

Perspectives

Published by the National Association for Bilingual Education
January – February 2013, 35:1, pp. 14-15
[the pictures have been left out]

Revitalizing the Aanaar Saami Language in Finland

Jon Reyhner, Northern Arizona University

Marja-Liisa Olthuis, Suvi Kivelä and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas provide a detailed study that gives hope to speakers of severely endangered languages. In *Revitalizing Indigenous Language: How to Recreate a Lost Generation* (Multilingual Matters, 2013) they document how the Aanaar Saami (AS) in Finland, with only about 350 speakers of their language, were able through the Complementary Aanaar Saami Language Education (CASLE) project from 2009 to 2010 to make significant strides in revitalizing their language. Dr. Olthuis spearheaded CASLE, Kivelä was a student in the program, and Dr. Skutnabb-Kangas is an internationally known researcher of indigenous language rights and revitalization. The AS are part of the estimated 75 to 100 thousand Saami, most of whom are living today outside their homeland.

The “lost generation” of AS in this book’s title are young adults, age 20-39, too old to have taken advantage of the first AS language nest established in 1997 and too young, because of the suppression of the AS language in schools and elsewhere, to have learned it at home as the elder generation did. The CASLE program recruited 17 motivated “young professionals” who showed language-learning aptitude by already having learned at least one second language with a few non-Saami students in program. Funding was found so that these 17 participants could be full time students for one year. For these older students Finnish was used as the language of instruction in first three courses to provide basic knowledge of the AS language. The following nine courses used AS as the language of instruction.

To implement the CASLE project, possible funding agencies were identified and approached, potential employers for project graduates were identified, language revitalization efforts worldwide were researched, motivated students were recruited that could be full time language learners for a year, and teaching materials were developed. By careful selection, the project had no dropouts and graduates went on to staff two new AS language nests opened in 2010 and 2011, multi-age AS immersion classrooms, and a media program. The CASLE program provided the 1600 to 1700 hours needed to learn everyday language plus the vocabulary of a student’s chosen profession. Of course to become a real Master of a language takes some 20 years.

While the CASLE program was designed to meet the unique needs of the Aanaar Saami and utilize available funding, it has several important aspects that any endangered language community should seriously consider implementing. The CASLE experience reinforces what language activists know about language nests and Master-Apprentice (M-A) language revitalization methodologies. Language nests are described as “backbone of AS revitalization,” a “gentle environment” for language learning, and “the strongest possible revitalization method for children” (pp. 46 & 130). However, for the students the “M-A

training was experienced as the most beloved part of CASLE” (p. 80). Twenty-two paid Masters with 5 to 7 hours training usually worked with two students at once, and students had multiple masters. Students were expected to know the basics of the AS language before starting M-A activities. The most common M-A activity was looking at old photos, mostly at the Master’s house. One Master noted in regard to his apprentices’ language learning, “Nobody can deal with it if somebody corrects every word” (p. 88). After their coursework and M-A activities such as fishing, CASLE students had a training period, mostly in the AS language nest or a multi-grade immersion classroom.

Hurdles to AS language revitalization remain, including providing spaces outside language nests for young learners to speak AS. However progress is being made both with young and older learners. There is now an AS major at the University of Oulu and students can graduate with masters degree in AS. The authors note that severely threatened languages need to accept second language (L2) speakers and anyone willing to learn the language.

The last quarter of the book is a series of 18 “Info Boxes” written by Skutnabb-Kangas that are referred to throughout the rest of the book. She starts with one on criticism of Sweden’s minority policies and practices and ends with one on the Saami language and traditional knowledge. These boxes overview current international and Finnish research on language revitalization and indigenous education.

Many of the indignities the Saami have faced including being put in boarding schools and having their language suppressed in Scandinavia are similar to what has happened to colonized indigenous people in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and elsewhere. In their conclusion the authors note “the reversal of language shift has affected people’s dignity and the way they look at the future” for the better (p. 165). The authors describe many hurdles, especially the lack of AS teaching materials, that had to be overcome in developing the CASLE project and offer valuable insights for anyone interested in language revitalization on how to overcome them. ★ _