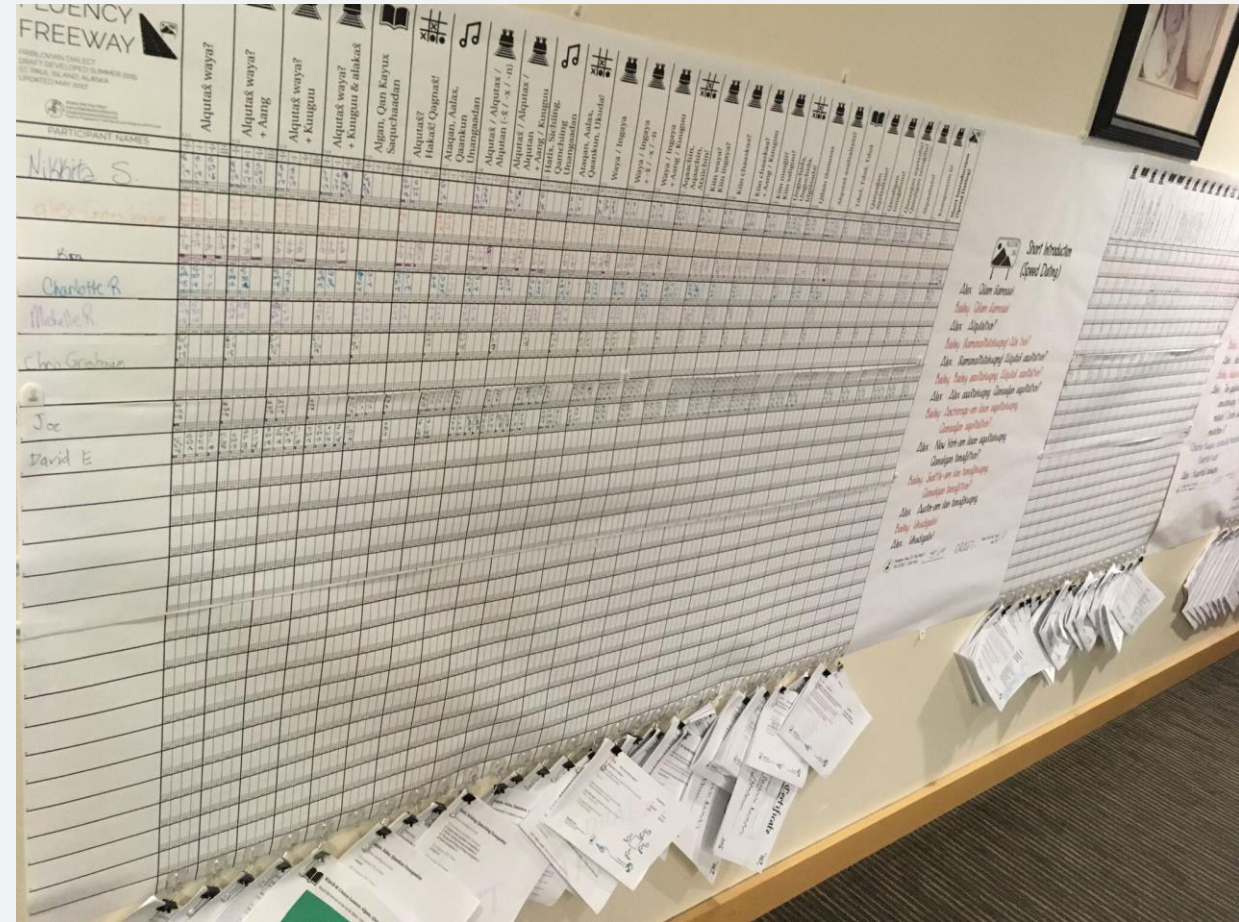
A: Wan tunux alugilux suxtal alugisagil ii?

B: Aang, tunux alugilux suxtal alugisagiku.
Ta: mmsy

A: Wan tunux karandaasi suxtal alugisagil ii?

B: Nangaa, wan tunux karandaasi suxtal alugisagilaka. Wan tunux alugilux suxtal alugisagiku.

Curriculum-building on the “fluency freeway”



Comparison to past revitalization methods

- Does not require significant resources
 - No teachers, no formal classrooms, no textbooks
 - Use of everyday items and acting to create “set-ups”
- Mentality
 - No prescriptivism; speaker knowledge not compared to prescriptivist resources or to English
 - Language learning is made fun and accessible
- Community building built-in
 - Elders and youth come together to interact
 - Elders have a monolingual Aleut space
 - Youth acquire skills and practice leadership by driving the learning forward

Txichix
qag̃aasakuq!

