

Iquito Language Documentation Project: *Training the Community Linguists*

While Chris focused on the overall administrative framework of the project, my talk will focus on the training of the community linguists, or *lingüístas* as we called them. I will discuss the general challenges we faced, and in the process discuss 3 important lessons that we learned when it comes to doing this kind of revitalization work.

As Chris mentioned, the project's structure provided us with 3 members of the community to be trained as *lingüístas*, and 4 native speakers, called *especialistas*, to inform and aid the *lingüístas* in their work. The *lingüístas* represented a broad spectrum of the community. We had Hilter, a 40 yr. old man who had learned to type in the Peruvian military. There was also Miroslava, an industrious 30 year old woman and mother of 4 children. Finally, there was Arturo, a sharp young adult who was still completing his high school education.

Once we began their formal training, the *lingüístas* met at least 2 hours a day, 5 days a week. In addition, the *lingüístas* were occasionally asked to meet for an extra hour for one-on-one computer training, practice elicitation sessions, transcription training, and training in the use of tape recorders. All told, the *lingüístas* received about 70 hours of training over a 6 week period. You can see in the overhead a list of some of the things we wanted them to have learned. They needed to know basic grammatical concepts like the differences between nouns and verbs. They needed to know important features of the Iquito language, such as its use of affixes and be

able to distinguish long vowels and other sounds that have no Spanish equivalents. They also needed to know how to elicit data and learn a language from the *especialistas*, and they needed to understand how to use a computer and several computer programs.

This is actually a lot to teach to someone in just 70 hours. We knew from the beginning that the amount of material we wanted to teach them in the limited time that we had was a challenge. Nevertheless, we were confident that they could be adequately trained in spite of the amount of material to teach. So the insights I want to share with you all have to do with the best approaches we found for training community linguists in a very

Things We Wanted to Teach to the *Lingüístas*.

1. Basic grammatical concepts: noun, verb, adjective.
2. Basic Iquito syntax - verb and noun affixes
3. Basic linguistic features: sentence-final vowel devoicing, morphemes, affixes, alphabet design issues, stress.
4. Transcribing sounds correctly.
5. How to have an elicitation session, and overcoming common difficulties in them.
6. Teaching pedagogy, incl: how to teach a language class, classroom management, teaching technique, lesson planning.
7. Understanding computers and Windows
8. Knowing how to use MS Word
9. Knowing how to use Shoebox
10. Using a mouse and basic keyboard use.
11. Understanding a computer's file structure system, including how to copy, delete, rename, and move
12. Knowing how to print documents

short time. That is, the approaches that seemed to work well for our situation this past summer.

Our first insight was to realize that most of these concepts could actually be taught as skills. This is actually to say that their goals in learning linguistics are different from ours. When academics set-out to learn phonology, knowing phonology is the goal. In a sense, our knowledge of phonology is largely divorced from our personal lives and life situations. For the *lingüístas*, however, their endangered language is highly salient. As a result, the *lingüístas* do not care about knowing phonology for the sake of knowing phonology. What they want to know is “How can I get people to start speaking Iquito again, and how will knowing about affix allomorphy help?” So whatever we taught them had to be taught in a way that was highly relevant to their life situation and personal goals. Instead of just teaching them about allomorphy in a non-contextualized manner, we taught them that it was okay if pronouns and other morphemes sound a little differently in different environments, that there was no one “right” pronunciation for every situation, and that if they wanted people to speak Iquito correctly, they should teach people to pronounce the pronouns as the *especialistas* did in each of their different situations. If their goal was to get people to speak Iquito again, we had to avoid teaching them just a bunch of “head knowledge,” if you will, and instead teach them some practical means of reaching their goal. That is to say, we had to take a skill-based approach to learning, and we had 3 major skills for them to learn.

- 1) First was learning how to do linguistic elicitation. This means knowing how to learn a language from a native speaker, and how to acquire specific grammatical information from the *especialista* that they would then incorporate in a language class.
- 2) They needed to learn how to construct a lesson plan and teach a language class effectively.
- 3) They needed to know how to use a computer, so they could record for future generations their knowledge of how the language functioned and the new vocabulary they had learned, as well as record Iquito texts.

Our goal in each of these 3 skills was not to develop full competency. Although that would have been an admirable objective, we knew there still was not time enough in the summer. Instead our objective was for them to become sufficiently competent in the basics of each skill area.

The analogy I like to use is that of teaching a kid how to ride a bike. Your goal in teaching a kid how to ride a bike is not to teach the kid so well that he can then participate in cross-country bike races. Instead, you focus on the basics. You teach him how to keep his balance, to peddle when he first gets on the bike, to keep the handle bars straight until he gets some speed, to lean in a bit when turning around. And sure, the kid will still crash his bike a few

times, but after a while they get it. But at that point they are still not good bike-riders. But the point is this - once they learn to stay on the bike, you no longer need to supervise every attempt they make to ride a bike, because you know with practice that they will get better and they will develop better balance and agility on their own.

This is the same approach we took with the lingüístas. For example, they may not type 60 WPM and whip the mouse cursor around the computer screen, but they are sufficiently competent in using a computer. That is, they can open a computer, record a simple text in MS Word, and save the information.

The same can be said for elicitation sessions. If they want to know the Iquito word for brother, they may not know all of the intricacies that can occur with kinship systems, but they know enough to ask the especialista carefully about the meaning of the word they get back, and not to assume that the word has the same meaning and use as the Spanish word, and not to be surprised if they have more than one word for brother.

When it came to learning the Iquito language, we taught them not so much to analyze data, which requires specific knowledge of a variety of linguistic theories, but to accurately describe the data in an item & arrangement approach.

When they wanted to know what the possessive pronouns were or some other specific grammatical feature, we taught them to ask for data that varied in semantically-minimal ways. That is, instead of asking an especialista how to say, “my house, your canoe, his palm fruit,” to learn what the possessive pronouns were, we taught them to ask things like, “my house, my canoe, my palm fruit,” in a minimal-pair approach to finding words and morphemes in a language.

Our second insight was to realize that we could increase their competency in these basic skills by encouraging both teamwork and specialization. In the business world synergy is the buzzword for the phenomenon that occurs when two people working together accomplish far more than if the two people worked separately. We got the opportunity this summer to witness this phenomenon first hand. After each of their practice elicitation sessions we had the lingüístas sit down and compare results. For example, we might have them all go work individually with their especialistas to find the Iquito words for body parts. When they came back together, they didn't just compare results. They argued and debated the words and even asked the native speakers to repeat the words, until they finally reached a consensus on the proper spelling, pronunciation, and use of the word in question. It turns out they worked really well together, and their group-work sessions were much more productive and accurate than their individual sessions. We took advantage of their teamwork by scheduling them to spend several hours each week working together, either on the same topic, or at least being in the same building together so that they could double-check each other's results.

We also encouraged specialization. We realized during the course of our training sessions that one lingüista was showing a natural aptitude for using the computer, while another lingüista was showing a natural aptitude for teaching and maintaining classroom structure. We encouraged this specialization and tried to help each of the lingüistas develop greater competency in their different skills areas than we had originally anticipated. In this way, each of the lingüistas developed an expertise and special responsibility in each of the major skill areas. Hilter knew more about the computers, and the other two lingüistas would go to him for help solving computer problems. Miroslava was most competent in language pedagogy, and Arturo, who had the best ear of all three of them, would work to ensure the texts and other aspects of the language were faithfully recorded and documented. So the second insight is to realize greater competency in their basic skills could be achieved by encouraging synergistic teamwork and specialization.

Our 3rd insight was to leave the lingüistas with plenty of reference materials. It was always our goal for the summer to leave the community with a copy of our Shoebox dictionary and some grammatical notes. But when we realized that we didn't have nearly enough time to teach them all that we wanted to, we realized that they needed to have more-detailed reference materials. The problem, again, stems from the fact that we are teaching people skills that must be practiced to be retained. That is, you can tell a person how to do something time and time again, but if it's a minor point or detail, they may not have sufficient practice opportunity to retain knowledge. So we tried to expand the detail of the community grammar book and in particular we wrote a step-by-step computer manual explaining in detail how to use a computer. The meaning behind every icon in every program was explained and we translated all the English menus they would need to use and explained precisely how to enter data in Shoebox, open files, and so on. If they forgot a detail about how to use a computer, at least they had a written resource to turn to.

In conclusion, when faced with a limited time within which to teach a lot of material to community linguists, the three things we found most helpful were, first, to take a skill-based approach to learning, second, to encourage teamwork and specialization, and third, to leave as much written documentation as possible.