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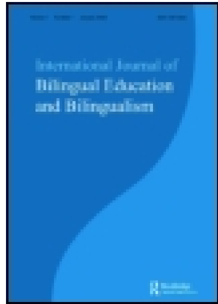

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The Latent Speaker: Attaining Adult Fluency in an Endangered Language

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
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The Latent Speaker: Attaining Adult Fluency in an Endangered Language

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This paper focuses on how latent knowledge of an ancestral or heritage language affects subsequent acquisition by adults. The 'latent speaker' is defined as an individual raised in an environment where the ancestral language was spoken but who did not become a speaker of that language. The study examines how attitudes, latent knowledge and learning settings affect the subsequent acquisition process of latent speakers of Alaskan Athabascan languages. The first phase of the study focuses on two successful adult learners and their progress towards developing fluency. The second phase includes an analysis of the backgrounds, attitudes and language proficiency of 15 beginning adult heritage language learners. The results suggest that latent speakers have a number of characteristics distinguishing them from other language learners which may both aid and inhibit language learning. Their receptive skills surpass productive skills, they remember common expressions and emotion-laden vocabulary and their productive phonology is advanced. However, these learners tend to have a low estimate of their language abilities and report being hesitant to speak. These results provide information on factors affecting heritage language acquisition and have implications for adult language programmes.

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Keywords: Athabascan, endangered language, heritage language, indigenous language, language revitalisation, latent speaker

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Introduction

The 21st century may see more than half of the world's languages disappear as children in language minority communities increasingly speak a language of wider communication rather than their ancestral language (Krauss 1992, 1998). In response to this challenge, indigenous communities worldwide are seeking ways to revitalise their languages, including teaching those languages as second languages. This paper focuses on particular language revitalisation efforts by Alaskan Athabascans and opens the question of how latent knowledge of an ancestral/heritage language affects subsequent acquisition by adults.

While we feel that the term 'ancestral language' preserves the distinction between languages which are considered endangered and those which are widely spoken in a homeland elsewhere, we recognise that the term 'heritage language' is rapidly gaining currency and that scholars (Campbell & Christian, 2003; Fishman, 2001) include indigenous languages under this umbrella term. Therefore, we use this term to refer to Alaskan Athabascan languages and

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learners. We agree with Fishman (2001) who notes that while in the USA the term 'heritage language' is used to refer to immigrant languages, indigenous languages and colonial languages, these languages and speakers differ dramatically from each other. Similarly, Carreira (2004), Wiley (2001) and Wiley and Valdes (2000) call for more explicit definitions and distinctions for heritage language learning and teaching. For our purposes, 'heritage language' refers to a language spoken in a community where that language is being replaced by a language of wider communication. From the perspective of the younger generation in this community, who no longer speak this language, it is their 'heritage'.

The authors' interest in heritage language acquisition derives from our longtime work in second language teaching and learning and work with Athabascan language revitalisation efforts in Alaska through the Athabascan Language Development Institute. The interviews, assessments and analyses in this study were done in English by the researchers and in Athabascan languages by elders and fluent speakers. We hope that the results of this study, examining factors affecting the learning of an endangered language, will provide information relevant to the successful learning and teaching of heritage languages to adults.

In this paper we first review the literature on language revitalisation in indigenous communities. We then introduce the concept of the 'latent' speaker, an adult raised in an environment where a heritage language is spoken who did not become a fluent speaker of that language. Finally, we present language learning profiles of both beginning and successful learners of endangered Alaskan Athabascan languages and discuss ways in which they can be used in planning, teaching and assessing heritage language acquisition by adults.

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Language Revitalisation

Language revitalisation in indigenous communities

Much of the recent scholarly work on language revitalisation falls within the interstices of education, anthropology and linguistics, recognising that any one discipline on its own does not provide an adequate picture of indigenous efforts to revitalise local languages. Henze and Davis (1999: 9) point out that until recently much of the work in this area has been done in a piecemeal fashion rather than a holistic approach that addresses the 'interconnections among language, culture, politics, economics, and education'.

In more recent work, however, these connections are being made. King (2001) documents school-based language curricula within the context of language shift in two Quichua communities and reflects both indigenous and Western education perspectives on language instruction. With similar attention to linguistic, cultural and educational issues, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (1999) discuss the complex interplay of language and identity exhibited in adult education workshops among the Kwara'ae in the Solomon Islands. Kulick (1992) provides rich anthropological detail describing the linguistic and

cultural changes and choices made in a small community in Papua New Guinea. McCarty and Watahomigie (1998) examine common threads in the historical and educational experiences of American Indians and Alaska Natives that provide the sociocultural context for language and literacy development. Based upon years of fieldwork on Australian Aboriginal languages, Tsunoda (2004) describes cultural, sociolinguistic and structural aspects of language endangerment.

Much of the published literature on language revitalisation describes particular programmes and approaches for revitalising languages (Hinton, 1997; Hinton & Hale, 2001). The language revitalisation efforts of various indigenous groups have been described at a series of Stabilizing Indigenous Languages conferences since 1994 and in subsequent publications, including Cantoni (1996) on the role of families, communities and education in language maintenance; Rehyner (1997) on teacher education, curriculum development and teaching methodologies; Burnaby and Rehyner (2002) on language and literacy development; Rehyner *et al.* (2003) on the use of technology in the classroom and preparation of language teachers; and McCarty and Zepeda (2006) on research foundations for programmes, credentialling professionals and suggestions for language teaching.

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Other recent work includes research on various aspects of learning and teaching indigenous languages. McCarty and Zepeda (1998) present papers by linguists, educators and native speakers which include personal 'autobiographies' related to heritage language learning in the USA, Mexico and Latin America. Hornberger (2005) brings together papers which stress the patterns of language use, attitudes and abilities that heritage language learners bring to the classroom. Suggestions are made for collecting background information through pedagogical profiles (Kagan, 2005) and language background/learning histories (Elder, 2005). Bradley and Bradley (2002) include papers in their volume describing research on endangered languages in indigenous and migrant settings and emphasise language attitudes as a key factor in language maintenance.

A common theme in much of the above-cited literature is that decisions regarding language revitalisation must be made by indigenous communities themselves. The desire of many indigenous people to direct their own language programmes (Warner, 1999) and to resist the hegemony of Western 'technocratic pedagogy' (Manu'atu & Te Kepa, 2001) has to some extent isolated these movements from the analytic gaze of Western academic culture.

Among the positive aspects of indigenous language maintenance is the empowerment of those who have had little opportunity in their societies. Hornberger (1996, 1999) describes how it can be an avenue for cultural expression and allow for indigenous groups to have decision-making power over their own education.

The present study was designed to shed light on the role of the latent speaker within language revitalisation efforts in indigenous language communities and to provide insights into the factors affecting the learning of heritage languages by adults.

The Latent Speaker

Definition

The particular phenomenon that interests us is what we term the 'latent speaker', an individual raised in an environment where the heritage language was spoken, but who did not become a speaker of that language. The factors that contribute to this lack of natural language transmission are many, but there is widespread agreement among scholars that in both immigrant and indigenous language communities schooling and economic factors figure prominently (see Campbell & Christian, 2003). In most cases, one of the languages in these multilingual environments is privileged and spoken in wider contexts while the ancestral language may be a source of shame or embarrassment. Fishman (1991: 88), in discussing the most severe stage of language attrition, notes that the few remaining users of the ancestral language may be just 'understanders'. Researchers have used various terms referring to the latent speaker. Krashen (1998) writes of 'language shyness', which he says is particular to situations where one's dominant language is other than one's heritage language. Edwards (1994) and Romaine (1995) mention 'receptive (passive) bilingualism' as opposed to productive (active) competence. Leap (1988) uses the term 'passive fluency' to refer to the phenomenon among Native Americans of understanding, but not speaking, the ancestral language, and Williamson (1991) refers to the 'passive speaker'.

The level of ability to understand the ancestral language may vary a great deal between individuals just as the ability of 'speakers' may range from elders who are expert storytellers and speechmakers to those adults who use the language infrequently and only for limited purposes. While the varying abilities of 'speakers' is widely discussed in language teaching literature and levels are defined, the connections with ancestral language acquisition have not been drawn until recently. Dorian (1981) uses the term 'semi-speaker' to refer to those speakers in a Scots Gaelic community who have minimal productive skills, but who can function in communicative interaction. Sasse (1991) distinguishes two types of 'imperfect' speakers in situations of language loss: those who were once proficient but no longer use the language regularly, and those who did not acquire the language as a normal transmission process. Borland (2005: 120), in her study of a Maltese community, notes 'There is much to be learned about what it means to be a receptive bilingual and of the processes by which such receptive knowledge can and does become activated for heritage language background learners.'

A number of second language attrition studies provide descriptions of learners who have reported learning a language as children but forgetting this language as adults. Most of these studies, however, focus on subjects who gained fluency as children and analyse what they remember of the language years later. DeBot and Weltens (1995) note that there is a great deal of research on child bilingualism, but few studies exist on the long-term effects of the acquisition of a language at an early age. DeBot and Stoessel (2000) found that after 30 years of non-use of Dutch, two German learners had residual vocabulary knowledge. Hansen (1999) has shown in her studies of Japanese

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that when a language is presumed forgotten it is not always gone. She provides data on the long-term savings effect on L2 vocabulary and syntactic relearning. She notes that relearning is one of the main areas to potentially benefit from language attrition studies (Hansen, 2001.) These types of studies provide insights into the knowledge latent speakers may retain of a language they were exposed to in childhood.

For our purposes, the latent speaker may not be a *speaker* of the language at all, but someone who understands the language to varying degrees. The term 'latent speaker' emphasises the (re)acquisition of a language which is to some extent a familiar one. While the phenomenon of the latent speaker has previously been identified, there have been few systematic studies of what constitutes 'latent knowledge' of a heritage language in situations where the language is no longer used as the dominant medium of communication and self-identity.

The latent speaker and language revitalisation

Latent speakers who are learning to speak their heritage languages can have an important part in language revitalisation. By reactivating their knowledge and working with fluent speakers to develop their own speaking skills, they play a vital role in transmitting the ancestral language and culture to the children in their homes, schools and communities. The urgency of this work comes from a recognition by latent speakers that if they don't learn to speak the language and pass it on, it will die.

To provide successful programmes to adults wishing to learn their heritage languages, it is necessary to better understand their abilities and needs, both linguistically and culturally. It appears that those adults who have become successful in learning their ancestral language as a second language begin with varying degrees of latent knowledge (Basham, 1994). Thus the study reported here was initiated with the goal of better understanding the process of acquiring an indigenous heritage language so that communities can develop more effective language programmes for adults. Our focus is on the crucial role that adults can have in the preservation and revitalisation of languages.

The Study

A study was conducted over a two-year period to examine the pathways to learning by latent speakers of Alaskan Athabascan languages. In order to understand better the cognitive, linguistic and social aspects of acquiring an ancestral language by latent speakers, we posed the following research questions:

- What effect does hearing the language as a child have on language learning as an adult?
- What factors contribute to successful language learning by latent speakers?

In-depth learner profiles were used to describe how attitudes, linguistic background and learning settings affect the learning of ancestral languages by

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latent speakers. Interviews, surveys and assessment instruments were used to examine their:

- latent knowledge,
- motivation to learn and
- language skills.

The first phase of the study focused on two successful learners of Athabascan languages who as adults were latent speakers. The second phase included a broader assessment of beginning latent speakers learning Athabascan languages.

Context of the Study

Alaskan Athabascan language communities

Of the 11 Alaskan Athabascan languages, seven are included in this study: Koyukon, Gwich'in, Upper Tanana, Lower Tanana, Tanacross, Upper Kuskokwim and Deg Xinag. These languages are spoken in Interior Alaska, and, in the case of Gwich'in, in Canada. These languages are all part of the Na Dene family, which also includes Navajo and Apache (Mithun, 1999). The complexity of verbs, nouns, directionals and word order provide many contrasts with English and contribute to the difficulty English speakers often have in learning the language (Jones & Jette, 2000; Kari, 1989; Thompson, 1987).

The estimated number of speakers in Alaska for the seven languages involved in the study ranges from 30 (Tanana) to 300 (Gwich'in and Koyukon). Each language community has a distinct history of contact and subsequent language shift. For example, Koyukon was affected by the gold rush and steamship traffic on the Yukon river in the late 1800s, resulting in a relatively rapid language shift leaving few if any speakers younger than 50 (Kwachka, 1992). Some Gwich'in communities, on the other hand, are more remote and thus include some younger speakers. One common factor affecting all groups, as well as most Native American communities, is educational policy which forcibly excluded use of the indigenous languages in schools.

Since the 1970s there have been bilingual programmes in many schools, and some materials are available in the languages (e.g. dual language storybooks). While these programmes have provided cultural information, they typically have not provided enough language exposure to result in acquisition (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998).

The present situation for each of the languages is precarious. In some villages there are no remaining fluent speakers; in others the speakers are quite elderly and not able to teach (at least not in a traditional classroom setting). Recognising this trend, concerned Athabascan adults have been meeting and discussing plans for action (Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999). There has been a demand for more language classes at the university and in communities. Many communities look to Hawai'i and New Zealand for models of immersion programmes. However, the lack of individuals who are both fluent speakers and certified teachers is a serious problem for Athabascan communities.

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Alaskan Athabascan language programmes for adults

There have been relatively few Athabascan language programmes for adults as most efforts have focused on programmes in schools for children. Koyukon, Gwich'in and Tanacross have been taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. However, until recently the classes that were available focused on language structure and did not produce new speakers, much like the typical foreign language classroom in the USA. The approach to teaching was grammar-based, focusing on literacy and verb paradigms. In 1997 the US Department of Education funded a career ladder project, entitled Denaqenage' (proto-Athabascan for 'our language'). The typical student in this programme is 35 years old, a latent speaker of an Athabascan language, and involved in his or her local community either as a language teacher or as a bilingual aide in the school. A key activity for this project is the Athabaskan Language Development Institute (ALDI), which funds tribal members who want to become language teachers (Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999; Marlow, 2000). In addition to classroom teaching of seven Alaskan Athabascan languages, the Denaqenage' project also sponsors a mentor–apprentice programme, which pairs speakers and learners of these languages (cf. Hinton, 1997). This one-to-one interaction places emphasis on learning in a context where language is simplified and the mentors are not teachers, but elders who meet daily in the community with their apprentices and provide opportunities for interaction in the languages (Sikorski, 2000).

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Participants in the Study

Alaska Native adult learners of Athabascan languages who have participated in language programmes are included in this study. Two of the participants are advanced learners who have been successful in activating their latent knowledge and acquiring new knowledge of the language. The remaining learners are beginning this process under the tutelage of advanced learners co-teaching with elders who are native speakers.

In the first phase of the study, we analyse the language learning histories of the two advanced learners who began formal study of their languages as adults. The mothers of these learners are linguists, authors of Athabascan books and classroom language teachers. However, they spoke only English to their daughters when they were children due to the dominant educational philosophy of the time, which advocated speaking English rather than ancestral languages to children. As a result, both learners fit the definition of 'latent' speakers as until recently they could understand but not speak their Native languages. These advanced learners, after classroom instruction and one-to-one mentoring with fluent native speakers, now teach classes themselves to beginning Athabascan language learners.

In the second phase of the study, we examine the attitudes and language skills of 15 beginning learners in classes taught by elder/advanced learner pairs. These students were also latent speakers and were at the beginning stages of (re)acquisition of their heritage languages. All students were enrolled in three-week classes for three hours a day which focused on both

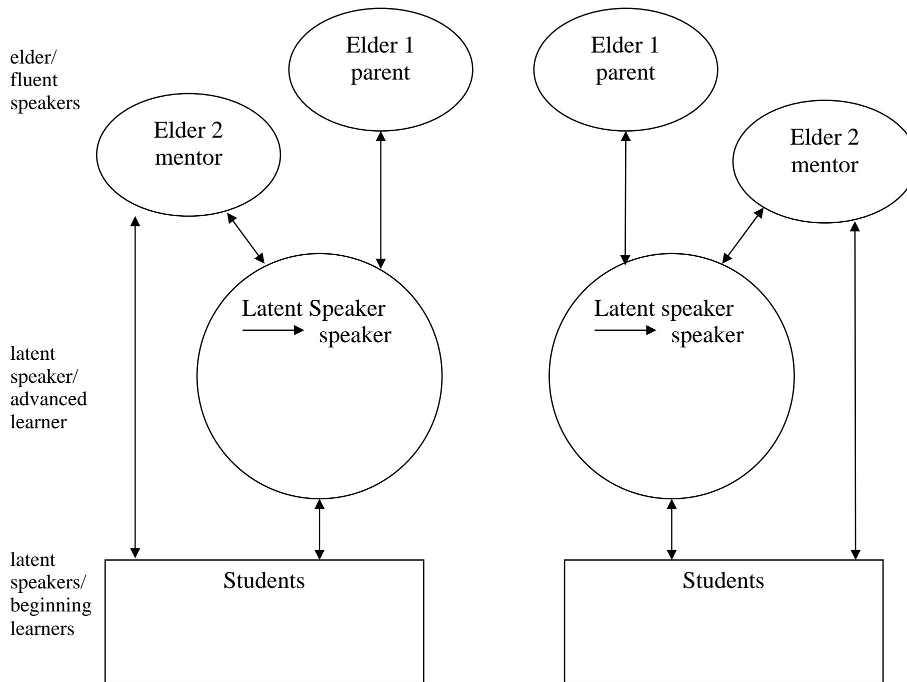

Figure 1 A model for adult language transmission

communicative activities within various contexts (cooking, tanning hides, sewing) and grammar explanations. In addition, some of the students were beginning one-to-one interaction with elder speakers of their heritage languages. These students have continued meeting with these elders regularly during the year upon returning to their villages through a mentor–apprentice programme.

Figure 1 shows the model for adult language transmission described in this study. Three levels are included. At the top level are elders who are fluent speakers of Athabascan languages as well as English and who serve as mentors/teachers/consultants. At the middle level are the advanced second language learners who are also now teachers. At the bottom level are beginning learners who are participating in language classes taught by the elders and advanced language learners. In the two parts of this study, the language backgrounds and skills of the advanced and the beginning learners are described.

Data Collection

A number of instruments were used to collect information about the linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the language learning experiences and the language skills of participants in the study. The number of subjects given each instrument varied due to limitations in time and contact. Some teacher interviews and classroom observations were made in addition to the methods of data collection listed below.

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Language use survey

A written language use survey (see Appendix 1 for sample questions) was given to all subjects to learn about their current and past use of their ancestral languages. Questions elicited information on languages spoken in their communities, self-reports of their language abilities and contexts in which they hear/heard their ancestral languages spoken.

Language autobiographies

Participants in the first phase of the study were asked to write profiles of themselves as language learners. They were asked to describe their experiences and feelings about learning, speaking and hearing their ancestral languages since childhood. These extensive essays provided a rich source of information about learner attitudes and motivation as well as descriptions of their language learning experiences.

Individual interviews

Interviews were conducted with the advanced learners and selected beginning students. Some interviews took place after formal language instruction and others following mentor–apprentice sessions and assessment. Interview questions focused on self-reports of language abilities and opinions on classroom instruction, learning activities and assessment procedures.

Assessment of receptive/productive skills

A formal assessment instrument was used to evaluate the receptive and productive skills of six students working with elders as part of the mentor–apprentice programme (cf. McGroarty *et al.*, 1995). The mentors, all elders from Athabascan communities, administered these tasks after extensive training. They gave suggestions for assessment revision, gave all directions and recorded answers on record sheets. This assessment was given before formal classroom instruction to evaluate learner skills.

The parts of the test included a picture description task, a vocabulary, phrase and sentence comprehension task, and a story retelling task using a sequence of pictures (see Appendix 2 for sample items). The picture description task involved naming people, objects and activities in an Alaska Native village scene. Learners were asked to name as many things as they could in the picture. For the comprehension sections, the mentor described something in the same picture and asked the learner to point at what was being described. The descriptions involved identifying objects, people, actions and location of objects. The mentor checked the item if the learner pointed at the correct part of the picture.

The story retelling task involved the mentor telling a story in the ancestral language using a sequence of four pictures taken from an Alaska Native story, *Shahnyanti's Childhood* (Peter, 1975). The learner listened and then retold the story, first in English and then in the Athabascan language. The oral sections of the test were recorded and later transcribed by a Native language speaker.

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Results

Phase 1: Advanced learners of Athabascan languages

Learning histories

The initial phase of the study began with compiling profiles of the two highly successful adult learners of Athabascan languages. At the time of the study, both of these learners were over 30. These learners shared their language learning stories in the form of written language learning autobiographies, focused interviews and informal conversations over a period of three years.

These profiles include descriptions of the various settings where the learners were exposed to the ancestral language and the aspects of the language reported as learned. The learning experiences, described by these

Table 1 Language learning profiles of successful learners

Age	*Learner role/setting*	*Description of setting/usage*	*Aspects of language learned*
Child	Child hearing elders and parents speaking	Elders spoke language together Children heard language	Understood commands, animal names, personal feelings, parts of stories
Young Adult	Learner in classroom	Grammar-based curriculum Vocabulary lists, emphasis on reading and writing	Learned patterns, vocabulary, verb tenses, prefixes, suffixes, reading of simple stories
Adult	Apprentice in one-to-one with mentor	Immersion in activities – sewing, tanning skins Explanation/ translation/ vocabulary at home One-to-one conversation	Learned to talk about useful activities Developed fluency, confidence
Adult	Co-teacher with mentor	Teaching classes Modelling and help from mentors Training new mentor/apprentice pairs	Speaking/comprehension improved Learned strategies for learning/teaching
Adult	Teacher/ coordinator	Teaching language classes in a variety of settings	Developed fluency, new vocabulary

two learners of Koyukon and Gwich'in, are quite similar. Table 1 summarises their experiences. It represents a progression from childhood, when the learners were exposed to elders speaking with each other, to adulthood, when they began studying and finally teaching their ancestral languages. Both learners heard their ancestral languages as children, but did not speak them. They heard the languages most frequently when elders spoke to each other during family visits and activities. They reported understanding common expressions, commands, parts of stories told by elders, but they used only English in conversations. They began studying their ancestral languages formally in the classroom many years later as adults where they were exposed to grammar, reading and writing, but still did not develop fluency. An important turning point for each of them was the opportunity for one-to-one focused interaction in the mentor–apprentice programme. Within a short time both became teachers, aided by their mentors, and they report continued progress in developing language skills.

Both learners noted the value of formal instruction as a means of identifying patterns and sorting out the complexities of language. But they also report that their speaking abilities remained limited until they had focused interaction with a fluent speaker where the attention was on communication. As teachers, they report continuing to progress with help from the elders and opportunities for active learning while teaching their ancestral languages to others.

Self-reports on latent knowledge

Some of the specific words, phrases and structures in Koyukon and Gwich'in that these learners reported remembering from childhood, before beginning formal instruction, are summarised in English in Table 2. The vocabulary includes commonly used words from village life, descriptions of weather, health, commands/requests, simple questions.

Factors influencing language learning

In a series of interviews, these learners expressed their opinions on their motivation to learn as adults, the effects of hearing the language as children and reasons for their success in learning. One of the adults described her experiences and influences on her ability to speak as follows:

> During my childhood I heard Koyukon Athabascan (Denaakk'e), but was not spoken to in Denaakk'e ... As a kid, I understood mostly commands such as 'adzigee' ('taboo') or animal names or simple stories. (As an adult) some topics I can understand like when my aunts are talking about our family, but on others I am still lost ... Stories help ... I listen to them again and again ... then I retell them ... Stories and conversation go hand in hand ... My motivation now is to learn Denaakk'e so I can converse with speakers from all villages and so I can teach students our language.

The interviews with both advanced learners indicate that hearing the language as children had both positive and negative effects upon their attempts at learning as adults. They said that language input as children provided them familiarity with certain aspects of the language, but that it was difficult to focus attention on speaking as adults, as the excerpts in (1) show.

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Table 2 Examples of vocabulary and expressions remembered from childhood (rendered here in English)

Vocabulary			*Expressions/collocations*		
Plants/ animals	*Family*	*Activities*	*Commands*	*Exclamations*	*Questions*
fish	mother	cook	You eat	I'm scared!	Who's that?
berries	father	pick	Come here	It hurts!	What?
river	grandmother	hunt	Don't do that	It's cold!	What's this?
mountain	elder	visit	Stop	It's wet!	Where is it?
	child	sew	Give me that		

(1) I could pronounce sounds correctly when I started studying as an adult.
Some words, expressions, parts of stories were familiar to me.
I was used to not paying attention to the language.
It was especially difficult to start speaking, rather than just listening.

They also expressed their opinions about the benefits of the instruction they had received as adults. They described the benefits of a number of instructional activities as summarised in (2).

(2) Participation and movement help in developing speaking.
Activities in the community develop language and cultural awareness.
Teachers/mentors provide feedback on errors.
Teachers provide simplified input and focused explanations of grammar.
Structured class shows how to learn language.

When asked what contributed to their success in learning, they gave a number of strategies that they used in learning their ancestral languages. These strategies are summarised in (3).

(3) I try to overcome my fear of speaking.
I don't give up and am persistent in trying to speak.
I sound out to see if forms 'sound' correct.
I learn to read and write through oral stories I have heard.
I continue to improve while I am teaching others the language.

Thus these two adult speakers of Koyukon and Gwich'in note that hearing the language in childhood, changed attitudes, classroom instruction, opportunities for interaction and teaching others all have contributed in some way to their success in learning their ancestral languages as adults.

Phase 2: Beginning learners of Athabascan languages

Adults in the beginning phases of learning their Native languages were included in the second phase of this study to learn more about second language learning development in latent speakers and to build on information provided by the two advanced learners.

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Learning histories

Language learning autobiographies and surveys of 15 beginning students were used to summarise their language learning experiences. Some of these students were in Koyukon and Gwich'in classes taught by the participants in the earlier phase of the study, while others studied in classes taught by advanced speakers of other Athabascan languages, including Lower Tanana, Tanacross and Upper Kuskokwim.

These learners all noted that they heard elders speaking their Native languages while growing up and understood some of what was said. They reported contexts for hearing their language included family visiting, tribal meetings, potlatches, fishing, saunas and storytelling. All reported that they rarely attempted to speak as they were not encouraged to. They were told that 'their tongues were stiff' or 'they didn't say words right'. Most of these adults noted that it was only as they began a language programme, where they participated in focused language activities both in and out of class, that they felt comfortable trying to speak and interact using their ancestral languages.

Self-reports of latent knowledge

In the Language Use Survey, these beginning students were asked what aspects of their ancestral language they remembered from childhood. Comments on what they reported remembering are summarised in (4).

(4) The rhythm and intonation of stories.
The sounds of the language.
The voices of relatives saying words.
Some words for serving tea, cooking, hunting, tanning hides.
Expressions for greetings, weather, personal feelings.
Exclamations for danger, anger, praise.

Factors influencing language learning

The Language Use Survey and interviews were used to compile learners' opinions on what helped activate their latent knowledge and what has helped them most in beginning to speak their ancestral languages. Some of the reasons they give for wanting to learn their languages are: preservation of language and culture, desire to teach children and desire to communicate with elders. One adult learner in an interview describes her experiences and motivation for studying her Native language.

> As a small child I heard nothing but the Athabascan language in our family ... Our native language was not allowed in school. We spent a lot of time learning only English and later on as I got older I moved [to the city] then I moved back to my village. In the past 17 years I was away I hardly heard any Athabascans speak our language and I was lost because I stayed away too long. Now that I have kids in school and they're trying to learn the language I can't help them because I'm having hard time understanding what older people say in our native language. This is the main reason I'm trying to get back my language. So I could help teach younger children in school.

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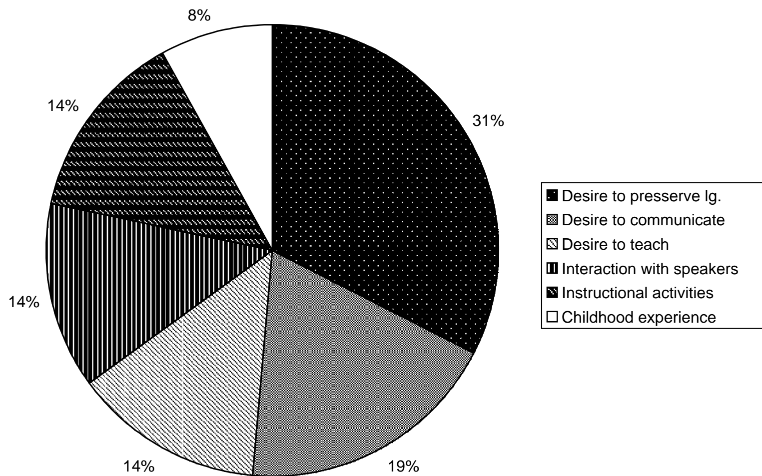

Figure 2 Factors influencing ancestral language learning

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The beginning students listed numerous opportunities and activities that they felt were helpful as they began to learn their ancestral languages. Many of their comments are related to classroom activities and interaction with mentors/elders as shown in (5).

(5) I don't get laughed at by speakers, but laugh with speakers.
I make mistakes, repeat, and am corrected.
I now have the courage to try to speak with others.
I see pictures, the written word, and hear it.

These learners reported a variety of factors as influencing their learning to speak their Athabascan languages. They report that the desire to speak as adults had the greatest influence on their learning. They also note the importance of instructional activities with visuals, writing, error correction and opportunities for one-to-one communication with speakers. The factors most commonly reported are summarised in Figure 2.

Assessment of productive/receptive skills

Six beginning learners who were taking language classes, as well as participating in the mentor–apprentice programme, were given the Productive/Receptive Skill Assessment (see Appendix 2). The tasks were administered by elders, who were their mentors, and oral responses were recorded on tape.

On Part I, a description of a village scene, there were approximately 30 objects and 12 different activities in the picture. Students were asked by elders to describe all they could about the picture in their Athabascan language. These learners named an average of 50% of the objects in the picture and described 25% of the activities. The most commonly given vocabulary were words for family members, food and animals, while the activities most frequently described were 'The girl is picking berries', 'The mother is cooking'.

On Parts, II, III and IV, the comprehension sections, students were shown the same picture and asked to point to the correct part of the picture as the elder described it. The highest average scores were on the comprehension of vocabulary (80%) where the most commonly understood items were 'berries', 'food' and 'house'. The next highest scores were on the identification of activities shown in the picture (sentence comprehension) with an average of 64%. The highest accuracy was on items describing 'hauling water', 'feeding dogs' and 'drinking water'. The comprehension of locatives, which are complex structures in Athabascan languages, was the lowest at 35%. Most subjects understood only 'inside', 'outside' and 'in front of' from the 10 items given.

On Part V, the story retelling task, students first heard a story about four pictures from an Alaska Native story. They then were asked to retell the story, first in English then in their languages, Lower Tanana and Koyukon. All students could retell the story in English which had been told by their mentors in their Athabascan language. However, most students were unable to retell the story in their Athabascan languages. In their attempts to retell the story in Lower Tanana and Koyukon, the learners used a variety of strategies including: repeating words and building upon them to add details, inserting English words and asking in English for help from their mentors. The assessment demonstrated variability among learners in language skills, but they consistently showed their comprehension skills to be superior to production skills through their English descriptions.

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Discussion

The language learning success of the two advanced learners suggests that it is indeed possible for latent speakers of an ancestral language to develop into fluent speakers as adults and to become effective teachers of others. In beginning to speak, these adults seem to profit most by focused interaction with a fluent speaker where the attention is on communication. As both of the learners in our study received both formal and informal instruction as adults, it is impossible at this point to state whether they would have achieved their current level of fluency without both. We do know that formal instruction alone did not lead to spoken fluency. However, both say that they value the formal instruction as a means of identifying patterns. Another reason for their success seems to be the opportunity to teach what they have already learned under the tutelage of a mentor.

The beginning adult latent speakers in the second phase of the study provide information on the development of language skills before extensive formal instruction. Their reports suggest that as adults they remember the intonation and sounds of language and the contexts within which the language was spoken, such as oral stories or conversations between elders at family gatherings. The importance of affective factors on their learning is a recurring theme. Their changed attitudes towards the language and the changed attitudes of elders towards their attempts to speak influenced their motivation and confidence. The desire to learn, together with new opportunities for learning through the classroom and mentoring, may lead to successful development of language skills.

The latent speakers in this study tend to have a low estimation of their ability to speak their Athabascan languages. Most subjects in the beginning classes rated their speaking ability as 'none' or 'very little'. Their comprehension did exceed production on all tasks, but when asked to produce words or expressions within domains related to Native culture, they not only understood, but were able to express themselves orally to some extent. The beginning learners had difficulty in orally retelling a story in their heritage languages, even though their comprehension of the story was good, as evidenced by their descriptions in English.

The assessment tool which was used in this study needs much refinement, but both teachers and students commented that the assessment of receptive and productive skills gave them a much clearer idea of the learners' existing knowledge and directions for building upon this knowledge. The attempt to establish a context through pictures proved to be difficult for both the elders and students. Further assessment might include language production and comprehension tasks within real contexts.

Latent speakers appear to have a number of characteristics which distinguish them from other second language learners. Being a latent speaker aids learning as an adult, especially in regard to pronunciation. For example, latent speakers may use different strategies for learning such as 'sounding out to see if something is right' as they may have a more developed implicit understanding of their ancestral language than a second language learner. However, being a latent speaker may also have an inhibiting influence on language learning. One inhibiting factor is fear of ridicule. Several of the participants in this study mentioned that they were embarrassed to speak, especially in the presence of elders who might make fun of them. In addition, latent speakers are used to passively listening and not producing the language. Peripheral attention to language may be more developed, but at the same time, active participation may be more difficult due to the participant role latent speakers have been used to in discourse.

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Conclusion

The original research questions addressed in this study dealt with the characteristics of latent speakers and factors contributing to their language learning. A number of answers to these questions emerge from the information gathered from these adult learners of Athabascan languages.

(1) What effect does hearing the language as a child have on learning the language as an adult?

Latent speakers tend to have:

- an understanding of basic vocabulary and expressions in the ancestral language;
- familiarity with pronunciation, intonation, rhythm;
- a low estimation of their speaking ability;
- difficulty beginning to speak rather than listen;
- an understanding of cultural/contextual aspects of usage; and
- an implicit awareness of language.

(2) What factors contribute to successful language learning by latent speakers?

- positive attitudes towards learning/speaking;
- motivation to learn;
- opportunities for use in various contexts;
- encouragement from others to speak;
- opportunities to practice and receive feedback;
- learning rules and patterns; and
- opportunity to teach others.

A number of implications for developing adult fluency in heritage languages emerge from this study. Heritage/ancestral language classes should build upon the existing knowledge of latent speakers. It is very important for educators to learn about the life experiences of these adults, their attitudes and their abilities. Latent knowledge is by definition not obvious, but should be carefully considered when designing adult programmes. It is important to show latent speakers what they already know and to give them confidence in their ability to reactivate their latent knowledge, speak their heritage language and ultimately pass it on to others.

Further research on language learning by latent speakers may well provide interesting data on the role of input and interaction in language acquisition, as well as directions for planning language revitalisation programmes for adult learners. Much remains to be done in exploring the wide range of possibilities for adult language learning and language preservation. For example, there is a need for developing sensitive assessment instruments that will allow both the learner and the mentors to determine what the latent speaker already knows of his or her language. There is also a need to develop appropriate language lessons which provide a means for the learner to participate more fully in the life of his or her community. The importance of this quest is echoed in the words of one adult latent speaker, 'I firmly believe that to become a whole person, I have to find my heritage and it is in the stories, the names, the history, and the language.'

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Appendix 1

Language use survey: Sample questions

1. What is your home community?
2. What languages are spoken there?
3. If you have children, what language do you mostly use in speaking to them?
4. When you were growing up, how often did you hear Athabascan spoken? (check one)
   ____very often ____ often _____ not often ______rarely _____ never
5. How often do you hear Athabascan spoken now?
   ____very often ____ often _____ not often ______rarely _____ never
6. Who speaks Athabascan in your community?
   ___everyone ____ parents ____ grandparents _____ no one ______ other
7. How much Athabascan do you understand?
   ___ almost everything ____ quite a lot _____ some ____ almost nothing
8. How much Athabascan do you speak?
   ____a lot ____ some _____ not very much _____ none
9. In what situations did you hear Athabascan spoken as a child? (please list some examples)
10. Describe your experiences in learning your language.
11. What triggered your desire to become a speaker?
12. If you heard the language as a child, how has it affected your ability to speak the language?
13. If you have taken a language class, how has it affected your ability to speak the language?
14. What has helped you most in beginning to speak your language?

Appendix 2

Assessment of comprehension/production: Directions and sample items

DIRECTIONS FOR THE MENTOR:
Show picture of village scene.
Part 1: Picture Description (use tape recorder)

- Ask the student to name any objects or describe what the people are doing in the picture.

Part 2: Vocabulary Comprehension

- Say each of the words below in your language. Do not use English.
- Ask the student to point to the correct object in the picture as you say each word.
- Place a check in the box if the student points to the correct object.

Examples: mountain, net, boat, berries

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Part 3: Phrase comprehension

- Say each of the sentences below in your language. Do not use English.
- Ask the student to point to part of the picture which you are describing.
- Place a check in the box if the student points to the correct part of the picture.

Examples: Show me someone who is in front of the house, who is behind the house

Part 4: Sentence comprehension

- Say each of the sentences below in your language. Do not use English.
- Ask the student to point to part of the picture which you are describing.
- Place a check in the box if the student points to the correct part of the picture.

Examples: He is eating. She is cooking. She is picking berries.

Part 5: Story retelling (use tape recorder)

Show the picture sequence.

- Tell a story about the 4 pictures in your language.
- Ask the student to retell the story in English, then in Athabascan.

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