

The Iquito Language Documentation Project: Creating a lasting infrastructure

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I'll be speaking to you today about creating a lasting infrastructure for the Iquito Language Documentation Project. After all, it's one thing to *say*, "OK, we're going to carry out a long-term, collaborative, community-based language revitalization project." It is another thing entirely to *do* so. My goal today is to share with you some of the strategies that the project team has implemented in order to best assure the success of the project over the longest time span possible.

Allow me to draw your attention to three guiding principles of the Iquito Project:

- First, design and implement all the project's activities in accord with the community's specific long-term goals for the project.
- Second, consistently produce tangible results.
- Third, create a system of checks and balances, so that the momentum of the project will continue – even and *especially* when one part or another loses a little steam.

I'd like to illustrate how important each of these points is with a few concrete examples.

Upon learning a little bit about the Iquito Project, many people, both in the US and in Peru, have expressed the following skeptical observation, "There are only 26 elderly speakers of the language left? How can you ever succeed in revitalizing that language?"

The key, of course, lies in how one defines the word "succeed". If the project's goal were to have Iquito return to its former status as the first and primary language of all ethnically Iquito people, the skeptics would be right – that *would* be tough. But that is not the project's goal.

Remember that this is a community-based project. So evaluating the success of the Iquito Project depends upon how the Iquito community defines success. And achieving success depends on meeting the community's goals. The community has told us very clearly what their two long-term goals for this project are:

1. The creation and publication of written materials in and about Iquito, so that the Iquito language will survive to be seen and read.
2. Iquito language education, so that Iquito children can have the opportunity to learn the Iquito language while they're still young – an opportunity that their parents were deprived of and now genuinely regret.

I'd like to emphasize that *all* of the various activities of the Iquito Project are based on realizing one or both of these goals.

While a basic set of written materials can and will result from this project's first three years of work, designing a successful Iquito language education program is a much more difficult goal to meet. Lev has already mentioned some of the challenges that the community is facing in realizing this goal. It was through talking at length with

community members of all ages during our visit to San Antonio in 2001 about the specific difficulties the bilingual school was having that the strategy of training a group of Iquitos in language documentation and teaching skills emerged, so that the community itself would be able to confront the problems that were frustrating their efforts. They already had plenty of insight into the complex realities of the situation and motivation to change it, so it seemed that providing them with technical skills was the next logical step. Underlying this entire strategy is our conviction that the community is fully capable, and in fact *best* suited, to carry out the work of revitalizing their heritage language.

At the same time, a very, very challenging aspect of this project, or any long-term project I've ever heard of, is the 'long-term' part. Fostering the enthusiasm, interest, and commitment of the people involved in a project like this one is essential to its longevity. But how do you accomplish that? Our strategy is to consistently produce tangible results that demonstrate to everybody, including ourselves, that we *are* setting and then reaching goals and that good things *are* coming of all of this work.

A few examples of tangible results that we've produced so far are:

- Building the Centro del Idioma Iquito (*show image*);
- Establishing Iquito language classes in San Antonio six nights a week;
- Completing six weeks of intensive training this summer that resulted in three very capable and enthusiastic community linguists (*show image*);
- Having in hand a year's worth of salaries to pay the linguistas and the especialistas for their work; and
- Completing eight weeks of intensive collaborative language documentation work that in turn resulted in:
 - A preliminary dictionary, and
 - A first book of Iquito texts.

I'd like to say a few more words about the Centro del Idioma Iquito. In designing this project we had several strong motivations for building an actual spiffy new building in San Antonio. But perhaps the strongest motivation was is the great symbolic value of such a place. By investing in the Centro, we made material two concepts: first, that we intend this project to last and second, that the revitalization of Iquito is sufficiently important to warrant its own building, its own computers – in sum, its own dedicated *space*. Our second strong motivation was to provide a quiet, dry, comfortable place dedicated exclusively to research, teaching, and learning Iquito.

Finally, we have built into the project a system of checks and balances, so that the momentum of the Iquito Project will continue. This point makes a nice segue into discussing the nuts and bolts of the infrastructure of the Iquito Project.

The Iquito Project is made up of three groups of people with intersecting and complementary responsibilities: the Supervisory team; the Investigatory team; and the Advisory team. I'll talk a bit about each team's responsibilities in a moment, but first I'd like to explain how these community teams were formed.

On June 21st, just two days after our arrival in San Antonio, the community held an assembly and elected the project's supervisory team. The supervisory team is the governing body for the project, and it was important that this body be both elected by and answerable to the community. The current supervisory team is composed of eleven members of the community who represent, and are representative of, the community. As Lev mentioned, San Antonio has a somewhat fractious internal politics. The size of the supervisory team and the diverse points of view of its members cut across many political lines, allowing the project a remarkably successful democratic governance. The team's current members include (*show list*).

Then on June 28th, the supervisory team held their first meeting, at which they selected – from a large pool of contenders – the three linguistas and four especialistas who now work for the project. Again, the composition of the investigatory team cuts across political lines.

In a meaningful sense, the Investigatory team is the heart of the Iquito Project. As I mentioned earlier, the philosophy behind this project is that the people best-positioned to do revitalization work on a language are its very speakers and inheritors. It is this team of individuals who will transform a language documentation effort into a vibrant long-term revitalization project.

The Iquito Project's investigatory team is made up of three linguistas and four especialistas (*show photo and introduce them*). During this first year, the linguistas each work 10 hours a week and the especialistas work 5 hours. Each receives a monthly salary administered by Cabeceras Aid Project. During the coming year, the Endangered Language Fund will provide a substantial portion of these funds.

All of the responsibilities of the investigatory team are centered on the project's two concrete goals: creating language materials and teaching Iquito to the community. During this first year, the investigatory team's research tasks are to build the Iquito-Spanish dictionary and to gather lexical and grammatical information necessary to build their lessons for the language classes.

Each linguista teaches Iquito language classes three nights a week. Classes are taught from 7 to 8 in the evening, Tuesday through Sunday, and adults and children attend on alternate evenings. Hilter teaches the adult classes, which were drawing 10 to 15 students each time while we were in San Antonio. Arturo and Miroslava co-teach the children's class, which was drawing an amazing 35 to 40 students each night while we were in the community. Every class is attended and assisted by an especialista, who serves as the expert on Iquito and is an invaluable resource in teaching the language, as Lynda will discuss.

Over the course of our working together this summer, certain individual strengths showed themselves in each linguista and especialista, and we realized how much it would benefit the project as a whole to integrate these factors into the project's long-term structure. As

Mark will discuss in greater detail, we built areas of specialization into the responsibilities of each team member.

The project's structure formalizes collaborative research and teaching activities within the Investigatory team. The work of each person is interwoven with the work of the others so that they all share responsibility and motivation among them, and so that all have an idea what the others are up to. In this way, no one is left on their own.

We built specific documentation procedures into the project's structure – that is, documentation of the team's work as well as of the language. As you can see, we designed a highly-detailed schedule and we also set month-by-month goals so that each linguista's work is broken down into concrete activities linked to attainable goals.

In addition to maintaining a research notebook and entering data into the Shoebox database, each linguista keeps a daily Journal of his or her research, planning, and teaching activities. In their Journals, they also keep a time log of their own hours and the hours of the especialistas. At the end of each month, the supervisory team reviews these Journals and time logs in order to approve the disbursement of salaries. These journals are also a valuable tool for the linguistas themselves in maintaining a healthy perspective on their own progress. In addition, at the close of each month, each linguista produces a brief written report and backup files of the month's work.

Everyone involved in this project recognizes how important it is that the linguistas speak Iquito competently. Therefore, each linguista is paired with a particular especialista to learn to speak Iquito. These three pairs were chosen by the supervisory team and each pair works closely together on elicitation, speaking practice, and language learning using the Master-Apprentice model. The Master-Apprentice model relies on intensive monolingual interactions between a native speaker, or Master, and a language learner, or Apprentice. The fourth Iquito especialista does Master-Apprentice work with Ciro Panduro, the first Iquito bilingual school teacher, to improve Ciro's knowledge of Iquito.

If the investigatory team is what makes the project "long-term", then the supervisory team is really what makes the Iquito Project "community-based" in a meaningful sense, because the authority to decide how the project will be developed and carried out lies entirely with this group. This team meets twice every month, on the 15th and 30th, to administer the work of the project. In particular, they supervise the seven-member investigatory team, which means that they verify that each linguista is meeting his or her research goals, they approve the linguistas' and especialistas' time logs so that they may receive their salaries, they resolve conflicts or confusions about the project's activities as they arise, and they even make decisions on how the Iquito language will be pronounced and written in the context of the language classes. They also work closely with the advisory team to assure that the project's activities meet the expectations of the project's funders.

The advisory team consists of us four plus Sr. Gabel Sotil, the head of the division of culture and education for the municipality of Iquitos. Gabel's participation in this project

from the outset is fundamental to its success, and we are deeply grateful to him. As well as mentoring the Iquito bilingual teachers and being a tireless intermediary between San Antonio and the various municipal bureaucracies, he serves as the conduit for communication for the Iquito Project between Austin and San Antonio de Pintuyacu and he administers the funds for the linguistas' and especialistas' salaries.

All three teams worked together this summer in order to draw up and formalize the structure of the project. This included refining the Iquito Project's first three-year *convenio*, which was then ratified by a plenary community assembly on August 7th; and designing a specific set of bylaws which govern the Iquito Project, which were signed into effect by the supervisory team also on August 7th.

One of the most significant challenges the Iquito Project faces at this moment is its independence. As I've mentioned, we four spent eight intensive weeks in San Antonio working to launch this project. The energy and enthusiasm that the whole team shared during that exciting first phase were tremendous. But now, here we four are back in Austin, and there the other members of the project team are in San Antonio, faced with an entirely novel set of responsibilities and no easy way of communicating directly with us. As much effort as we all dedicated to setting up a robust system for the project's first year of operation, we can be sure that problems, conflicts, and even disillusionment may surface in the coming months. For my part, I am sure that the Iquito Project will surmount its obstacles in one way or another and will become what ever the community most wants it to be.