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“Honoring Our Ancestors”: Language Reclamation in an Ethnic Studies Classroom

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Abstract

American Indian and Indigenous Studies is grounded in central tenets that strengthen tribal sovereignty and self-determination. These principles encompass relationality, storytelling and oral traditions, decolonization, and Indigenous languages. According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, there are 6,700 languages spoken globally. Indigenous people speak around 4,000 of these languages. The United Nations (2018) estimates that more than 50% of the languages spoken today will be extinct by 2100. Considering this context, Ethnic Studies classrooms are pivotal spaces for student learning, where awareness, research, and connection with Indigenous languages can take place. This work examines language reclamation praxis in Ethnic Studies at Cal State LA. It analyzes an Indigenous language project conducted by students in two Chicana/o Latina/o Studies courses. Grounded in Ethnic Studies pedagogies as frameworks to enhance language reclamation among students of Latinx heritage, the paper problematizes settler colonialism and its effects on Indigenous languages. The paper emphasizes student reflections on Indigenous language loss and settler power, highlighting language reclamation praxis centered on the students' exploration of their family histories and cultural roots. The paper situates the language project as an Ethnic Studies pedagogical praxis that enhances language reclamation and challenges hegemonic narratives of Native erasure.

Keywords: Indigenous people; Indigenous languages; language reclamation; settler power.

Introduction

As an academic discipline, American Indian and Indigenous Studies is grounded in central tenets that strengthen tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Among these principles are relationality, storytelling and oral traditions, decolonization, and the preservation of Indigenous languages. In her groundbreaking work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2024), Māori scholar Linda T. Smith highlights the importance of revitalizing, restoring, and returning to Indigenous languages as decolonial projects. Today, Indigenous languages are at risk of extinction. According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, there are 6,700 languages spoken globally. Although Indigenous people comprise approximately 6% of the worldwide population, they speak around 4,000 of these languages. The most recent estimates indicate that more than 50% of the languages spoken today will be extinct by 2100 (United Nations, 2018). Indigenous languages are more than a code of oral communication. They reflect the worldview of Indigenous peoples and encapsulate profound connections to their territories.

Santiago-Martínez (2024) notes that Indigenous languages embody cultural expressions deeply ingrained in philosophical thought and serve as symbolic expressions for naming the world. They also serve as a critical vehicle for transmitting knowledge, organizing, and fostering communal relations. Considering this context, the university classroom, particularly in Ethnic Studies, is a pivotal space for student learning, where awareness, research, and connection with Indigenous languages can take place. It is a transformational, resilient, and fierce space for reclaiming students' histories and creating meaningful community connections.

This work examines language reclamation praxis in Ethnic Studies. More specifically, it analyzes an Indigenous language project conducted by students at California State University, Los Angeles. This project was inspired by my role as a workshop facilitator for a community-based project with the Institute for the Teaching of Indigenous Languages (IELO) in Michoacán, Mexico. This article begins by exploring Ethnic Studies pedagogies as frameworks to enhance language reclamation among students of Latinx heritage. I also problematize settler power, its effects on Indigenous languages, and linguistic racism in academia. Next, I discuss the various components of the language project and engage with student reflections by highlighting two major themes: Indigenous language loss and endangerment, and their connection with settler power. Secondly, I emphasize language reclamation, which centered on the students' exploration of their family histories and cultural roots. I conclude with final remarks that situate the language project as an Ethnic Studies pedagogical praxis that enhances language reclamation and challenges hegemonic narratives of Native erasure.

Ethnic Studies Pedagogies: Community Empowerment for Social Transformation

Ethnic Studies emerged in the context of liberation and resistance of oppressed Peoples of Color in the United States in the second half of the 20th century. It is an anti-colonial project that recenters marginalized and racialized communities, their voices and lived experiences, and above all, their humanity (Dominguez et al., 2023; Escobar, 2014; Lugo-Ortiz, 2007; Sleeter, 2020). Urrieta and Machado Casas (2013) demonstrate that Ethnic Studies challenge coloniality of power over knowledge production by centering community experiences, traditional ways of knowing, and non-dominant voices whose presence is often erased from whitestream schooling. In this sense, Ethnic Studies thus entail a critique of settler colonialism and the emergence of new possibilities for marginalized communities of color to rewrite themselves into history relationally and humanely. As an anti-colonial discipline, Ethnic Studies integrates research and pedagogical frameworks that both amplify and elevate community voices, validating community members as knowledge holders and creators (Joulbert, 2023; Zavala, 2018). Among Ethnic Studies research and pedagogical approaches are community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), community-based participatory research (Deeb-Sossa, 2019), community-engaged research (Manzo et al., 2020), and the pedagogies of the home (Garcia & Delgado Bernal, 2021), as well as Culturally Relevant, Sustaining, and Responsive Pedagogies (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017; Shaw, 2022).

This paper employs Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (CRPs) to frame the Indigenous language documentation project developed in the Department of Chicana/o Latina/o Studies at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). Culturally Responsive Pedagogies center on student- and community-based knowledges, thereby integrating their lived experiences and culturally appropriate frameworks to make sense of the world and create inclusive, caring, community-

oriented, and empowering learning environments (Shaw, 2022; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). CRPs in Ethnic Studies develop "students' agency by engaging them directly in action that responds to their research on their community" (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015, p. 47). Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2015) argue that CRPs allow "students to see themselves, their families, their communities, and their histories in the curriculum and practices of the classroom, as multiple sources of knowledge and cultural experiences are validated and celebrated" (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015, p. 117). In other words, CRPs advocate for the implementation of teaching pedagogies that support the ways of knowing of communities of color and respond to the many ways in which mainstream schooling continues to operate as a colonial and hegemonic space (Nasir et al., 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated the application of CRPs in Indigenous curriculum, primarily through the incorporation of Indigenous language learning (Garcia, 2025; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017; Stowe, 2017). These studies show the significance and positive outcomes of integrating Indigenous languages into university spaces, including the implementation of Indigenous language programs and language events. Garcia (2025) suggests that "by incorporating Indigenous languages into education systems, we not only support the revitalization of these languages, but also empower students to connect with their cultural heritage" (p. 19). In this way, Indigenous languages constitute a central tenet in American Indian and Indigenous Studies, as well as a pedagogical approach to reinforce student empowerment, cultural roots, and community connections.

Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Languages and Higher Education

Historically, Indigenous languages have been targets of colonial extermination due to various factors. Settler colonial violence through genocide, displacement, and dispossession has placed Indigenous languages and thus their speakers at a higher risk of vulnerability (Lam, 2020). The hegemonic position of English—or Spanish, in the case of many Latin American countries—constitutes a legacy of settler colonial power that has historically oppressed Indigenous languages and criminalized their speakers. For Meighan (2023), English is ingrained in a Eurocentric framework shaped by linguistic imperialism, cognitive imperialism, and white supremacy (p. 147). The author refers to this process as Colonialingualism, defined as "the transmission of imperial mindsets, knowledges, and belief systems through the teaching and learning of languages" (Meighan, 2023, p. 149). For the settler colonial state, racial superiority was often proven through language (Bourdieu, 1991; Shakar, 2023). As a logic of elimination, settler colonialism maintains a hegemonic model of power that privileges Eurocentrism over Indigenous knowledges (Grant & Wong, 2008; Quijano, 2000; Wolfe, 2006). In the United States, for example, settler colonialism operated through the removal of Indigenous people and the establishment of policies that legalized land theft, but also through assimilationist policies that structured state-based education as a mechanism of Native extermination (Blackhawk, 2023). Settler colonialism has also instituted various forms of symbolic violence that delegitimize Indigenous ways of knowing. Therefore, the extermination of Indigenous languages and their speakers is deeply intertwined with the coloniality of power that subordinates Indigenous people for the benefit of capitalism and its extractive logics (Quijano, 2000).

Bourdieu (1991) explains the power relations encapsulated in linguistic exchanges through the concept of "linguistic markets." Linguistic Markets operate in all spaces of the social system, including the educational field. While colonial languages such as English are associated with

racial/cultural superiority, economic betterment, social prestige, and upward mobility, Indigenous languages are often perceived as obsolete and racially inferior. Bull (2013) notes that "all individual languages, varieties, utterances and texts unavoidably have a market value. They are hierarchically ordered. Thus, some linguistic tokens are valued more highly than others, which again means that different speakers possess differing amounts of linguistic capital" (p. 36). Just as Indigenous people are racialized, so are their languages. In this line, May (2023) speaks of linguistic racism and the ways colonial language ideologies construct hegemonic structures that oppress non-dominant languages and their speakers. Similarly, Dorais (2012) observes, "Because of their mere demographic weight, languages spoken by a lesser fraction of a Nation State seem doomed to occupy a subordinate position on the linguistic market, except, of course, in colonial or semi-colonial settings, where the language of the colonizers always predominates, whatever the numerical importance of its speakers" (p. 39).

In the United States, two linguistic markets are well-established, particularly in the social spaces that Indigenous people from Latin America navigate. First, a hegemony has been established around the use of the English language. Secondly, the hegemony established by the Spanish among the Latin American diaspora. Discourses constructed around Latinidad erase Indigenous people and their languages from the Latin American diaspora in the U.S., thus making them subject to multiple legal vulnerabilities (Catalano et al., 2022; Gomez Cervantes, 2023). Such discourses of Native erasure also impact educational spaces. Historical narratives associated with Manifest Destiny and the "vanishing Indian" have established an academic framework that consigns Indigenous people to a distant historical past, where stories of genocide, violence, and removal or displacement are often obscured.

Furthermore, Leonard (2023) argues that the representation of Indigenous languages in the field of linguistics is often rooted in colonialism, subject to linguistic racism skewed in favor of Eurocentric perspectives. Indigenous languages are pejoratively identified as "dialects," which subjects them to a status as "less than" languages, and Indigenous community knowledges have been marginalized and excluded from curriculum development. Considering the alarming rate of linguistic extermination, Pratt and Dantas-Whitney (2020) emphasize an urgency to decolonize educational spaces to recenter the lived experiences and ways of knowing of students of color, as well as their communities. In this way, the insertion of Indigenous languages in the academic classroom challenges the hegemony imposed by settler colonialism. It provides creative possibilities for those whose languages are at risk of extinction or are no longer spoken.

Language Reclamation as Ethnic Studies Praxis: An Indigenous Language Project at Cal State LA

Since 2020, I have co-facilitated community workshops for and with native speakers and learners of Indigenous languages, guided by the Institute for the Teaching of Indigenous Languages (IELO) in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. In the fall of 2023, IELO established an accredited program, for which I served as an instructor, that trains Indigenous language speakers as language educators, allowing them to teach their mother tongues as a second language. My positionality as a P'urhépecha educator, broadcaster, and community member allowed me to integrate a language documentation project as a signature component in the courses I teach.

Originally called Mesoamerican Civilizations, "Indigenous Peoples of Mexico and Central America—a course offering through American Indian and Indigenous Studies, as well as Chicana/o

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Latina/o Studies at Cal State LA—explores the diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples in the Mesoamerican region, further examining the historical traditions of Indigenous peoples and their dynamic evolution, identity formation, environmental issues, food sovereignty, and linguistic revival. The course centers on Indigenous perspectives, voices, and knowledges, as well as their contemporary expressions of resistance. Student projects prioritize research that documents Indigenous knowledges, stories, and languages through various activities, including a Mesoamerican Foods project, a mapping of traditional healing practices, and P'urhépecha language lessons throughout the semester. However, the signature assignment consists of a language documentation project that entails the elaboration of digital materials in Indigenous languages.

The language documentation project compiled a report on the current state of Indigenous Mesoamerican languages. This first installment involved the elaboration of a socio-linguistic analysis of the students' chosen language, encompassing its primary characteristics, cultural context, linguistic vitality, factors contributing to language loss and endangerment, as well as current efforts in linguistic revitalization. Most students selected an Indigenous language connected to their cultural roots, family, or community, and homeland. For students who were not culturally or familiarly connected to Mesoamerica, I suggested choosing a language they were curious about. In the second installment, students constructed a semantic domain that they used to create a digital material. The project also integrated two workshops where linguistic databases and resources were introduced. These resources included Ethnologue, the Open Language Archives Community (OLAC), Linguapax, and Living Dictionaries, which students used as a primary reference point to identify linguistic vitality and locate existing language materials for their projects.

Students also learned about online platforms for creating digital materials, such as Bloom Library, Canva, and StoryWeaver. Free software to create learning materials constitutes a convenient strategy to increase the number of language materials and do it inexpensively. Drawing inspiration from contemporary Indigenous digital activism, students' projects were informed by a wide array of technological initiatives advanced by Indigenous people to enhance linguistic preservation, reclamation, and revitalization efforts across Abya Yala. Therefore, the class also hosted online sessions with Joaquin Marquez Trinidad, IELO's director, who shared the community workshops project and current efforts for language revival in Latin America.

Figure 1. The Natural Elements in Yucatec Maya by Alyssa Abasto.

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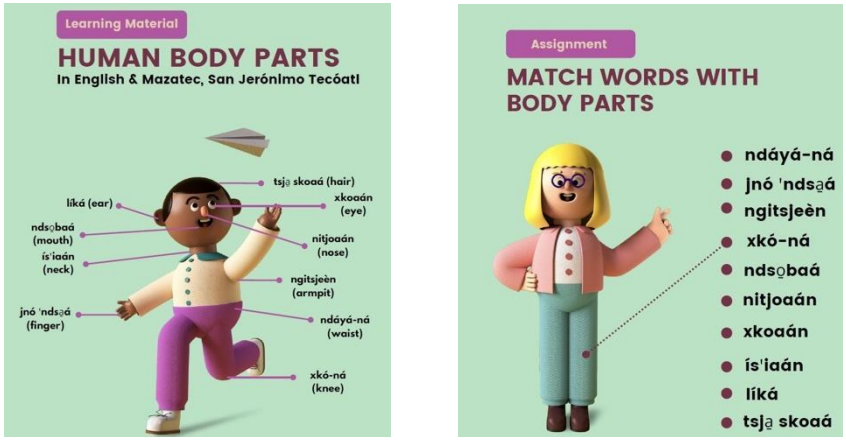

Figure 2. Human Body Parts in Mazatec by Antonio Ruiz.

Figure 3. Food Plants in Zapotec by Adela Elizarrez.

The language project resulted in the development of approximately 80 different digital language materials, combining the two courses in which this project was implemented. Students created digital materials in several Indigenous languages from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, including P'urhépecha, Zapotec, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Yucatec Maya, Mazatec, Wixarika, Yaqui, Popoluca, and Kaqchikel. Among the digital materials created are illustrated alphabets, bingo and memory games, word search and crossword puzzles, vocabulary flashcards, digital posters, and coloring books. The semantic domains include human body parts, animals, fruits, celestial objects, natural elements, and foods, as well as conversational phrases and vocabulary connected to specific territorial spaces, such as the cornfield.

The final part of the project consisted of a critical reflection, in which students responded to several questions: What motivated you to choose your language? What did you learn? If applicable, how does it connect with your family or community? Student responses varied, but their reflections illustrate their acquired understanding of Indigenous languages, their connection to their family, cultural roots, and community.

Heritage, Belonging and Language Reclamation: Student Reflections on Indigenous Languages

Incorporating Indigenous languages in university classrooms not only enhances the legitimacy of these languages within educational spaces but also in society as a whole. It fosters awareness of our plurilingual society and highlights the current challenges to language revival and preservation in Indigenous communities (McCarty & Lee, 2014). The language documentation project provided a platform that enabled students to critically engage with both historical and contemporary settler violence and ethnocidal actions that have contributed to language loss in Indigenous communities, and to reflect on their realities. While most students had limited knowledge about Mesoamerica's Indigenous communities, the language project allowed them to learn more about their heritage, where they come from, and their community's history. Despite their limitations, students entered the class with an open mind, eager to learn and be challenged. Student reflections encompass several themes, including the unique cultural and historical contexts of their chosen languages, characteristics of language revival efforts, current issues related to Indigenous languages, and connections to family and community.

Students' analysis of contemporary linguistic issues affecting Indigenous people brought to light the challenges hindering language revival and the impacts on their families and communities. A student's reflection echoed this sentiment of loss:

> I can share that communities are constantly battling with politicians that continue to sell the lands, constantly displacing indigenous communities, which made it difficult to find a person near me to translate the dialect, as it was difficult asking my grandfather, he had health issues. Also, my grandfather was able to share with me that when the war happened, people from the United States taught him and others from his hometown English words with the purpose of replacing their proper dialect. My grandfather from my mother's side has had the opportunity to visit me in California, and I was amazed when he was able to read some words in English. (May 18, 2023)

Learning about Indigenous peoples and their languages provided new insights into their contemporary experiences. It allowed students to connect local linguistic struggles with broader structures of settler colonial power that have had important repercussions on Indigenous language loss. They questioned the colonial history that subordinated Indigenous languages by treating them as racially inferior. According to one of the students:

> During the Spanish colonization of Mexico in the 16th century, indigenous languages, including Nahuatl was suppressed to impose the Spanish language and culture. . . . Most of "the Latinos," "Hispanos," only speak Spanish and identify with these terms that ultimately erase indigenous identity. Indigenous communities faced pressure to abandon their native languages and adopt Spanish. This historical trauma and power dynamics continue to impact language use today. Colonization also seeped its way into everything, including education policies, such as prioritizing the dominant language in its curricula. Indigenous languages have been marginalized in formal education, and it also limits the teachings of them. The lack of support from systems of power leads the younger generations to continue to assimilate to Spanish and not acquire our ancestral language. (May 18, 2023)

Considering the colonial background surrounding Indigenous languages, students were provided with insightful context regarding the importance of revitalizing these languages. Another student noted, "Political power and intervention play a massive role in the validity of a language, as it is this power that allows large funding protection for research of Indigenous languages/culture" (May 16, 2024).

In their analysis of current language issues, students also identified attitudinal factors that have impacted the transmission of Indigenous languages in their familial connections. For example, discourses about progress, where state-based schooling and Spanish language acquisition are viewed as a path to a better future, and discourses about identity and parenting, where Indigenous parents choose to teach their children Spanish to promote economic improvement and upward mobility, significantly impact language transmission. The following student reflection speaks to such discourses:

> . . . My tío is a Nahuatl speaker, and he has never taught my cousins. I remember one time my cousin told me his dad told him about it years later, and he was upset that he did not teach it. My cousin wished to be connected to his roots. With my tío knowing Nahuatl and his sisters too, there seems to be a sense of shame in learning it, which is why my cousin does not speak it. I feel that with this shame of learning something culturally important, it contributes to the endangerment. (May 2, 2024)

Another student working on the K'iche' language of Guatemala explains a similar story:

> I chose this language because it is mostly found in the midwestern part of Guatemala, particularly in Quetzaltenango. This is where my parents grew up, and my grandfather on my mother's side knows this dialect. I visited Guatemala last year and remember seeing my cousins learning about their language in their school. Not only are they learning Spanish, but they are also learning English and K'iche'. I also remember hearing the local people speak with their children, I think it is very important for this future generation to learn about their family's past. (May 16, 2024)

Listening to familial stories about Indigenous people and their culture, as well as visiting their parents' homelands, was fundamental for the elaboration of this project. Such experiences provided a framework for language reclamation.

While language revitalization focuses on creating new speakers, language reclamation constitutes a meaning-making process for heritage speakers (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). That is, language reclamation "goes beyond direct actions to increase the number of speakers and seeks to understand how the community sees the language and what it means for them" (Gutiérrez de Jesús & Chávez Gonzalez, 2022, p. 497). Building on this idea, Huaman (2014) argues that "reclaiming language is not only speaking but also embracing an imperative that demands advocates of language, builders of language programs, financial managers of those programs and those who will exercise creativity in order to create and/or preserve sustainable spaces that are conducive to daily language practices" (p. 84). In this work, I use Indigenous language reclamation as an action to explore familial roots and reconnect with students' cultural and territorial origins, viewing language learning as an ongoing process of resistance and reconnection, rather than an end goal of language acquisition with achieved linguistic proficiency (Chew et al., 2024).

Many of the students in class chose a language closely connected to their familial roots and their parents' homeland territory. Learning about their chosen language not only evokes memories of childhood, land, and family, but also awakens new interests in researching more and sharing with the community. One of the students noted regarding her family's knowledge of the language:

> I chose this language because my grandfather was the last in our family who spoke this dialect, and it inspired me to understand the significance of this language in my family and how it has failed to prevail in my generation. I long to understand the importance of this language that has lived through many generations but somehow died within my grandfather. This project has provided extensive information on how this language came to be and how there are different ways of pronouncing it in writing, which takes me to ancient times. I realized language is not just a way of expressing ourselves; our ancestry provides insight into our roots and significance here on earth. Language is part of our past, identity, and pride. (May 18, 2023)

Another student shared a similar experience:

> What motivated me to talk about the Yucatec Maya language was my grandfather, because when he was alive, he would speak in Yucatec Maya to me and my younger siblings. We barely understood what he was saying because he would try to teach us every single day. He came to our house, but he died when I was just 8 years old, so we did not have much time together, and I wanted to honor him by looking into the language. I wanted to learn more about the indigenous communities who speak the language and how they are managing to keep the language alive despite all the outside factors that are trying to slowly get rid of indigenous communities. (May 18, 2023)

For some students, being in familial and community spaces that elevate and promote their cultural roots became an inspiration to learn more about Indigenous languages. A student shared the following reflection concerning her motivation for doing a project on the Miskito language of Nicaragua:

> What motivated me to choose to research my project on the language Mískito is because I feel that I am lacking a part of my identity by not being fluent in the language. As a Nicaragüense Miskita, I feel almost ashamed to have lost that part of my identity. Although my family are native born speakers, I am the first generation where the language has been lost in the family line. Now that I have grown older over the years, I realized how important it is that I am educated in my culture so that in the future I can pass it on to my children. I am so blessed to still have connections to my roots through my family members, and I feel it is not too late for me to discover my identity through them. Also, by doing this project, I discovered there are more resources than I thought there were. (May 16, 2024)

Students also viewed this project as an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the language and share with their communal networks. For example, a student reflected on the importance of sharing the language with her sister and practicing so that it is preserved:

> The motivation I got for this project was that I was going to be able to revive a little bit from my hometown, as I had the opportunity to listen to some dialect words, but I did not know how to write them. I was able to find a dictionary, which helped me a lot when it came to translating the words. I was expecting to learn to write and speak it correctly, yet I felt that time passed quickly. Yet, after this project, I will be able to practice it with my sister, with the hope that she will be able to learn K'iche and adapt it to her everyday language routine. (May 18, 2023)

As we may observe, the language project constituted a critical venue for students to investigate their family histories, interrogate the multiple ways settler colonialism disrupted Indigenous languages, primarily through displacement, ethnocide, and dispossession, and consider ways of learning more about their cultural heritage and territorial roots.

The language project explored in this paper thus relates with what Chew and colleagues (2015) underscore as a primary goal of language reclamation grounded in a decolonial approach; that is, "learners often have other aspirations such as healing from trauma, countering narratives of loss, and strengthening relationships" (p. 20). Student reflections on Indigenous issues, connected to language loss and revival efforts, both shaped and enhanced a critical analysis of their own experiences, cultural heritage, their families' territorial origins, and migration journeys. In this way, the language project served as a transformational platform to challenge students' views on Indigenous people and languages, and to guide new lines of work and community rebuilding in the context of ethnocide and linguistic resistance. As one of the students concluded, "The work I do, I do con *todo Corazón*, so it only made sense to put in my energy and research work to honor my ancestors" (May 18, 2023).

Ethnic Studies, Language Reclamation and Implications for K-12 Classrooms

Indigenous language learning in the higher education system challenges the existing narratives of erasure that remove Indigenous people from the historical narrative and reduce them to remnants of the past. While Indigenous pedagogical praxis is grounded in Indigenous traditional cultures, languages, territories, and ways of knowing, mainstream education sustains a colonial mindset that upholds Eurocentrism and westernized educational practices.

The engagement of pedagogical praxis that centers on Indigenous languages, has the potential to offer integral educational experiences that reinforce ancestral knowledge, reaffirm community ties, and provide a better understanding of minoritized languages and communities more broadly. In their study of the Abenaki language of the Northeastern United States and its integration into elementary education, Audley and D'Souza (2022) argue that Indigenous language education constitutes a decolonial praxis that enables both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to challenge established settler narratives and appreciate Indigenous cultures. The authors observe, "learning the language of the Land on the Land might allow students to reposition their experiences, questions its knowledge structures, and gain insights into the culture of the language" (p. 95). In this way, the integration of non-dominant languages into the K-12 system generates interest, motivation, and learning opportunities for these languages, provides a more holistic understanding of the world offered through the languages taught, and reaffirms the validity and respect of languages other than English (Audley & D'Souza, 2022; Choi, 2016).

In the case of Native students specifically, studies have demonstrated that their exposure to Indigenous languages in the K-12 system has a greater impact on student success, closing achievement gaps. Not only does learning through their own Indigenous languages generate more trust and interest, but it also reinforces students' knowledge and cultural identities in academic settings (Kaomea, 2005). Indigenous languages play a crucial role in creating safe and supportive classroom environments.

Academic studies have also shown both the vulnerability and invisibility of Latin American Indigenous and migrant students in K-12 education (Crosnoe & Lopez Turley, 2011; Morrison, 2024). In the face of persistent challenges that Indigenous student populations encounter, the insertion of Indigenous languages challenges hegemonic notions of Latinidad. It transforms classrooms into safe spaces that protect Indigenous youth and their cultural identities. Training Ethnic Studies educators in Indigenous language pedagogies and the creation of digital teaching materials can encourage and promote the development of spaces for language learning, both in the classroom and within community settings. Furthermore, access to Indigenous language archives and technological tools allows students to engage directly in linguistic reclamation and revitalization efforts by creating and using their own language materials.

In our class, the sharing of experiences related to Indigenous histories, language loss, and linguistic revitalization has been facilitated through the development of digital materials in Indigenous languages. All combined, the language project fostered cultural awareness and generated important conversations on the students' territorial connections and family histories. In this process, students have reflected on the importance of Indigenous languages and the settler violence inflicted on their speakers. Furthermore, with cultural roots in the Mesoamerican region, students also engaged in a self-reflexive process that constituted initial steps towards language reclamation.

Final Remarks

Language reclamation praxis does not comprise a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, it involves a wide array of actions that diversify in various geographical, cultural, political, and even educational contexts. As this paper shows, Ethnic Studies constitutes both a potential and critical space for linguistic reclamation practices among Latinx youth, including those of Indigenous heritage, who have rebuilt new communities in the U.S. diaspora. The integration of Indigenous languages into K-12 curriculum is a pedagogical intervention that empowers Ethnic Studies educators to challenge and disrupt settler colonial narratives and spaces that have reinforced the “vanishing Indian” trope in the Euro-American imaginary. By representing a concrete pedagogical praxis, this intervention recenters the community-based knowledges and worldviews encapsulated through Indigenous languages.

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