

Why is language a cultural resource

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For an ethnic group, it forms part of the way meanings are constructed and contexts are created, facilitating social relations. It is, hence, easy to understand why ethnic groups cling to their languages with such fervor even when living in a foreign society – language is part of their cultural identity.

The dynamics of this fact is illustrated in the way bilingualism persists among Americans. Latinos, Asians, and other ethnic minorities speak at least two languages. Collectively, they represent a sizable portion of the American population. In education, this issue is important because, until only recently, the erstwhile government policy on language is “ English only.” The government reduced support for bilingual programs in education, effectively reducing bilingual teachers in the process. According to Katz (2004), if this policy will continue, it will seriously affect the chances of the children of the 47 million non-native English speakers today and in the future. Teachers who understand the language requirements of students would be scarce and students study in “ sink-or-swim” mainstream English classes, effectively compromising the attainment of academic proficiency. When language falls into disuse, the culture that constructed is gradually eroded as well. Its many other aspects would no longer have the means of representation. Language is not only a cultural resource for the ethnic minority that speaks it; it is also a resource for the community they live in. It forms part of the cultural convergence, which has made the American multi-cultural society success in the past.

It is imperative that policies should be adopted in order to protect and support the American indigenous languages, some of which are in danger of extinction. This is particularly important in the cases of the American Indians,
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who do not have a writing system that could have recorded their culture and history. Most of these ethnic groups transfer these artifacts orally and when their language finally falls into disuse, they would eventually perish as a people as they have no means to perpetuate their cultural identity. The most important aspect wherein provisions and support should be given is in education. Currently, there are some existing legislation and initiatives that aim to preserve and encourage the use of indigenous languages in the United States. For instance, there is the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, whose members teach at least one indigenous language. There was also the US Bilingual Education Act and the Native American Language Act. These initiatives, however, are insufficient and are threatened by the current government policies. Support for bilingualism has been reduced, which means that resources, particularly, funding from the government was cut, making instruction and learning at school difficult if not altogether nonexistent. There is a need for policies and more teachers that promote indigenous languages in the classroom environment.