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NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH A TRIBAL LENS

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents iv
Acknowledgments vi
Abstract viii
1. Introduction 1
1.1 Personal Background in Native American Language Curriculum 2
1.2 Purpose of this Study 4
2. Background Literature 5
2.2 School-based Approaches 6
2.3 Acquisition 9
2.4 Summary 11
3. History of NAL Courses at the OU 12
3.1 Origin of NAL Classes in Anthropology Department 12
3.3 Goals and Mission Statement of Original NAL Courses 14
3.4 Present Status of NAL Courses 15
4. Indigenous Research Methods 16
4.1. Participants 18
4.2 Format for Analysis 20
5. Results 24
5.1 Student Perspectives 26
5.1.1 Student #1 26
5.1.2 Student #2 27
5.1.3 Student #3 29
5.2 OU NAL Instructor 29
5.3 Muscogee Nation Language Preservation and Revitalization Program Mvhayvs 31
5.4 Impact on the University 33
5.5 Impact on Tribes 34

5.6 Impact on Language Revitalization 35
5.7 Student Impact 37
6. Conclusion 38
Bibliography 42

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Abstract

The University of Oklahoma (OU) has offered courses in Native American languages since 1991 (Barton 1996). Now, 32 years later, this work provides a contemporary view of the perceived relevance, effectiveness, and impact of these courses, asking questions like, why do these courses exist? Who is the audience for these courses? Who benefits from these courses? What impact are they having on tribes? Do they actually create speakers? As a Native American (Mvskoke Creek) researcher, as a language activist, and as a student who has participated in these courses, this work is immediately relevant to me and my experience in higher education. I approach this research through a tribal lens, and I am accountable to my tribal community which is one of those affected by the language policy decisions being made at OU. I continue this work through personal interviews with multiple Indigenous parties that are also affected by these courses, including students, instructors, and tribal language departments to come to a consensus of the overall influence of these courses on language revitalization and Native American identity and futurity on the OU campus.

From the beginning, the Native American language (NAL) courses at OU were aimed towards Native American students as a way of completing their foreign language requirement while exploring their own cultural identity through language. At the time of writing, four Native languages (Creek, Kiowa, Choctaw, and Cherokee) are being offered through the OU Native American Studies department. While the classes do not provide enough input for students to achieve high levels of proficiency, I find that they still contribute to language revitalization efforts by ensuring that the majority of the students who leave the class attain a respect for and understanding of the culture and background of that tribe and their language. There is also some

evidence that these classes motivate students to continue learning the language and become teachers and speakers themselves.

To investigate the impact that the OU NAL classes have had internal to OU, in the community, and for future generations, I conducted interviews with current OU students, OU Native language instructors, and educators in tribal language programs. Each brought a unique perspective to this issue, and pointed out many strengths of the program, as well as some things they would change. Overall, the NAL courses received praise, and all interviewees considered them to be both valuable and necessary, both to tribal language revitalization efforts and as an acknowledgement of tribal sovereignty by OU. Suggestions for improvement included a desire for more languages to be offered, and for more/broader community involvement in the classes.

With respect to the question of whether OU's language courses are harming or helping the local tribal communities, the consensus was that these classes are aiding Native American language revitalization in the long run. While they do not necessarily create speakers, and they necessarily involve taking the languages out of their tribal contexts, they do give those that have not had the chance to be exposed to either their own tribal language (or any Native language) the opportunity to create further understanding of Native American identity in Oklahoma and at the university itself. Given that so much of the student population at OU belongs to at least one tribe of Oklahoma, it is the university's responsibility to support these students, including through opportunities to learn Native American languages.

1. Introduction

Native American languages are so much more than just a medium of communication. They are a way of life, woven through our ceremonies, prayers, storytelling, and tribal kinship. Native American peoples have faced devasting traumas such as colonization, assimilation, boarding schools, and many others that have left every Indigenous language in North America in various stages of endangerment (Endangered Languages 2023). In response, many tribes have created Native American language programs in the hopes of slowing the language loss process and reversing the damage, including revitalizing languages that were once considered sleeping or have few fluent speakers left. There has also been a national trend in the US of adding Native American language (NAL) courses into school curricula (and in some cases allowing them to satisfy "foreign language" requirements), which is also part of a unified strategy for those Native American communities to help preserve and revitalize their languages, given that a large portion of a child's waking hours are spent at school. However, it is an open question whether these courses are truly effective tools of language revitalization, how well they accomplish their goals, and what effect this has on the home tribal communities.

In recent decades we have seen a movement among tribes to create language departments and work with linguists and elders to continue the legacy and strength of Indigenous languages. Immersion schools such as those in Hawaii have been implemented to create new generations of young speakers. There have been even more approaches developed for teaching Indigenous languages to adults. Many tribes have begun to offer adult language classes a few days a week, or they might have a language app or dictionary to make the language available beyond the geographic space of the community. Many have engaged public school systems and higher education to teach Indigenous languages as well. However, what happens when a non-tribal

higher education institution wishes to participate in Native American language efforts? This was the impetus for the creation of the NAL courses at the University of Oklahoma (OU), which have been offered since 1991. These classes have provided students with the unique opportunity to be exposed to languages that are endangered but are still found close to home.

How does it sit with the tribes of Oklahoma that their languages are being taught to Native students from all tribes, and also to non-Native students? Who is qualified to teach these courses? How have they impacted the tribes as a whole? Have they created speakers? How have they affected the students, as well as the instructors teaching the courses? What does the university get out of offering these classes? I address all of these questions through this research, with the goal of better understanding the role of universities in language revitalization and the overall effects this has on the tribes and the Native students who are taking the courses.

1.1 Personal Background in Native American Language Curriculum

I was first exposed to the Mvskoke language at a very young age when I would visit my grandfather in eastern Oklahoma. He would often give commands to me in Mvskoke, such as “sit down,” “come eat,” “come here,” and many others. When he would work in his garden, I would hear him sing hymns in the language and they always sounded so beautiful. He would also take me to my ceremonial grounds at Arbeka, as would my father, during our stomp dances and Green Corn celebration. My freshman year of college I became an intern with the Mvskoke Language Department. My job was originally to work as the beading instructor for their summer immersion camp for middle and high school students, but soon I was given the opportunity to help create language learning materials such as bookmarks with traditional stories and prayers, bingo cards with animals, a new color wheel for the office, and various other responsibilities that

included the language. This internship fueled my love for Native American language education and pushed me to continue this passion and turn it into a possible career.

During my junior and senior years of college I took Mvskoke I and Choctaw I classes at East Central University in Oklahoma while also participating in many Native American language preservation projects, such as creating virtual flash cards in Choctaw for my teacher's classes, creating a virtual Word of the Day calendar in Mvskoke for the Mother Tongue Institute, and participating on a panel of Native American youth language learners speaking in front of members of the United Nations during the Year of Indigenous Languages event in Sulphur, Oklahoma. I then was accepted to the OU Native American Studies (NAS) master's program where I have continued my language education while studying NAS with an emphasis on the history, language, and culture of Native American tribes. Since being accepted into the program at OU, I have had the opportunity to take Native American language-focused linguistic courses in language acquisition, typology, language documentation and revitalization, and many others. Through these courses I have gained a deeper understanding of how language is successfully acquired, theories of how to revitalize a sleeping language, and the skills needed to work alongside a tribally-run language department. During this time, I also created a children's book that featured both English and Mvskoke translations for use in our tribal Head Start program, and I have worked as an intern for the Native American Language archives at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, helping review their Mvskoke files and providing descriptions and translations for those that had missing information.

When I was entering my second year of graduate school, I decided I wanted to do research involving my love of Native American language revitalization and education for Native American youth and young adults. After having multiple discussions with my colleagues and

classmates in the NAS program, I have concluded that everyone's language learning journey is different, including how they have learned (if they have been given the opportunity at all) and how much exposure they have had to the language in comparison to what is needed in order to become successful language speakers. OU offers an array of NAL courses in order to provide their students with the unique opportunity to learn these languages. NAL courses also count for the university's general education "foreign language" requirement. Having been involved in this system, I wanted to take a deeper look at what the impact of teaching NAL courses at OU has been. Being that I did not fully start my language journey until I was in college myself, I feel a strong sense of responsibility to make my university a place where another Native language learner could get that spark that maybe one day will lead them to become a speaker and help their tribe revitalize their language.

1.2 Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the NAL courses being taught in a higher education setting through the tribal lens, with an emphasis on the OU language courses taught in the NAS department. This study includes an overview of the importance of language revitalization for Native American tribal languages, a review of the literature on language acquisition and the linguistic input needed in order to achieve fluency, and the structure and history of the NAL courses at OU. The core of this thesis consists of interviews I conducted with Native language students, OU NAL course instructors, and language instructors in a tribal language program. These individuals contributed information that allows us to evaluate the impact of the OU NAL courses and what can be changed or improved upon in order to better support tribal language revitalization efforts.

When conducting this research, it is important to acknowledge my positionality. I have an insider perspective to both learning the language in a higher education setting, as I had participated in Mvskoke I and Choctaw I courses in my undergraduate education, and as someone who has worked for the Muscogee Nation language program. This had provided me with my own experiences and take on language learning benefits and deficits in higher education, and also gave me the local relationships necessary to carry out this work. Another facet of my relationship to my research is that I am Native American (Mvskoke Creek) myself and therefore approach the topic through a tribal lens. My primary aim is to inform tribes in language decisions through this work, as it is they that are most affected by having their languages taught (or not taught) at OU.

2. Background Literature

Evaluating the impact of OU's NAL courses involves having some background in methods of language revitalization and ways in which we successfully acquire language. In this section I provide a brief overview of the background research on these topics, specifically with respect to Indigenous language revitalization, language acquisition, and school-based Indigenous language education. From this point on I will be implementing quotation marks when using the term "foreign language" when referring to the standard format for teaching languages courses in higher education institutions, as that is usually the classification university-based NAL courses are given. This label is inappropriate, since Native American languages are the original languages belonging to this country, long before colonization; there is nothing "foreign" about them.

2.1 Revitalization

"A language that is not a language of government, nor a language of education, nor a language of commerce or wider communication is a language whose very existence is threatened

in the modern world" (Hinton 3). In contemporary society, most Native American tribal members speak English or Spanish in their everyday lives, both of which are languages of colonization and assimilation. This means that actively fostering domains for Indigenous languages to be used is an ongoing challenge for language activists.

A common question language activists receive is, why do we care that Native American languages are going extinct or if no one uses them? Simply put by Hinton (5), "the loss of language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems, oral literacy and musical traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge, and important cultural practices and artistic skills." The loss of Native languages is a loss not only for Native Americans, but also for the whole world. The response to this is language revitalization, which can be practiced in many ways, and has many goals:

> At its most extreme, language revitalization refers to the development of programs that result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community and bringing it back into full use in all walks of life. Revitalization can also begin with a less extreme state of loss, such as that encountered in Irish or Navajo, which are both still the first language of many children and are used in many homes as the language of communication, though both languages are losing ground. (Hinton 5)

The Native languages currently taught at OU are all languages that currently have speakers, but most are not being acquired by children in their home communities, and therefore fall between the two extremes Hinton describes.

2.2 School-based Approaches

There are many approaches to language revitalization, and school-based programs are one of the leading options. “There are three main types of school-based language programs: teaching an endangered language as a subject (like a “foreign language”), bilingual education, and full-scale immersion programs. Different goals, benefits, limitations, and results characterize these three types” (Hinton 7). Since OU’s NAL classes fall under the category of teaching Indigenous languages as “foreign languages”, I focus here on that type of model.

While Indigenous language classes at the university level often exist as part of the same framework as “foreign language” classes taught at the university, “one important difference between most immigrant languages and indigenous languages in most cases, the immigrants’ heritage languages are still strong in the old country (Hinton 3).” This gives those students a stronger opportunity to interact virtually in a classroom setting, simply go visit where those languages are spoken, or have a conversation with a native speaker. For many Native American languages, these are no longer options.

In general, universities are western academic colonial institutions. They are therefore inherently not spaces that are welcoming to Indigenous peoples, languages, and methods, which has posed challenges for the successful implementation of NAL courses in the academy. “Educating Indigenous and non-Indigenous students requires establishment and expansion of safe Indigenous spaces within the Western institution that can both support student learning, and facilitate student contributions to insight and progression on issues affecting Indigenous peoples” (Chew et al. 76). Fitting NAL courses into the western university framework for foreign languages often constrains them in ways that are antithetical to Indigenous paradigms for learning and teaching languages.

A related issue faced by NAL classes in a college setting is that "institutional bureaucracy often places limits on community participation, an element vital to the success of language programs" (Chew et al. 76). According to a former professor in the Anthropology department at OU, during the creation of the NAL courses, there was debate as to whether to allow non-teacher-certified language speakers from the community to be allowed to teach at a college level, as it is generally required for university faculty to hold PhDs or at least a teaching certification. It was not until 2014 that the state of Oklahoma implemented Native American Language Teacher Certification for those of who met certain criteria (Professional Standards: Teacher Education and Certification 2014), which was landmark legislation that facilitated many speakers of Native languages becoming teachers, particularly in Oklahoma grade schools.

Other research has confirmed the importance of involving the community in Indigenous language learning. Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (136-159) document the structure of the NAL courses at the University of Victoria in Canada, which at the time of writing had been in operation for 13 years. They report that the development of community-based language learning is a necessary part of being responsive to the local tribal communities' needs, and doing so supports and empowers the self-determination of those communities, which is vital in the success of language revitalization. These courses were created in partnership and collaboration with the local Indigenous communities. Through the university's Department of Linguistics and the Division of Continuing Studies collaborating with an Indigenous post-secondary institution in British Columbia, they were able to create multiple programs and language certifications, such as a diploma in Indigenous language revitalization, a Bachelor of Education in Indigenous Language Revitalization, a Graduate Certification, a Master's degree in Indigenous Language Revitalization, and a Certificate in Aboriginal Language Revitalization. These programs aim to

provide “contexts, frameworks, and understanding around language loss, maintenance, and recovery with the goal of equipping those working to revive their languages” (Czaykowska-Higgins et al. 140). Being that these courses were designed to be as community-centered as possible, the university, through their partnership with the local tribes, was able to offer these courses in the local community. Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (141) stated that “all courses are offered in a cohort model composed of members of the partnering language community. In addition, almost all the courses are offered in the community.” This practice not only allows the students to learn the language, but also experience the everyday culture of the local tribal communities whose languages are being taught.

2.3 Acquisition

While the Indigenous language as a “foreign language” model is quite common, it is widely acknowledged that it is not a particularly effective way to create proficient speakers. “The language-as-subject program has two disadvantages: there is usually not enough exposure time to bring a student to fluency, and the program does not create any real situations for communication” (Hinton 7). This leads to two questions: (1) what is actually required to generate proficient L2 speakers, and (2) what might we expect college classes to generate in terms of language proficiency?

We know from studies of language acquisition that what and how much language a person hears (linguistic “input”) affects how well they learn the language. “Quantity” refers to the total amount of language someone is exposed to, often in utterances or words per hour of contact time. “Quality” refers to how linguistically rich the input is, including factors like how diverse the words and structures are, if one is exposed to narrative and conversational genres, how long are the utterances, etc. (cf. e.g. Rowe and Snow 2020). It is therefore important that the

linguistic input students receive in NAL classes involves sufficient quantity and quality to retain as much language as possible during the short duration of the course.

With respect to quantity, research indicates that in order to be successful in learning a second language, that language needs to make up no less than 25-30% of the total input (everything one hears in a day/week/year) (Genesee 2007; Baker 2014). O'Grady et al. (42) investigated the input received by students in multiple school-based Indigenous immersion programs and found that the amount of time the teacher was actually speaking to the students averaged around 13-25% of the school-day contact time. While this does fall within the minimum recommended range for acquisition and roughly matches first-language acquisition hourly exposure rates, it does not take into account the percentage of the children's day, week, and year spent outside of school, where they may be receiving no additional input. This means that even in an immersion school setting, students who do not hear comparable amounts of language outside the school environment are unlikely to meet the minimum recommended levels of input for successful language acquisition.

At the time of writing, each NAL course at OU is taught five days a week, for 50 minutes each class (more than some other college language classes). This means that students experience a maximum of 4 hours and 10 minutes of language a week, and 62.5 hours in a 15-week semester. Assuming students do not hear or interact in Native languages outside of class, ~4% of their total input is in the language, which is far short of the minimum 25% exposure. This makes it virtually impossible for any language-as-a-subject-style class to create proficient speakers. Additionally, OU's NAL classes are not taught in an immersion style, meaning that the actual exposure to the language is even less.

With respect to quality, O'Grady et al. (448-449) found that about half of what teachers said to students in the immersion schools they studied consisted of the same 50 words. While this is in line with findings for first language English acquisition (Quick et al. 2019), the challenge for school programs is that the student does not usually have 6+ years (as children do) over which to accumulate enough words to become fully conversational. In the case of the OU NAL courses, students may take as little as one semester up to as many as three semesters of a language. Findings from studies of vocabulary suggest that it takes 10-12 exposures to a word to be able to produce it appropriately (Schwartz and Terrell 1983). While we do not have figures for the number and types of words produced per hour in OU's NAL classes, it is likely that they are also limited in the quality of input that they can provide. On top of that, as Leanne Hinton and others have noted, the input one receives in a classroom is often not particularly representative of how language is used in real life (Hinton 2001; Hornberger 2008).

2.4 Summary

What does all this mean for the OU NAL courses? Many NAL courses in higher education fall short of their stated goals due to "insufficient exposure to the language input, and ineffective strategies which often emphasize contextually lacking noun and phrase memorization and English explanations of the language rather than Indigenous language speaking and listening opportunities" (McIvor 39). There is simply not enough language exposure or time allotted in a college class model for students to achieve proficiency. Although there are many disadvantages to the school-based style of language teaching, as we see in the interviews in section 4, there are still benefits to offering these classes, such as educating the students on Native American culture and creating Native representation in the university space. And while a NAL class might be just a small step in the overall trajectory of a student's education, it might lead to a giant leap in a

student's language journey that can in turn lead them to contribute to a tribe's language revitalization efforts (McIvor 38-47).

3. History of NAL Courses at OU

To understand the NAL classes at OU, we must first know something about their origins and what the goals were for the program. Originally, there was not a NAS department at OU and there were no NAL courses taught at the university. In fact, the courses themselves were not offered at the university until 1991. The courses themselves were originally developed within the university's Anthropology department, and at the time there were no similar programs (Fowler 1996). This was OU's first attempt at creating something completely unique that would catch the attention of other universities and tribal communities. They wanted to be able not only to offer NAL courses to their students, but also to train their students to become language teachers themselves (Fowler 1996).

3.1 Origin of NAL Classes in Anthropology Department

The Department of Anthropology was the first department at the university to implement NAL courses, beginning in 1991. This was three years before the creation of the NAS program in 1994, which would later go on to become the NAS department that exists today (Barton 1996). Importantly, the NAL classes at OU were largely created in response to the wishes of Oklahoma tribal nations. "For the past several years many of the Tribes in Oklahoma have contacted the Department of Anthropology for assistance with language preservation programs" (Fowler 3). The fact that tribes felt that there was need for college-level language classes, and that OU was an appropriate place for them, was a strong foundation for the creation of mutually beneficial and tribally responsive partnerships around language. It is also important to note that during the 1990s most tribes did not have language programs and thus could not provide language

education and revitalization to their citizens themselves, so having an institution such as OU implementing these courses might be the only support the tribes received in preserving their languages. “In planning the various components of the proposed certificate program, the Department of Anthropology has consulted native speakers, experienced instructors in the language classes, Native American educators and Tribal officials, alumni of the language classes, and OU faculty members with expertise in linguistic pedagogy” (Fowler 3). This shows that tribal experts were involved in the decision-making process for how their languages were being taught to students, which is in line with expectations for collaborative community-engaged work (cf. Bischoff and Jany 2018).

For this research, I reached out to a former professor of Anthropology and asked for their point of view on the NAL courses, as this individual was in the department during the first years that the NAL courses were offered. They had started working in the department in 2002 and during their time there they felt that the purpose of the classes was to raise the prestige of Native American languages no matter how little or how much language was taught, so that they had equal status to the other “foreign language” classes taught at the university. Changing people's attitudes towards Native Americans and their languages was a theme in the early years of the NAL classes, as the majority of those enrolled at the time were non-Native students. That said, the former professor did comment that “every single one of the (NAL) teachers spent way more time and effort in really reaching out to the Native students that were really wanting to learn the language.”

When asked who was teaching the NAL courses during their time in the Anthropology department, the former professor made it very clear that originally the courses were taught by professors from the Anthropology department who would bring in speakers from the

communities to help create their curriculum, then a few years later they were able to hire those speakers as teachers of the class themselves. The department also struggled with trying to defend why they should allow native speakers who did not have a college degree to teach college level language courses, a battle which they eventually won with university administration. Their instructors used a teaching method that emphasized language structure, and students were taught things like the rules and patterns of sound combinations, word formation, and sentence structure, while also learning the cultural context behind the language of the tribe or tribes it belongs to (Fowler 1996).

Additionally, according to the former Anthropology professor, while the Anthropology department received tremendous support from the tribes for the NAL courses, there were also some concerns tribal members expressed. Some tribes apparently did question why native speakers were teaching at the university rather than in their tribal communities. There was also contention around whether L2 speakers should be allowed to teach at the university level, as many tribes at the time would not allow L2 speakers to teach their language classes. This may have contributed to some instructors coming to OU, as they were not welcome to teach in their own tribal community.

3.3 Goals and Mission Statement of Original NAL Courses

I was able to track down the original purpose and goals for the NAL courses in the contemporaneous correspondence of the Anthropology department with the university, kept in the Native American Languages collection at the Sam Noble Museum. The stated goal was to "offer quality instruction of Native American language courses at the University of Oklahoma. Objective: Teach on a self-support basis the various Native American language courses" (University of Oklahoma Department of Anthropology 1993). When comparing this focus with

the NAL classes as they are currently offered, not much has changed. The students I interviewed made comments about how their teachers were very detail-oriented in teaching the language and wanted each student to have a strong understanding of the language's sentence structure, be able to have conversations with classmates, have good pronunciation, and understand the culture/history of the tribe.

When interviewing one of the NAL teachers at OU, they informed me that they themselves created the curriculum for their class, rather than it being handed down by the university. This statement demonstrates continuity of the original objective of having NAL instructors teach on a self-support basis. They also stated that the language is their own, and therefore they know exactly what to do and they are able to make a smooth transition for their students who continue on to the upper-level classes. They know how to connect the courses for students, and that is why they support having autonomy in the creation of the curriculum.

3.4 Present Status of NAL Courses

In the NAS department, NAL courses are usually 5 days a week and the classes themselves last 50 minutes. This means that each student receives 250 minutes (about 4 hours) of language a week. The department currently offers 4 NAL classes in Kiowa, Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw. During the first years of OU's NAL program there were classes available in Kiowa, Creek/Seminole, Cherokee, and Choctaw, as well as in Comanche and Lakota (Fowler 2). As such, the number of languages we offer at OU has decreased since their inception.

As far as the curricula for the courses is concerned, it appears that the pedagogical approach has not changed much. According to the NAL section of the NAS website, the courses "combine lessons in the grammar of the language, vocabulary lessons, and supplementary material and activities designed to situate language learning in cultural and historical context"

(www.ou.edu/cas/nas/native-american-language-program 2023). While individual instructors have worked hard to modify and improve their materials over the years, the overall structure is very similar to the original proposal for these courses as outlined by the Anthropology department in the 1990s.

Another issue facing the OU NAL classes now versus when they first started is that more and more tribes have in the last 20 years created their own language departments and offer language courses that are a little closer to home, or are online. This then allows the tribes to have full control over what aspects of their languages are being taught and to whom. Many of these courses are also free to the citizens, compared to those of OU which are priced like other college classes. This has resulted in OU NAL courses having decreasing enrollment in recent years, as there are now more options for learning Native American languages.

4. Indigenous Research Methods

When conducting this research, it was important as a Native American scholar to maintain a Native mindset and perspective on the world around me. I drew upon Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* to best understand my positionality in this research. "Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world: that's your ontology" (Wilson 175). My ontology for this research invokes the power that our Native languages contain. When colonizers took our children from us and sent them to the boarding schools and forced them to speak English, they were attempting to take away our power. Since the creation of these boarding schools, we have had to fight to keep our language and revitalize it so our youth and the next generation can continue our legacy. When I worked at my tribe's language department, I remember when they taught me to pray in the language. They told me the only way the Great Creator is going to hear you is if you speak in the language. Our language must be so

powerful if the only way that our higher being can hear me is if I speak my tribal tongue. This is one of the main driving forces behind my work, to provide ways for Native Americans to learn their languages given that many of us were not provided the opportunity to in our youth, and many at OU are only exposed to them though college-level NAL courses. This reminds me of Wilson's statement that all Indigenous research methodologies must be working towards social change. That is what I want from this research, to be able to provide information not only to the NAS department, but also to the university itself in order to bring better representation to and create futurity for the NAL courses at OU.

Wilson also discusses Indigenous epistemology**,** which is "how you think about that reality" (Wilson 175). We Native people are resilient and that is part of what defines us as a community. Relationality and kinship are what give us our reality and strength, for it is through kinship that we learn the language and culture. That is exactly what our NAL courses have the potential to provide, by being there for those wanting to learn the language, with our teachers showing them the way.

The most difficult part of my research has related to axiology, "a set of morals or a set of ethics" (Wilson 175). I was raised around my language but not necessarily in it. I heard it from my grandfather, but I was never required to speak it. I was always told to keep our language amongst our people as there are some things that cannot be shared or understood by the outside world. So culturally I had a hard time understanding why we offered Creek language classes not only to non-Muscogee tribal citizens, but also to non-Native students. My paradigm as a Mvskoke person met with my approach as a Native American scholar when I reflected on a common theme found in NAS, what Robert Craig stated in his essay "Institutionalized Relationality: A Native American Perspective on Law, Justice and Community" about how

"what sustains the lives of peoples are bonds of kinship relations that bind human and nonhuman life together with a sense of mutual responsibility and caring that is mostly aptly captured by the Lakota phrase *Mitakuye Oysain*, all are relatives" (Craig 285). As a scholar I have kept this quote in mind, that we as Natives share in our kinship and understanding of the world and it is our job to maintain balance with others. In the case of NAL classes, this means educating others so that they better understand us as a people, while also respecting the wishes of other Native Americans and representing their ideologies. One person does not speak for Native Americans as a whole, but everyone has a voice and should be equally heard. To me this is all part of approaching Native language work through a tribal lens.

My intent for this research is to provide feedback on and improve our understanding of the NAL courses that are offered through the NAS department at OU. While the institutional perspective is important to supporting NAL classes in higher education, I am particularly interested in viewing this situation through a tribal lens: do members of these tribes view these courses that are open to all students as a positive way to preserve their languages, or do they feel like they are sharing information that should stay in the community? Does providing language courses at universities take needed resources away from tribal language revitalization efforts, or are university language programs feeding better qualified people back into those efforts? By viewing these issues through a tribal lens, I seek to clarify the overall picture of the harms and benefits these courses have on our tribal communities.

4.1. Participants

In order to investigate the impact and effectiveness of the NAL classes at OU, I conducted interviews with OU students who have taken university-based and tribal language classes, NAS language instructors at OU, and language teachers at a tribal language program.

Interviewees were selected based on their experience and their relationships to the researcher and the topic of interest. Student interviewees included three students at OU who have taken at least one NAL course at OU or are planning to take an OU NAL course in the near future. Each interviewee provided a narrative that formed the foundation of this study. Each was able to share their point of view on the benefits of the language courses, while also providing feedback into how said courses could be improved upon. All interviewees volunteered their time for this research. I also tried to maintain this ideology and Indigenous viewpoint by keeping the identities of those I interviewed anonymous, as there were a few individuals who did not wish to be named as they believed that they do not speak for their people and did not want their opinions connected to them individually.

The first student interviewee is a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma who, before coming to the university, had very little exposure to their language since they are from out of state and were not given the opportunity to be around their people. Once at OU, Student #1 took multiple classes in their own Cherokee language. Student #2 is a descendant of the Lakota Sioux tribe who was also raised outside their tribal community. Once at OU, this student decided to take Cherokee language courses, though it was not the language of their people. Student #3 is a member of the MHA (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara, aka Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation of North Dakota), Yuchi, and Muscogee Nations who was raised around the Hidatsa and Mvskoke languages. They plan to take the Creek language courses at OU in the near future.

I also traveled to the Muscogee Nation headquarters in Okmulgee and interviewed two language teachers (mvhayvs) at the Muscogee Nation Language Preservation and Revitalization Program. One interviewee has experience teaching the language at a college level, and both have

experience teaching young children through adults. Both mvhayvs are L1 speakers and both did not start speaking English until they had reached the age of five, at which point they went to school and were forced to learn and speak English.

For perspective on teaching a NAL course at a non-tribal institution, I interviewed one of the language teachers in the NAS department. The main goal of this interview was to understand why they teach at OU and if they feel they are making a difference in language revitalization for the tribal community. During the interview we focused on their curriculum and who creates/controls it, as well as their hopes for the future for the NAL courses.

4.2 Format for Analysis

Before conducting this research, I had prior approval through the university Internal Review Board (IRB) given that my research involved human subjects, i.e., conducting interviews. Each interview ranged from ten minutes to an hour and took place after I received a signed consent form to use their feedback in my research. All interviews were recorded on a Zoom H1 recorder and then backed up to an external hard drive as well as the cloud. All interviews were done in person, either on OU's campus for the OU students and faculty, or at the Mvskoke language program in Okmulgee, OK.

In these interviews, I applied Indigenous research protocols by providing those being interviewed space to freely speak their minds as Indigenous peoples, even if it did not directly speak to the question I had asked them. This ties back to Wilson's conception of an Indigenous ontology where allowing those being interviewed to freely share their views of the world around them provides a more authentic picture of how Indigenous languages in higher education contributes to their learning environment and the wellbeing of their tribal people.

Each group that was interviewed had their own set of guiding questions around which the conversations were structured. Many of the questions followed the same themes, namely how the NAL courses have affected them, the university, or tribal communities. For the students, the core questions asked included:

1. Describe your background/history learning Native American language(s).
2. For the NAL classes you have taken, what was/were the format(s)?
3. How often did those classes meet and for how long?
4. Why do you believe the class/classes you have taken was/were formatted in that way?
5. What did your class mainly focus on? (Examples: reading in the language, singing traditional hymns, learning basic words, sentence structure, conversation, etc.)
6. What was the student-teacher ratio?
7. If you could change something in how you were taught or have taught in your class(es), what would it be?
8. Did you take a tribal language class that was not your tribal language? If so, why?
9. Would you recommend others take a different tribe's language course? Why/why not?
10. How do you feel about what your tribe currently offers in terms of language classes/support?
11. How do you feel about what your university offers in terms of language classes/support?
12. What advice would you offer the university to improve on the structure and proficiency results of their NAL courses? What advice would you offer your tribe?
13. If you could talk to the president of OU about the impacts of teaching NAL courses on campus, what would you say?

14. Do you think that everyone should be able to take NAL courses regardless of whether they are Native? Why/why not?
15. How do you think teaching NAL courses in a non-tribal university setting has affected the tribes whose languages are being taught?
16. Do you think universities should continue providing/adding Native languages classes? Why/why not?

For the Muscogee Nation mvhayvs, their questions were similar to those for OU students, but focused more on their experiences as speakers teaching and working in the tribal context, and how that informs their views of university-based language education.

1. Can you provide your background in the Mvskoke language?
2. What language levels have you taught (ages, beginner/advanced, tribal versus non-tribal)?
3. How long have you taught the language?
4. What is the structure for your adult language courses (duration, curriculum, how often you met, student-teacher ratio, etc.)?
5. If someone truly wanted to learn the language, how often must they be exposed to it?
6. If you have taught a college level language course before, what was your experience teaching the course?
7. Do you believe teaching NAL courses to all students (including non-Native students) is harmful or beneficial to the languages being taught?
8. Do you think NAL courses should be available to non-Native students? Should Native students have priority?

9. Do you think it is more beneficial to learn the language in the tribal community or in a classroom setting at a university?
10. Do you think the university should be required to have a speaker from the tribal community teach the NAL courses at OU?
11. Where do you think universities fail in trying to teach NAL courses?
12. Why do you think that a speaker might choose to teach at a non-tribal university versus in their own tribal community?
13. What resources does the Muscogee Nation offer for adults to learn the language?
14. Where do you see Mvskoke language preservation in the next few years?
15. What would you like to see at a non-tribal university in the future with respect to NAL courses?

When interviewing the instructor of one of the NAL language courses offered by OU, I wanted to focus on the structure of their courses while also receiving their input on the university's treatment of NAL instructors. I was also interested in why they chose to teach at a university versus their tribal community, or if they do both, how they balance their time.

1. What language do you teach at OU?
2. How long have you taught at OU?
3. Do you teach your language in your tribal community as well?
4. Were you raised in the language? If not, how did you learn your language?
5. What is your curriculum for your classes?
6. Is there a set curriculum that you have to follow or are you able to teach whatever you view as necessary in your course?
7. How often does your class meet?

8. Do you believe it is important that we offer NAL courses at OU? Why/why not?
9. Do you yourself have any experience taking NAL courses in a classroom or university setting?
10. Do you think your students receive enough language exposure in your courses to be successful speakers of the language?
11. In your opinion, what is the best way to learn a language? How important is it to include lessons on culture and history in your courses?
12. What do you think the benefit is to the university and the NAS department for offering NAL courses? Do you believe that the university takes pride in being able to offer the NAL courses?
13. What do you think NAS and the university can do to improve the NAL courses at OU?
14. What do you hope that each student takes away from your NAL class?
15. What do you hope to see in the future for OU's NAL courses?

5. Results

Overall, the feedback on OU's NAL courses was positive and supportive of the efforts of the instructors of the courses. The two students that had taken OU NAL courses felt they benefited from their experience, and both wish to continue learning the language. The student that was raised around the language and had only taken NAL courses in middle school and high school had many ideas about what they would like to see in the college-level courses they plan to take in the coming semesters. When interviewing the mvhayvs from the Muscogee Nation language department, they had strong feelings about who should be allowed to teach NAL courses, especially at the college level. Both the mvhayvs and the OU language instructor felt that the most efficient way of learning the language is in the community with tribal elders, if that

is a possibility. They also noted that for students that were not able to grow up in their tribal community, these courses might be their only opportunity to be exposed to it.

Each group also had feedback about areas of possible improvement for the future of the NAL courses at OU. The students wished that we provided more languages and that the classes were more affordable, while the Muscogee mvhayvs wished that the students were learning the language with an elder in the community versus in a classroom setting that lacks the necessary cultural context. The OU language instructor wished that they could have more opportunity to give their students a place to learn the cultural ways while still on campus grounds. The students echoed this when discussing the effects on the tribes of teaching these languages to outsiders, how you need that cultural foundation to understand the language. When asked if it is important to have NAL courses at OU, the responses were all yes. The students brought up the fact that OU has a large Native American student population and how important it is for the Native students to feel at home. Another brought up the point that OU benefits from offering these courses because they make the university unique, which is a recruiting tool for perspective students. One of the students even stated that one of the reasons they came to OU for school was to be able to take courses such as the NAL classes. The two students interviewed that had taken NAL courses at OU both wish to continue learning the languages they had taken in those courses, and are also interested in learning other Native languages.

After conducting the student interviews, I have come to the conclusion that these courses spark an interest in language learning for the students. Given that the students only heard about 4 hours of language a week, it was not near enough to create fluency but maybe it taught them enough to make them want to learn more. Even if a student only comprehended a few words, that is still a few words that can be taught to the student's family and friends and strengthen the

language. This was something also pointed out by the OU language instructor, which they considered a strength of the OU NAL courses.

5.1 Student Perspectives

Through my interviews with Native American students at OU about their personal experiences with the NAL courses provided by the NAS department, they reported that they enjoyed their experiences in the NAL courses, but there were also aspects of the experience that were lacking. I provide more detail on each students' individual responses in the following sections.

5.1.1 Student #1

Overall, Student #1 was of the opinion that the NAL courses are needed at this university and stated, "I think it would be a huge loss to the Native American studies department and also the University of Oklahoma if Native American language courses weren't offered." During our interview, we discussed at length the future of Native American languages and our people being represented at the university, and what actions must be taken to continue our representation on campus. When I asked, "if you could have a discussion with our university president about the impacts of the NAL classes at the university, what would you tell him?" Student #1 replied:

> I would tell him that what's being done is fine but let's expand it. Let's have more tribes. We have a lot of tribal nations within Oklahoma so let's try to get instructors to teach those and let's at least have it where it could be part of a core requirement. Let's have more tribes participate and send their speakers if they would like to do that and participate and expand their languages. That's the main thing I would focus on.

In terms of improvements, Student #1 made specific suggestions such as waiting to include the syllabary until Cherokee III, since the syllabary does not represent all of the phonetic contrasts in the language:

> Cherokee is a very complex language. It's a tonal language and I think I would say master the pronunciation for English speakers who might have difficulty with that and the phonetics of it and trying to get the proper tone and tonality for the specific words. Its beneficial to leave the syllabary which is an entirely different avenue of the language until they feel like students have had a firmer grasp within the language.

5.1.2 Student #2

Student #2 is a descendant of the Lakota Sioux Tribe who had not been exposed to any Native American language until they transferred to OU for graduate school. During this time, they took the Cherokee I course, even though it is not their Native language (OU does not currently offer Lakota). They had overall positive feedback and made statements about how they felt like they received "a well-rounded exposure" not only to the language but also to the history and culture of the Cherokee themselves. When asked if they believed that people should take a NAL course that is not their own tribal language, they responded that:

> It is important to be able to understand what is going on in the Native community in Oklahoma. It makes you a more diverse person and it's something not many people are able to do and that sets you apart. You are also able to connect to your ancestors and fellow tribal relations that might not necessarily come from the same tribe as you.

The most powerful statement this person gave related to how they never wish to see a world without Native American languages, stating that "I know we should not use the term 'dying language' but that's essentially what I don't want to happen. I don't want us to lose it

forever because of the lack of acceptance or wanting to invest in the languages or not having the resources to get an individual that can teach the NAL classes."

Student #2 also provided feedback on what the university and department could improve for students with respect to NAL classes. "I don't feel like we have near enough support. There is a huge burden on our faculty and the department because there needs to be more individuals working in the department to be able to offer more languages or just more ability to draw individuals in to taking these classes." They also said that they wish they could have taken the class for a longer time and that it was not as expensive to take the course. Cost is an important factor for Native American students, since many struggle to pay for their education and sometimes are forced to make hard choices between classes they want to take and those that they need to graduate.

Although Student #2 made comments on some failings of the university, they also provided encouragement by stating there are a lot of positive things that OU does. "We have a very significant kinship relationship because people do have the ability to take these classes and speak to each other in their Native language or in a language that relates to other tribal relations." If given the opportunity to speak to the university president on the subject, they would remind them that all land is Native land, and that it is important and significant to the university and its history to acknowledge that.

> We have a huge population of Indigenous peoples on our campus and to not have them represented would be a disservice, dishonor, and disrespect to the community to which it serves because we do make up OU. We are the students and we do pay to be here and make a significant contribution to our communities. Our identity is mostly rooted in the

language and culture. Obviously, language is the basis as it forms our culture and the way we understand the world and how we communicate it.

5.1.3 Student #3

Student #3 had multiple tribal affiliations including the Hidatsa, Yuchi, and Muscogee Nations. They had a different language learning experience compared to the others, as they had not yet taken a NAL course in a college setting but instead had taken language classes in middle school and high school. They also had informal language exposure through attending a Native American church where Mvskoke hymns were sung, and through interacting with their Hidatsa grandmother. When asked if they planned to enroll in any of the OU NAL courses, they assured me that they are interested in enrolling in the coming semesters.

Given that this person has previous exposure to Native languages, I asked what their ideal classroom setting and curriculum would be if they were to enroll in the NAL courses next semester. Their feedback consisted of wanted to be taught traditional hymns, literature, and vocabulary. One thing that was surprising is that they wished that the classes were every other day rather than every day, which is currently the structure. This student is in graduate school, so being in a class that meets every day can be challenging when trying to balance schoolwork at that level. That said, they do stand by the NAS department's reasoning for having five day a week language classes, saying that it would make the language easier to retain if practiced every day. Their biggest desire for their ideal language class is to have an elder from the community teach the course "as language and culture goes hand in hand, and culture must be included because if you don't know the culture you won't know the language."

5.2 OU NAL Instructor

One of the NAL instructors at OU agreed to be interviewed for this research to provide perspective on being a Native American teaching a tribal language in a non-tribal higher education institution. They were raised in the language and have never taken a NAL course in a classroom setting. This instructor is however a very experienced Native language instructor, with over 40 years teaching the language within their tribal community through teaching basket-making, and teaching at OU for 18 years. When discussing if they believed that students received enough language in their class to be successful speakers themselves, the instructor was very quick to comment that they did not. They also explained how historical and cultural context is needed to learn Native languages because "it all combines. You have to know your tradition, your culture, and your language." They also gave me cultural examples on the importance of knowing your personal culture heritage for ceremonial and cultural purposes that I cannot share in this thesis.

When asked if it is important that OU offers these courses (and if so, why), the instructor felt that NAL classes are important because they serve as a support system for all the Native American students that hail from so many tribes. They said that they are there for the Native students belonging to their tribal affiliation so that they can learn their language, which is a fundamentally different relationship than most learning Spanish or other foreign languages have with their instructors. "They live in Oklahoma where the language and the tribes are. It's important because that's who they are." While this instructor felt that the university does support Native language revitalization efforts, they do believe that the university can and should expand the NAL courses and offer more languages and hire more instructors. In terms of the future for OU NAL courses, they stated that they hope that the program can grow and that they can find an area in the university completely to themselves (perhaps a building of their own). Having a

dedicated space would create more possibilities for implementing Indigenous pedagogical methods, and better ways of educating students through nature and stronger cultural demonstrations.

The overall hope that the instructor has for their courses is that each student at least comes away with a few words in the language. They told a story about a previous student who had returned to them years after taking their course in order for them to receive translations for a project they were working on in their career. The instructor admitted that they had frequently asked themselves over the years if it is worth it to teach the language to these university students. They felt that stories such as that of this student returning years later demonstrate that it is.

5.3 Muscogee Nation Language Preservation and Revitalization Program Mvhayvs

Although the mvhayvs in the Muscogee Nation Language Preservation and Revitalization Program teach the language at different levels (one teaches beginner's Mvskoke to adults and the other teaches intermediate and conversational Mvskoke courses to adults, as well as college-level courses) both had very similar views as to how higher education institutions should conduct their NAL courses and who should be allowed to teach them.

When discussing exposure and input, both agreed that you have to be around the language constantly to truly understand and speak the language. They themselves stated that the one-hour-long language courses they teach every week are simply not enough. They also addressed the role of motivation in learning, with one instructor making the point that "it does not matter how much a student is exposed to the language if they are just not simply interested in learning." As is the case with OU's college courses, many students enroll primarily because it fulfills a university requirement and are not really interested in learning or speaking the language, or participating in the culture, outside the context of that class. However, both

instructors felt it was still important that a university like OU offers NAL courses, saying "it is about time Native Americans are recognized and make people realize there are other languages spoken besides English and that we are no longer hidden people anymore and we are still there and that we are the true Americans."

When asked if we should allow all students to take college-level NAL courses, one mvhayv responded, "we need to teach our own before we teach someone else," meaning that Native American college students should get priority in enrollment for the language courses over non-Native students taking them just to satisfy the general education requirement. Though they both supported the pursuit of higher education and the ability to take language courses at the college level, they both made strong points that it is best to learn the language within the tribal community and by spending time with elders in the community. One said, "it has to be like a living environment and everyday life to learn the language because that's how we learned." The other made a similar point, saying, "It's like when they say it takes a village to raise a child. The same can be said about learning the language. It starts at home and the community." Additionally, when asked who should be teaching the NAL courses at OU, they both made it very clear that it should be a tribal member from the community and someone who has been around the language all their life.

We also discussed how they thought universities like OU might improve their NAL classes. Their consensus was that universities need to be flexible in who they hire for NAL teaching positions. One stated that "an elder might not have the PhD needed to teach a college-level course but has all of that wisdom and knowledge from being a Native person." Much can be said about the passion and cultural understanding of elders and speakers of the community

such as themselves, so they believe it is only right for someone such as them to teach the next generation of tribal members both in the community and in the higher education setting.

5.4 Impact on the University

As mentioned by Student #3, OU has a large Native American student population, as does the state of Oklahoma. Student #2 also made a strong point that being able to take a Native American language course at the college level is very rare and therefore unique. All of these statements can mean positive things for OU. When it comes to educational institutions, you must have something that makes you stand out in order for students to apply to your university, and what better way in a state that has 39 federally recognized tribes and a large Native American population than to offer NAL courses that will draw in students? As was the case for some of the student interviewees, this might be the first time a Native American student has the opportunity to learn their tribal language. These interviews stand as evidence that this is something students consider important and is a factor for some in choosing to attend OU.

At the time of writing, the NAL courses at OU can fulfill the "foreign language" general education language requirement for all OU students in the College of Arts and Sciences. This is a mutually beneficial situation for the students and the university, where the university gets more diversity in its general education offerings, and students gain access to the unique experience of learning Native American languages which for many fulfills cultural needs.

Given that there was consensus from all interviewed parties that offering NAL courses at the university is a contribution to Native American language revitalization and a way of possibly creating future language speakers down the road, it is of the upmost importance that the university continues to offer and support NAL language courses. These courses not only are a great asset to the NAS program, they also allow the university as a whole to be able to

demonstrate their support for the Native American community, for their students, and for the tribes themselves.

5.5 Impact on Tribes

Student #2 made a statement in their interview that learning a Native American language in a non-tribal higher education setting has many positive outcomes, but also generates certain issues. One issue is that by learning in an educational setting as opposed to in the community, students might have a harder time understanding terms that they lack the appropriate cultural context for, which are difficult or impossible to reconstruct in the classroom context. “Words might be misrepresented, and certain words might not be understood versus what they might mean to an elder individual that has been in the community and practiced these ceremonies and traditions their entire lives.” Student #3 added to this point, noting that all Native American languages are endangered, and it is a positive thing that the university is doing its part in preventing the languages from going extinct, but they need to try their best to make provisions for tribal elders and people that grew up in the community to teach the courses. The mvhayvs at the Muscogee Nation also stressed how important it is to provide a person from the community to teach the courses. The OU NAS department’s collection of language teachers all hail from their tribal communities so it is of upmost importance that we continue this practice, per the wishes not only of the students but also of the language teachers in the tribal communities themselves.

Being that all the language instructors that currently hold a position in our OU NAL program are all from their own tribal communities and feel strong ties to their culture, it is worth noting how they came to be at OU. When interviewing one of the language instructors from our university who has over 18 years experience of teaching here, they told me that they also have at

one point taught in their tribal community and someday wish to get back to it. When discussing the topic of speakers choosing to teach at a university versus in the local communities, the former professor of Anthropology informed me that back then L2 speakers could not teach in their tribal communities and that resulted in many of them coming to OU. There is also the possibility that maybe they as teachers want to reach out to their community, those citizens outside of the tribe, other tribal communities, and maybe also non-Native students in order to increase the visibility of their language and its representation in Oklahoma as a whole. So, while the teachers at OU might have 'left' their communities to teach here, many of them still also teach in their communities in service of our Native students and making our identity as Native peoples known on campus.

5.6 Impact on Language Revitalization

One of the primary questions this research sought to address is whether/how college-level NAL classes support tribal language revitalization. Based on the interviews I conducted, the answer from both community and university members is that they do, although not necessarily in a linear or immediate way. These classes support the identities and development of Native American students who may one day continue their language education and possibly work for their tribe in the efforts to preserve and revitalizing their languages. Even if students only learn a few words, they can take that back to their communities, teach their families and friends, or use it in their work, as in the story about a former student who later worked on a language revitalization project to give back to their tribal community. This might only be a small deed, but it still plays its part in language revitalization.

The most recent example illustrating that graduates of NAL courses do in some cases go on to be active participants in language revitalization is Briana Mason, who will be graduating

with her Master's degree in NAS this year. After first being exposed to her tribal language while at college and taking NAL courses, she applied and was accepted to the Chikasha Academy Adult Immersion Program. She hopes to one day teach Chickasaw, and is currently participating in Chickasaw language revitalization activities like youth summer camps (OU Department of Native American Studies 2023). Continued contributions have also been made to Mvskoke language revitalization by OU NAS alumna Melanie Frye, who after taking NAL classes and earning her degree was hired by OU as our Creek language instructor. She is also active in language revitalization in her community. Finally, although I did not take NAL courses at OU (I took the Creek and Choctaw courses at East Central University), that opportunity to learn my language was a formative experience that led me to continue to learn and advocate for the Mvskoke language. It was also the impetus for this research, and my focus on providing insight into the outcomes of NAL courses with the emphasis on the effects of tribes whose languages are being taught as well as on the Native American students who are taking them. I myself also plan to possibly one day in the future to return to my tribe's language department and continue my contribution to language revitalization for the Muscogee Nation.

NAL classes also give the Native American community the opportunity to educate the non-Native students who take the courses about their culture and the true history of their people that often gets left out in history classes from grade school on through the college level. These courses create a sense of community that is completely unique, as they bring together Native students who are learning their languages with those of other tribes and also those without tribes at all.

So, while these courses might not create speakers, they still make a difference and strengthen the languages that are being taught. Student #2 stated that even though it has been a

while since their last language class, they can still use what they learned with their fellow classmates and friends. They were also able to understand some of the speakers when they went to North Carolina and visited the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. When I worked in the language department at the Muscogee Nation, I remember being frustrated when trying to learn a set of words I was using to create new language learning material and just could not get it. When I finally did learn it, I remember one of the language teachers looking at me and telling me, "it doesn't matter how small the amount of language you learn is. It's the fact you can still learn it at all. And take back these words you learn and teach it to the next generation so that they can carry your legacy."

5.7 Student Impact

Though neither Student #1 nor #2 felt as though they had finished their NAL courses as fluent speakers, they both felt that they did take away something from their time in those classes. Student #1 was able to better understand their own tribal language and Student #2 was able to find kinship with fellow Native Americans that come from a different tribe then themselves. They both as tribal citizens were positively impacted by their time in these classes and both wish to continue their Native language journeys. They themselves might not have had a large impact on their tribes yet, but this does not mean that they won't in the future. It only takes one dedicated person to help revitalize an endangered language and these courses might just be what that person needs to get started in making a difference.

Throughout the 32 years that the NAL courses have been offered at OU, even those students that have not continued on in language have developed into strong advocates for Indigenous languages, partly as a result of their experiences in those classes. A few of the many student success stories include Dr. Amanda Cobb-Greetham and Dr. heather ahtone, who were

some of the first individuals to take these courses at OU. Dr. ahtone has since become a curator for multiple Native American art museums, such as that of the Institute of American Indian Arts, the Southwestern Association of Indian Arts, and she is currently the senior curator at the First American's Museum in Oklahoma City. Dr. ahtone has also been an adjunct professor at the OU School of Art and Art History for the past four years (Chickasaw.tv 2023). Dr. Cobb-Greetham went on to become the founder of the Institute for American Indian Research at the University of New Mexico, the founding Director of the OU Native Nations Center, Chair of the OU NAS Department. She has also served on the board of trustees for the National Museum of the American Indian, and has been the editor for *Native American Quarterly*. She also served her tribe as the Chickasaw Nation Administrator of the Division of History and Culture, and during her tenure, oversaw the building of the Chickasaw Cultural Center and the creation of the Chickasaw Press, both of which foreground Chickasaw language throughout. Though neither one focuses on language in their research and occupation, both have still had a positive impact on their tribes and on representation of Native people and languages in higher education.

6. Conclusion

There is always room for improvement in any college-level course, program, or major. In the case of the OU NAL courses, the feedback I received all pointed to the conclusion that students, teachers, and tribal members feel that the NAL courses at OU are beneficial, and even critical to recognizing tribal sovereignty in this area. That said, there was also a longing for something more. The students all agreed that more languages should be offered in our program, as Oklahoma has 39 federally recognized tribes but only a handful of their languages are taught at one of the largest universities in the state. The mvhayvs of the Muscogee Language

Department supported the university providing a Creek language class, as well as others being taught by members from each language's tribal community.

It seems that the NAL courses at OU have not evolved very much since their creation in the 1990s, and in some ways the program has weakened, since we now offer fewer languages. The curriculum has not shifted to total immersion models (widely considered to be more effective), and it continues to be largely vocabulary, story, and linguistics-based. These courses have been available for more than three decades, and so much has changed for language revitalization since the 1990s. New pedagogical models have been developed, new research in Indigenous language acquisition has come out, and tribes have made great strides in creating language departments and sustaining their own language revitalization efforts. This change in context surrounding language ecologies in the state, as well as falling enrollments for OU's NAL courses, means it is time to re-evaluate the role of these classes and how they are conducted.

After 32 years of OU offering NAL classes, there is also the opportunity to reflect on their impact. There are case studies we can point to of multiple individuals who have taken these courses and gone on to have great impact on decolonizing the western higher education institutional paradigm. This includes individuals discussed in section 5.7, such as Dr. Amanda Cobb-Greetham and Dr. heather ahtone. It also includes those whose Native language learning journeys began or matured at OU, like Briana Mason, who has gone on to become a proficient speaker and champion of language revitalization in their community. These are just a few of many success stories over the years.

After considering the research into how much language is needed by adults to attain proficiency in a language, having classes that are only 50 minutes a day for 5 days a week simply does not meet that goal. However, NAL classes are only one facet of each tribe's language

revitalization strategy; creating interest, spreading awareness, and connecting people to their languages are also essential components of a successful revitalization effort. We see success every time a student leaves the class and shares what they learned with their family, friends, and tribal community.

Overall, the NAL courses seem beneficial to all parties. The university is able to provide unique courses that will draw in prospective students by offering something that many universities cannot. The students who take these courses might not walk away as fluent speakers, but they gain a new perspective on Native American culture and maybe have a drive to pursue learning more of the language. The students who do want to continue their language journeys might one day become speakers and go back to their communities and be that knowledge holder for their tribes. The tribes themselves might have to sacrifice by sending their speakers away from their communities in order to reach students at a non-tribal university, but it allows them to reach out to the ones that were raised outside of the tribe. As Native Americans it is often a challenge to prove that we still exist and to be represented properly in non-tribal institutions such as OU. However, being able to provide courses like our NAL offerings can lead to great things such as kinship amongst the Native American students and teachers, and provide them the cultural knowledge that they have always wanted but never received, all while meeting a course requirement for their college education.

Based on the results of this research, my recommendation is to continue striving for excellence in these courses as a whole. Of the 39 tribes of Oklahoma, we currently only offer 4 language classes (Kiowa, Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw), meaning that we only represent a fraction of the many tribes present not only in the state but also in the university population. Working with tribal communities is imperative in order to continually grow the NAL program

and make adding more languages possible. The tribes must also be involved in the decision-making about these classes, as they involve so much more than just teaching a language - they communicate a way of life and culture.

I would also recommend that the NAS department create partnerships with local tribes and begin offering a variation of the NAL classes that allow students to go to their tribal communities and learn the language from speakers in exchange for college credit, a model similar to the program at the University of Victoria discussed by Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (136-157) in section 2.2. This would allow the students more exposure to the language while also being around the culture. As mentioned in section 2, 4 hours a week is not enough to create a strong foundation in the language. If the university and NAS department truly want to provide meaningful support for language revitalization, I believe that sending students into the community via established partnerships with that local tribes is the best way to do that. You can only learn so much about any language in a classroom; language is social and derives so much meaning from the people who speak it and the places they inhabit. This is why studying a foreign language in its country of origin is so much more effective. Why can't we have the same for our languages? It is just like the statement one of the mvhayvs made, that when students want to learn the language, we must be able to provide for them and be there to support them because "it takes a village to raise a child (or in this case a college student) in the language."

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