

# Learning P'urhepecha as a second language: Reflections from a community-based workshop<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The P'urhépecha language workshop was a community initiative created by the collective Ireta P'urhépecha to provide a language learning space for second language learners. The workshop was planned using the communal governance structures of the organization, which are compatible with the community-based language planning framework (Hinton, 2013b; McCarthy, 2018). Our goal was to address the needs of the established P'urhepecha community in Washington state by providing high quality, accessible language instruction to adults who have not had the opportunity to learn the language and seek to strengthen their Indigenous roots through its preservation and transmission. This chronicle describes the general challenges faced by Indigenous communities in diaspora, as well as those faced by our community as we seek to reclaim our native languages in the face of social, cultural, and economic pressures. In order to address these challenges, we set out to create a culture-based language learning program for beginners that focused on communicative skills and met the unique needs of our community. We relied on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) framework and teaching techniques to inform our instruction because it is centered on the learners' natural ability to process language instead of focusing on heavy grammatical explanations. This project hopes to highlight the need to include the migrant communities living in the USA as an integral part of the language revitalization initiatives, as well as provide a template for other communities interested in starting their own language revitalization programs.

## RESUMEN

El taller de la lengua P'urhépecha fue una iniciativa comunitaria creada por el Colectivo

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<sup>1</sup> La versión en español de este artículo está disponible en el mismo volumen de *Lenguas Vivas*.

Ireta P'urhépecha para proveer un espacio de aprendizaje del P'urhépecha como segunda lengua. El taller se diseñó bajo las estructuras comunales organizativas del colectivo que son compatibles con el marco de Planificación basada en la comunidad (Hinton, 2013b; McCarthy, 2018). Nuestro objetivo era apoyar las necesidades de la comunidad P'urhépecha establecida en el estado de Washington al proveer instrucción de calidad a adultos que no han tenido la oportunidad de aprender la lengua y que buscan fortalecer sus raíces indígenas por medio de la salvaguarda y transmisión de la lengua. La presente crónica describe los desafíos generales que enfrentan las comunidades indígenas en la diáspora, y el contexto particular de nuestra comunidad al querer recobrar nuestras lenguas originarias a pesar de las presiones sociales, culturales y económicas. Basado en estos desafíos y contexto, creamos un programa para principiantes de segunda lengua con base en la cultura y con enfoque comunicativo. Nos apoyamos en el marco de la Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas (SLA) y sus técnicas de enseñanza para desarrollar instrucción adecuada ya que se centra en la habilidad natural del aprendiz para procesar el lenguaje en vez de enfocarse en la mera explicación gramatical. Este proyecto busca enfatizar la necesidad de incluir a las comunidades migrantes en los Estados Unidos como parte integral de los procesos de revitalización de lenguas y a su vez proveer un ejemplo para otras comunidades que tengan el interés de iniciar sus propios programas de revitalización de lenguas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The community-based P'urhepecha language workshop was organized by the collective Ireta P'urhepecha with support from the University of Washington Tacoma<sup>2</sup>. Its main objective was to create a space for community members to learn basic communication skills in P'urhepecha. The initiative was designed with the participation of community members using the community-based framework in order to address the unique needs of an Indigenous community in diaspora. The workshop consisted of nine lessons that were designed with original materials, implemented in weekly 2-hour sessions over a 9-week period. The participants were primarily of P'urhepecha ancestry who speak Spanish as their first language and English as their second language.

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I write this article as a member of the Ireta P'urhepecha collective, a grassroots organization founded by P'urhepecha migrants in Washington state. The project was developed in a collaborative manner in consultation with the members of the collective, and led by a team assigned by the collective: Carlos Mota, who provided the majority of the content, ideas, materials, time and dedication; Tata Marco Antonio Flores Quin, who also contributed content, counsel, and his vast knowledge of the P'urhepecha language and culture; and myself, who provided experience as a language teacher and linguist to support the pedagogical aspects of the workshop.

This chronicle describes the key aspects of the workshop that are important for Indigenous language revitalization projects: the implementation process under a community-based framework to ensure the equity of the parties involved; the challenges of creating an Indigenous language program in the context of diaspora; and the content design using techniques from the field of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT) in order to provide appropriate curriculum for second language learners<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, we would like to highlight that this work was carried out in a context that has received very little attention, but is increasingly important: Indigenous communities in diaspora in the U.S. In doing so, we hope that this chronicle also serves as an example for other communities and demonstrates the possibilities of implementing similar revitalization efforts.

### 1.1 THE P'URHEPECHA: A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The P'urhepecha are a group originally from the state of Michoacán, Mexico. It is estimated that in Michoacán there are about one million people who self-identify as P'urhepecha (Argueta & Castilleja, 2018). Furthermore, there are communities established in other states in Mexico as well as in the United States. Even though it is a group with considerable numbers, there are only about 142,000 speakers of the language, and 94% are bilingual with Spanish (INEGI, 2020). According to the UNESCO (2010), the P'urhepecha language is at a vulnerable<sup>4</sup> risk of disappearing. This means that even though it's not at extreme risk due to the relatively high number of speakers, it is in fact endangered due to the steady decline of speakers in many communities.

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<sup>3</sup> In the field of SLA, the term *second language* (L2) is interchangeable with *additional language* and it refers to the acquisition of any language after the first. In our case, P'urhepecha is the third language since the majority of the participants are Spanish-English bilinguals.

<sup>4</sup> Degrees of endangerment of the interactive UNESCO Atlas of World's languages in danger: extinct < critically endangered < severely endangered < definitely endangered < vulnerable < safe. Vulnerable: "most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)" (Moseley, 2010).

In the United States, it is estimated that there is a population of about 120,000 people who are from a P'urhepecha community (Leco Tomás, 2013). These migrants have established transnational communities in various states such as California, Texas, Illinois, North Carolina, Oregon, and Washington. Moreover, the people of Michoacán have a long migratory tradition to the United States due to job opportunities in the farming industry. The first documented P'urhepecha migrations date back to a period from 1940 to 1964 with the “Bracero Program”, arriving mainly to California and Texas. When the program ended, many workers chose to remain in the U.S., while others began seasonal migrations between the two countries according to the agricultural cycle. In the 1980's there was a rise in more permanent migration to the U.S., and over the next two decades the P'urhepecha communities began to establish themselves in various parts of the country beyond the border states (Leco Tomás, 2006).

The migration to the state of Washington is even more recent. According to local activists and members of the P'urhepecha community, the first migrations happened in the mid 90's due to the lack of employment, the economic crisis in Mexico, and the deforestation in the P'urhepecha territory, since an important part of their economic activity is linked to the timber industry. Currently, it is estimated that there are about 3,000 people of P'urhepecha origin in different parts of Washington state, mainly from the towns of Quinceo, Tzintzuntzan, Ichupio, and Nahuatzen (Marco Antonio Flores Quin, P'urhepecha activist from Quinceo, personal communication, October 18<sup>th</sup> 2019). The population from Quinceo, municipality of Paracho, is located mostly in the area south of Seattle, and the population from Tzintzuntzan is in the Tacoma area. These communities have maintained many of their traditions and continue to practice their customs and festivities in this new territory. Of the 3,000 people of P'urhepecha origin, it is estimated that only about 500 people continue to speak the language, with the majority of the speakers being from Quinceo due to the high language vitality in their community of origin. According to the 2020 census reported by the INEGI, in the municipality of Paracho—where Quinceo is located—30% of the population over 3 years old is an Indigenous language speaker, whereas in the municipality of Tzintzuntzan, only 9.4% of the population speak P'urhepecha. Based on this data, we can observe how the tendencies of language shift that occur in the Mexican communities are reflected in the communities in diaspora.

Migration is a known contributing factor to language shift (Pérez-Báez, 2009, 2014) not only in Indigenous communities, but in general. Minority languages in the context of migration suffer gradual language shift in favor of a majority language, and tend to be displaced in three generations. A common phenomenon in the United States is that children of immigrants tend to replace their parent's language with English due to factors such as the educational system, socio-economic pressures, lack of prestige of the minority language, among other factors. It should be noted that this situation becomes more complex when introducing a third language—in the case of the P'urhepecha, a large

percentage of the migrant population are bilingual with Spanish. With this in mind, intergenerational language transmission becomes even more complex as the Indigenous language gets displaced in favor of Spanish as a *heritage language*<sup>5</sup> and English as the dominant language of the second and subsequent generations.

Focusing on the case of the P'urhepecha community in the United States, I have observed three general patterns<sup>6</sup> of multilingualism in the family domain: 1) the first generation is mainly P'urhepecha-Spanish bilingual with English dominant children, bilingual with Spanish (or dominant in Spanish with English as their second language); 2) the first generation is P'urhepecha-Spanish bilingual with trilingual children; 3) the first generation is Spanish speaking (those who come from communities with low P'urhepecha vitality) with bilingual Spanish-English children (with varying degrees of fluency in Spanish). It should be noted that it is very important to know the composition of the communities in order to implement revitalization projects that are relevant to their linguistic contexts as well as to determine appropriate methods to encourage linguistic development. Due to the multilingual nature of the community, many individuals have varying degrees of P'urhepecha knowledge, while others that identify as P'urhepecha have no knowledge of the language. The former case is defined as heritage speakers (meaning they have some exposure to P'urhepecha at home), while the latter is defined as second language learners (meaning they have no previous knowledge of P'urhepecha). In the field of language teaching, this distinction is crucial to determine the pedagogical approach that should be implemented based on the linguistic knowledge that the students have previous to entering a language class.

## 1.2 THE COLLECTIVE IRETA P'URHEPECHA

The collective Ireta P'urhepecha is a grassroots organization that was founded in 2008 by a group of P'urhepecha migrants in the south Seattle area in Washington state. Its main objective is to recover and maintain the P'urhepecha culture and knowledge in the context of migration as a response to the pressures of assimilation that migrants face. The collective is guided by the P'urhepecha concept of the *jakajkukua*—similar to mutual aid—which depends on community support in the form of contributions of human and economic resources provided by members and allies. Over the years, the collective has developed diverse community networks who contribute with varied support such as monetary and material donations, volunteers, and services (music for events, food preparation,

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<sup>5</sup> For *heritage language* I use Polinsky and Kegan's (2007) definition: a heritage speaker is a person that grew up exposed to a minority language at home, but is dominant in the majority language of the country where they live.

<sup>6</sup> There are other patterns in the first generation that range from P'urhepecha monolingualism to trilingualism.

workshop/ceremony facilitation, etc.). Besides the community support, the collective has received grants from various social and educational institutions. These resources have been used to provide direct support to the P'urhepecha community and other Indigenous communities by providing information on public health and social services.

Throughout the years, the collective has focused on creating spaces for the members of the P'urhepecha community for their cultural practices and traditions, spaces to establish dialogues on relevant topics, and culturally appropriate support to the community and allies. Among some of its annual activities, the *Kurhikuaeri K'uinchekua* or P'urhepecha New Year is the highlight of the year. This event is organized in parallel to the one in Michoacán on February 1<sup>st</sup>, where the renewal of the fire symbolizes the beginning of the new cycle. This particular event brings P'urhepecha people as well as individuals from other non-dominant communities together from various parts of the Pacific Northwest and California.

Besides cultural events and ceremonies, the collective has a strong focus on the recovery of ancestral and contemporary P'urhepecha knowledge that can be practiced in daily life. To facilitate this, we focus on providing spaces for dialogues using workshops led by members of diverse communities. These dialogues bring together individuals with similar interests to share experiences, communal knowledge, and cultural practices. For instance, the collective has organized workshops about P'urhepecha history, traditional plants and medicine, and other topics of interest. Moreover, the reclamation of the P'urhepecha language has been one of these important topics, since the majority of the members are not speakers of the language and seek to learn it. This is how the language workshop initiative came to be, not only due to communicative needs, but also due to the awareness that knowing the language allows a deeper understanding of the P'urhepecha culture.

## **2. THE P'URHEPECHA LANGUAGE WORKSHOP**

### **2.1 COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING**

Based on our context, reality, and resources, we embarked on the task of designing a workshop that aligned with our communal organizational structure and that was relevant to the needs of our community. First, the members interested in learning P'urhepecha made a proposal to the community assembly to be discussed with all the members of the collective. Ireta P'urhepecha functions under the Indigenous organizational structure of community assemblies or *juchari juramukua* as the top authority, meaning that all proposals are discussed and decisions are made within the assembly with all members participating equally.

It is worth mentioning that by using communal structures, we were able to incorporate concepts that are compatible with the principles and stages of Community-Based Language Planning (Hinton,

2013b; McCarthy, 2018). The concepts proposed by this model fit our way of managing projects—the initiative addresses a community need and therefore is initiated by community members; the goals are put forth by the participants; and the materials and content created belong to the community. According to Hinton, language revitalization planning helps the community establish realistic goals, implement effective methodologies, and ensures that community members are in charge of managing their own projects.

Working under this model and our own organizational structure, we discussed the logistics of the project such as time, venue, and number of participants. This information was turned into a proposal, which was voted on and approved by the assembly. Then, as a collective, representatives were chosen to lead the implementation of the workshop. The collective proposed Carlos Mota as the instructor (from Tzintzuntzan), because he is a second language speaker who has been dedicated to learning the language for many years. He was also interested in creating learning materials and had organized workshops in the past. Another team member assigned to be our advisor and language expert was Tata Antonio Flores Quin (from Quinceo) since he is a first language P'urhepecha speaker. Last, I was assigned to the team as a linguist because my expertise in language teaching would allow me to contribute to the methodological and pedagogical aspects of the project.

The next step was to conduct a needs assessment to identify both collective and individual objectives. An important stage in the Language Planning models (Hinton, 2013a, 2013b) is to conduct research so that the community can determine what their particular needs are. Therefore, these models propose using surveys to identify the community attitudes towards language revitalization, gauge the level of interest, and determine the programs they would like to have in their communities.

In our particular case, the first assessment was done within one of our communal assemblies so that interested members could express their expectations and goals. For example, a participant said that she wanted to learn the language because she wanted to communicate better with her mother-in-law since she was P'urhepecha dominant. Another participant said that he wanted to teach his daughter so that they could communicate with family members when they visited their hometown in Michoacán. A third participant was interested in having a deeper spiritual connection by understanding P'urhepecha prayers in ceremony.

Subsequently, we did a public call for participants that was distributed to the community beyond the collective through social media and acquaintances. Community members completed a questionnaire that allowed us to gather general data such as: age, sex, first and second language, town of origin, current place of residency; as well as questions about attitudes towards learning P'urhepecha and personal objectives. With this information, we were able to assess the general profile of the participants, their level of interest, and personal goals.

From these surveys, we determined that participants were adult learners with Spanish as their first language (some had English as their dominant language), with no knowledge of P'urhepecha. Based on this, we were able to establish that the appropriate level of the content should be for beginners. Furthermore, this indicated that we needed to use a second language teaching methodology as opposed to one targeted to heritage language learners or for literacy skills education. It was important to make this distinction since the latter situations are also common in revitalization programs, but require different pedagogical approaches.

Besides the demographic data, we also collected information from which we were able to determine four general objectives:

1. To be able to better communicate with family and friends who are P'urhepecha native speakers
2. To reconnect with our cultural roots and honor our ancestors
3. To instill the importance of our language and culture in the younger generations
4. To create a space that strengthens our community, culture, language, and traditions

These objectives demonstrate the importance that learning the language has in the community and the long-term commitment of the individuals involved; however, we recognize that they are broad, and could not be fully attained during the short time span offered by the workshop. Therefore, we used them as the basis to create smaller, more attainable objectives that were implemented in each session of the workshop, thereby providing the foundation for individuals to study the language and achieve their personal goals.

It is also important to highlight the significant differences between learning a foreign/majority language<sup>7</sup> and an Indigenous language due to political, historical, and social asymmetries. Learners of Indigenous and endangered languages face particular challenges that students of majority languages do not. Among the differences, Hinton (2011) mentions the motivation, learning goals and outcomes of learning a second language. For instance, the motivation of an English speaker learning Spanish as an L2 could be to communicate with native speakers when travelling to a Spanish-speaking

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<sup>7</sup> I use Hinton's (2011) definition of *majority language* referring to a language that has governmental support within a nation state where the majority of its citizens speak the language, for example: Spanish, Japanese, French, English.



country, or perhaps to get a job in a community with a high concentration of Hispanics. However, if this learner does not end up acquiring the language, the consequences are minimal. In contrast, an Indigenous language learner's motivation is often deeper than just communicative skills. Indeed, many of them are seeking to reconnect with their ancestral roots, strengthen their identity, and reclaim a culture that was denied to them. For them, knowing their language can be an expression of resistance against the linguistic, social, and historical hegemony they have faced. In many situations, learning the language is the only way to ensure its continuation and survival.

Based on all of the above, we agreed on a 9-week workshop with 2-hour weekly sessions focused on basic communicative skills (objective 1) and integrating cultural content (objective 2). Moreover, we decided that it would take place at the UW Tacoma campus to facilitate access to diverse communities as a neutral space (objective 4) and would be open to the general public regardless of their ethnic origin and educational level. We also discussed that the institutional support would give visibility to the efforts in promoting minority language learning in a safe and welcoming space, and consequently contributing to increasing the social prestige and perceived value of learning an Indigenous language.

Finally, we established that the workshop would be directed to second language adult and young adult learners. We made this decision based on the fact that the majority of the collective's members are first language Spanish speakers. It is worth mentioning that although the participants had no previous P'urhepecha linguistic knowledge, many of them had vast knowledge of other cultural aspects which helps increase the possibility of obtaining socio-cultural competency (Polinsky & Kegan, 2007), and also allows them to share their knowledge and thereby enriching the cultural content of the workshop.

## **2.2 THE CHALLENGES ON THE ACQUISITION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

After defining the general outline of the project, we began working out the details related to the teaching methodology and resources, both of which present particular challenges when working with endangered languages. These challenges can vary depending on the state of vitality that the language has and the particular context of the linguistic community. Some of the most evident challenges are the lack of available resources, for example: access to native speakers, language documentation, a standardized writing system, adequate pedagogical materials, trained language instructors in their native languages, institutional support, and language prestige. Therefore, it's important to take into account the particular challenges and state of vitality of the language and its contexts when developing language revitalization programs (McIvor, 2020).

The first challenge we faced was related to our chosen methodology for language teaching. Even though we knew that we wanted to use a communicative approach, this methodology has mostly been designed for learning foreign/majority languages—languages that have lots of native speakers, social prestige, national territories and thus are not endangered. Research, materials, textbooks, and language teacher training programs have typically focused on majority languages. It is not until recent years that research has started to focus on endangered languages, and therefore many Indigenous languages lack the extensive track record of resource development that individuals developing programs for majority languages have at their disposal.

The second challenge was creating materials based on the chosen methodology that were level appropriate for the participants. Fortunately, the P'urhepecha language has a rich cultural tradition of music, dance, art, oral tradition, and more recently written literature; it is also well documented in various linguistic fields, has dictionaries and vocabularies, teaching materials of different academic and communal institutions; and most importantly, it still has a large number of native speakers. Therefore, we did not have to start from scratch as with many highly endangered languages that may have very little language documentation or no longer have native speakers. However, in order to meet our goals and address the particular needs of our community, we had to design our own content based on the communicative approach.

Besides the challenges that language revitalization projects face regardless of their context, migrant communities have additional challenges unique to their circumstances. First, even though it is a community with constant mobility, for many individuals access to their hometowns in Mexico is often unattainable. Therefore, it is more difficult for a language learner in diaspora to find spaces to interact with native speakers of the languages compared to a learner living in a community where the language is spoken natively. Furthermore, the lack of autonomous territory results in decentralized communities spread across the USA as opposed to the cohesive communities in their native territory.

Second, in comparison with the Indigenous territories, the community in diaspora has less access to language programs and resources. For instance, access to published materials, institutions with language teaching training programs, and classes with structured curricula are usually not within the reach of the migrant community. Typically, they have to resort to grassroot efforts where the interested individuals create their own materials using their own resources and developing their own pedagogical training without institutional support.

Third, the economic pressures and high cost of living in the USA tend to limit participant availability and time needed to study a new language. The long work hours and family responsibilities tend to leave little time to attend a language class. This typically results in inconsistent attendance and can lead to lack of motivation and focus.

Finally, as previously mentioned, first-generation migrants tend to prioritize learning English due to the pressures they have to function in the Anglo-speaking society. In contrast, the second and third generations, who are already English-dominant, tend to prioritize learning or improving their Spanish, since it is deemed more useful in various Spanish speaking domains of the U.S. Consequently, learning a third language, which is often inaccessible and lacks social prestige, is left behind, thus contributing to the process of language shift.

### **2.3 SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TEACHING (SLAT)**

Taking into account the challenges mentioned and the objectives put forth by the participants, we focused on choosing and adapting a methodology that was relevant and accessible to the participants. We designed the course based on a communicative, practical, and cultural approach, integrating the principles of SLA and avoiding “traditional” language teaching: that is, an approach centered on grammatical explanations, use of explicit translation, and mechanical exercises. The communicative approach has seen increased adoption in Indigenous language revitalization programs, as its focus on natural processes of language acquisition is seen as highly compatible with Indigenous language methodologies. Moreover, this approach is centered in the learner’s ability to process language as a means of communication among speakers. It’s worth mentioning that research (Berlin, 2000; Green & Maracle, 2018; Mclvor, 2020) has shown that language teaching principles based on SLA are compatible with the methodologies used in Indigenous language revitalization programs because both distance themselves from what we know as “traditional language classes”, instead focusing on oral skills and the natural process of language acquisition.

Second language acquisition theories are based on the findings from research spanning more than 35 years. For the purposes of this chronicle, I will briefly state the findings that are relevant to the techniques used here; however, there is a wide variety of literature available to those who are interested in pursuing the topic further (Gas & Selinker, 2001; Van Patten & Williams, 2015, to mention a few).

Generally speaking, we know that the acquisition of a second language requires the creation of an implicit linguistic system, similar to that of our first language—the learner must develop linguistic knowledge that is tacit. Native speakers do not need to explicitly know the grammar rules of their language, like the ones found in textbooks. They can tacitly produce linguistic structures, vocabulary, the sounds of the language, and other linguistic components; they do not need to know “why” something is said in their language in order to use it naturally.

Due to the fact that the abstract rules that comprise the language are part of our mental linguistic system and are not those explicit grammar rules that we find in language books (Van Patten & Rothman, 2014), we know that the language acquisition process is much more complex than learning

grammatical rules and vocabulary, but rather it consists of various processes that are happening at the same time. When producing a simple sentence or decodifying a message, the mind is processing many linguistic components at once. For instance, when we produce a coherent sentence, not only do we have to know the word order, we also need to know the meaning of each of those words and their internal components, as well as how the words sound and in which contexts we can use them.

The concept of linguistic *input* is fundamental to the creation of the implicit linguistic system. Linguistic input is everything that the learner hears that is meant to convey a message (Lee & Van Patten, 2003). It is basically what gives us the “linguistic data” that we need in order to develop all of the components required to slowly build the implicit mental system. Despite the different perspectives in the language acquisition literature on this topic, there is a consensus that in order to successfully acquire a language, there needs to be a large amount of input—basically the learner has to be exposed to the language constantly during the acquisition process.

Furthermore, this concept goes beyond passively listening to the language, it is crucial for the learner to comprehend what they hear for it to be processed. Krashen (1982) developed the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, which indicates that comprehension of the linguistic input is what leads to language acquisition. He asserts that a second language learner must listen (and read for languages with writing systems) and most importantly, understand what is being said in order to develop the linguistic components of the language they are learning. It should be stressed that this process is not about memorizing grammatical rules—the rules we see in textbooks are used for organizing concepts so that we can talk about a language—they are not part of the implicit linguistic system needed to comprehend and produce a language.

Even though input is crucial to the development of the linguistic system, it is not enough for successful acquisition (Long, 1990)—we also need linguistic *output*, which is the ability of the learner to use their implicit knowledge to produce spoken language (or written or signed language). In general terms, the acquisition process consists of receiving linguistic input, which in turn needs to be processed by the learner. Subsequently, the learner integrates the structures and linguistic components in the developing linguistic system. Through incorporating and developing these structures, the learners are then capable of producing output. Therefore, it is important to point out that in order to acquire a language, the learner must go through these processes time and time again to be successful and eventually develop advanced communicative skills.

The last finding I want to highlight is that the acquisition process is slow and evolves according to the amount and consistency of the input the learner is receiving. The linguistic system is built in stages that require time and a lot of input in order for the learner to gradually acquire the different structures of the language. As language instructors, it is important to recognize that each structure taught has its

inherent stages and learners have to go through them at their own pace in the language acquisition process.

## **2.4 TECHNIQUES USED IN THE WORKSHOP**

Taking into account the concepts related to the second language acquisition process, our next task was to design and develop course content that would align with the communicative approach and complement the available resources. First, we established the topics and communicative goals that would enable participants to develop basic communication skills: greeting friends/family in different contexts, introducing themselves, talking about daily activities, and using everyday expressions. Carlos, the instructor, provided the majority of the content: vocabulary words, verb paradigms, expressions, etc. and for every lesson he designed short comics that contained these words and expressions. Once the material was ready, my task was to organize the content effectively using techniques based on the communicative approach. We worked with three techniques in particular: Comprehensible Input (CI), Focus-on-Form, and Total Physical Response (TPR). In the following sections, I will give an overview of these techniques and provide examples on how they were used in the workshop.

### **2.4.1 COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT**

The Comprehensible Input technique is based on the idea that L2 learners need to be exposed to input in the target language that they can understand in order to be able to process the language. Drawing from this idea, many pedagogical techniques have been developed in order to provide learners with input that is slightly over their level, yet they can process. For instance, instructors rely on cognates, pictures, gestures, and objects so that learners can begin to deduce the content of what they are hearing.

For each session, we introduced approximately 10 new words or expressions that were presented to participants using short comics<sup>8</sup>. Using these, the learners could deduce the nature of the content based on the pictures and with the help of the instructor. This allowed us to create a direct meaning-to-form connection when introducing vocabulary, instead of relying on direct Spanish translations. After the introduction, the target words were presented individually using different visual aids such as pictures on a PowerPoint presentation, physical objects, gestures, etc. These words were also given to participants in a handout written fully in P'urhepecha so that the learners could begin to form connections between the presented objects on screen and the written forms. The instructor used the target words in different contexts so that the participants could hear the forms and process both the sounds and the forms (sample lesson plan provided in the Annex). In this way, we gradually presented

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<sup>8</sup> The comics were designed using the application Storyboard That: [www.storyboardthat.com](http://www.storyboardthat.com)

the vocabulary in context and with visual aids to facilitate what is known as *binding*. Terrell (1986), proposed this mechanism as an affective mental and cognitive process that makes connections between meaning and form—a necessary component in language acquisition.

Besides assisting with the acquisition of new vocabulary, presenting the vocabulary in context encourages the connection between language and its culture. All course content contained elements related to P'urhepecha celebrations and traditions that were emphasized by our language advisor. Tata Antonio expanded on the lessons by providing explanations of cultural elements and thus contextualizing the concepts within the socio-cultural context and P'urhepecha cosmovision, which was crucial to achieve our cultural goals. Furthermore, he also complemented the lessons with insights on his dialectal variety, since it is different from the instructor's Lake variety. It is worth noting that the P'urhepecha varieties are mutually intelligible (Chamoreau, 2005, 2009); there are pronunciation and lexical differences, but generally, speakers from different communities and regions are able to understand each other. Therefore, we opted to present the content in the instructor's variety, but with Tata Antonio's insight to point out the dialectal differences to enrich the participant's learning experience.

#### 2.4.2 FOCUS-ON-FORM

Another technique used in the communicative approach is **Focus-on-form** (Long, 1991, 2000). This refers to presenting brief explanations of linguistic elements as needed by the learners based on the content they are working on—this could be a reading, a dialogue, an activity, a communicative task, a game, etc. Therefore, the focus is not on presenting form after form as has been done traditionally (that is **Focus-on-forms**), but rather when the student is working on some type of communicative activity, the instructor can highlight certain elements—morphological, syntactic, phonological or even pragmatic—to provide explanation of the specific form brought to the learner's attention. By doing so, the student focuses their attention on the specific elements they need to comprehend the material they are working on. To better illustrate this concept, in the following section I will provide an example of how this technique was used.

Because P'urhepecha is an agglutinative language with rich morphological forms, it was important to highlight certain structures so that the learners could expand on the use of verbal roots. For example, when working with the topic of “daily activities”, we were able to use the material to highlight the morphological elements that denote person, tense, aspect, and mood in the composition of the verbs as in example 1<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Glosses and abbreviations: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, CL = clitic, HAB = habitual, IND = indicative, PROG = progressive, PRON = pronoun, PST = past, SG = singular, SJ = subject

(1) Verbal morphological structure: Root + aspect + tense + mood

*pirixapti*

piri-xa-p-ti

sing-PROG-PST-IND3

'S/he was singing'

Although detailed explanation and analysis of the inflectional morphology were not provided, we did present the necessary forms so that the learners could contrast person and aspect morphemes. These were presented gradually to facilitate the stages of acquisition, always keeping in mind that the forms taught could be used in communicative activities and classroom interactions. Therefore, we divided the content so that the learners could first distinguish the verbal roots from the inflectional suffixes as in 2. When changing only the verbal root (*piri-*; *uanda*<sup>10</sup>, *t'ire-*), the learners could focus on this particular part of the word.

(2) a. Ji **piri**-xa-ka

I sing-PROG-IND1/2

'I am signing'

b. Ji **uanda**-xa-ka

I speak-PROG-IND1/2

'I am speaking'

c. Ji **t'ire**-xa-ka

I eat-PROG-IND1/2

'I am eating'

Afterwards, we turned our focus to the specific first—and second—person singular structures, since they are complementary in a question/answer conversation. We introduced structures in pairs adding different verbal roots so that the learner could continue learning new verbs. In this particular case we brought the focus to the subject pronouns because they make the distinction between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person, but also bring the attention to suffix *-ka*, which is the indicative morpheme used for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> singular, as in 3 and 4, and plural persons.

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<sup>10</sup> P'urhepecha does not have a standardized writing system and therefore there are many alphabets that the speakers use. In order to avoid confusion with the allophones of the language, help participants with its pronunciation, and maintain a communicative approach, we opted for the phonetic alternative and used the CREFAL (1978) alphabet.

(3) *Ji uandaxaka*

**Ji**                    **uanda-xa-ka**  
 PRON.SJ.SG1        **speak-PROG-IND1/2**  
 'I am speaking'

(4) *T'ure uandaxaka*

**T'u=re**                **uanda-xa-ka**  
 PRON.SJ.SG2=CL2   **speak-PROG-IND1/2**  
 'You are speaking'

Once these two forms were practiced and understood, we gradually introduced the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular forms as in 5 in order to contrast the morphemes (in this case the indicative mood) that distinguish third person from first and second person in P'urhepecha with morpheme *-ti*.

(5) *Achaati uandaxati*

Achaati    **uanda-xa-ti**  
 man        **speak-PROG-IND3**  
 'The man is speaking'

Finally, we brought focus to the verbal aspectual morphemes in combination with the previous structures, but now contrasting the present progressive (-xa-) as in 6, with the present habitual (-sîn-) like in 7.

(6) *Ji t'irexaka atapakua*

Ji t'ire-**xa**-ka        atapakua  
 I eat-**PROG-IND1/2**    atapakua (traditional P'urhepecha dish)  
 'I am eating atapakua'

(7) *Ji t'iresinka atapakua*

Ji t'ire-**sîn**-ka        atapakua  
 I eat-**HAB-IND1/2**    atapakua  
 'I eat atapakua'

In this manner we presented structures in pairs in order to contrast their meaning by highlighting specific parts of the morphology. Moreover, we presented the content in stages so that structures could be gradually acquired instead of presenting them all together as verbal paradigms to be memorized and subsequently used. This approach has been shown to be effective in the acquisition process since it suits the way we represent linguistic concepts in the mind and the gradual process of



acquisition in stages. As Lee and Van Patten (2003) state, verbal paradigms do not correspond to how the linguistic knowledge is structured in the speakers' minds and therefore teaching verbal conjugations in this way is unnecessary and counterproductive in the acquisition process since it lacks psycholinguistic validity.

### **2.4.3 TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE**

Another technique that is effective at the introductory level since it targets more comprehension than production is what is known as Total Physical Response (TPR). It basically consists of the learners physically doing what the instructor asks of them such as standing up, sitting down, walking to the door, greeting a classmate, etc. This technique allows learners to receive input and create connections between words/phrases and physical actions in a comprehensible manner. Due to the fact that our participants were beginners, we decided to implement this technique to introduce basic vocabulary and expressions in order to link language to physical action.

As a warmup, in every session we implemented an immersive activity led by the advisor and instructor. These immersive exercises were done 100% in the target language. All participants started by creating a circle to allow students to interact with their classmates standing to their right and left. First, the advisor and instructor modeled an action, for instance, the instructor would greet the advisor and tell him to "hand this paper to the next person" in the circle. Then the advisor would greet the person to his left and give them the paper, instructing them to do the same with the following participant. The activity was repeated until all the participants had greeted the person on their left and received instructions to give the paper to the following person. At the end of each session, we repeated the exercise, but using a different object. For example, instead of using paper, we would use a water bottle or a dollar bill or any other object that could be used in everyday situations.

Since the activity was done 100% in P'urhepecha, the participants were required to comprehend and process the language using resources such as the physical movements they saw. As the workshop progressed, we included more advanced structures, gradually incrementing the level as student comprehension capacity increased. Although at first this activity was deemed difficult, as we moved forward participants began to enjoy it more because it forced them to communicate 100% in the target language, thus providing a concrete communicative goal that could be achieved and serve as a source of satisfaction in their learning process.

## **3. REFLECTIONS**

This chronicle detailed the steps used to develop a language workshop under the community framework for P'urhepecha second language learners in diaspora. The pedagogical techniques implemented were grounded in the field of Second Language Acquisition in order to develop a

language learning program with a communicative approach. Based on the goals proposed by both the members of Ireta P'urhepecha and individuals from the broader community, we developed a workshop as a first step in the effort to teach the P'urhepecha language in Washington state, and thus contribute to broader initiatives in endangered language revitalization.

In order to assess the outcomes of the workshop, I would like to reflect on how the proposed objectives were addressed:

1. To be able to better communicate with family and friends who are P'urhepecha native speakers
2. To reconnect with our cultural roots and honor our ancestors
3. To instill the importance of our language and culture in the younger generations
4. To create a space that strengthens our community, culture, language, and traditions

Keeping in mind that these goals are actually long-term proposals, and that the language acquisition process is gradual, complex, and requires time and exposure to the language, we are able to make some generalizations on what we accomplished with the project.

First, the learners were exposed to authentic language provided by the instructor and advisor, thus beginning the onset of acquisition, learning vocabulary, structures and basic expressions that they can begin to use in their interactions with native speakers (objective 1). Based on empirical research, we know that linguistic input is the crucial component for language acquisition. Therefore, by choosing the appropriate teaching approach and techniques, we were able to provide participants with the highest possible amount of input without overwhelming them. With the cultural content given by our advisor, the participants were able to reflect on the meaning of words and how they are connected to the P'urhepecha culture and cosmivision (objective 2). This gave participants insight into how language enriches their ability to understand many of the cultural practices that they do in their daily life, ceremony, and events.

The third objective focused on the importance of adult language learning in order to help with language transmission to the younger generations. Although the workshop did not target children, on many occasions children of the participants attended the sessions, which allowed them to see their parents' interest in learning about their ancestral roots and language. In fact, one of the challenges we faced was the lack of childcare due to the evening schedule of the workshop. Luckily, we held the workshop during a down time at the university, which allowed the participants to bring their children and leave them safely in a lounge area next to the classroom. Many of the children that waited patiently for their parents peaked in occasionally to see what they were doing. Some of them even participated in the activities, which not only gave them exposure to the language, but also perhaps helped them realize that their ancestors' language was being taught at a university, thus giving it visibility and

indirectly meeting our third objective. As an anecdote, for the closing of the workshop we had a get together where the participants brought food and reflected on their experiences. At the end, we played traditional music, and the young daughter of a participant sang us a *pirekua* (a traditional style of music) in P'urhepecha. This reinforced our view of how community work can be effective and makes us hopeful that our children will one day take the lead so that our languages can survive and perhaps thrive in future generations.

More generally, the contributions to the community are varied. First, creating a positive space for Indigenous language learning (objective 4) within an educational institution contributes to removing some of the social stigma that tends to be associated with speaking an Indigenous language. This reinforces the idea that our languages can occupy other domains beyond the home and community, including academic ones. By expanding the domains of the language, we can contribute to creating positive attitudes and awareness of its value in society. We also established a precedent by implementing a grassroots language initiative, which we hope can serve as an example for both our community as well as other Indigenous communities who may choose to participate in future workshops or start similar initiatives in different languages. Furthermore, we created materials that can be reused and improved in future iterations of our workshop or by anyone that would like to use them.

The final contribution that I would like to point out is the importance of including the migrant communities in the language revitalization process. Because of the transnational nature of the P'urhepecha, language shift has a great impact on both sides of the border due to the linguistic accommodation that happens when migrants communicate with the people back in their hometowns (Pérez Báez, 2009, 2014). In other words, when migrants can no longer speak the Indigenous language, then communication becomes skewed towards Spanish in domains where Spanish is not normally used, such as the home environment in high language vitality communities. Therefore, advocating for the use and acquisition of the language in the migrant communities contributes to language maintenance in the home communities.

Looking forward, we would like to continue offering the workshop to the community, adding more advanced levels and topics, and inviting more community members—perhaps even starting a program for children and teenagers. We would also like to have resources to facilitate community participation such as: child care, a more accessible location, and schedule flexibility. In terms of methodology, I am personally interested in designing task-based lessons because they have worked well within Indigenous language programs that implement the communicative approach (see Riestenberg & Sherris, 2018 for Zapotec and Salish Qlispe).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We know that the processes of endangered language revitalization are long-term projects that require the tireless commitment of the community in order to be successful. We also know that learning a second language requires dedication, years of practice, and persistence, even for languages that are not endangered. In the context of migration and diaspora these collective and individual efforts require even more dedication due to the specific challenges these communities face. Implementing language classes will not necessarily create new speakers; however, it can lay the foundation for successful second language learning by providing participants with the opportunity to approach the language. In our context, this opportunity is precisely what is missing, and therefore I believe that our biggest contribution was exactly this: to provide a safe space so that interested individuals could have the opportunity to explore their language and their roots. Even though this is only the beginning and we have much work ahead, this workshop was complementary to the cultural and traditional activities the collective Ireta P'urhepecha and community participate in, and as McCarthy (2018:25) said "small-scale efforts can plant the seeds of far-reaching transformations".

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## APPENDIX

## Sample lesson plan and materials

**Level:** beginner

**Session:** 3

**Topic:** *Uandajperakua* (greetings)

**Communicative goals:**

The learner will be able to introduce themselves and say where they are from

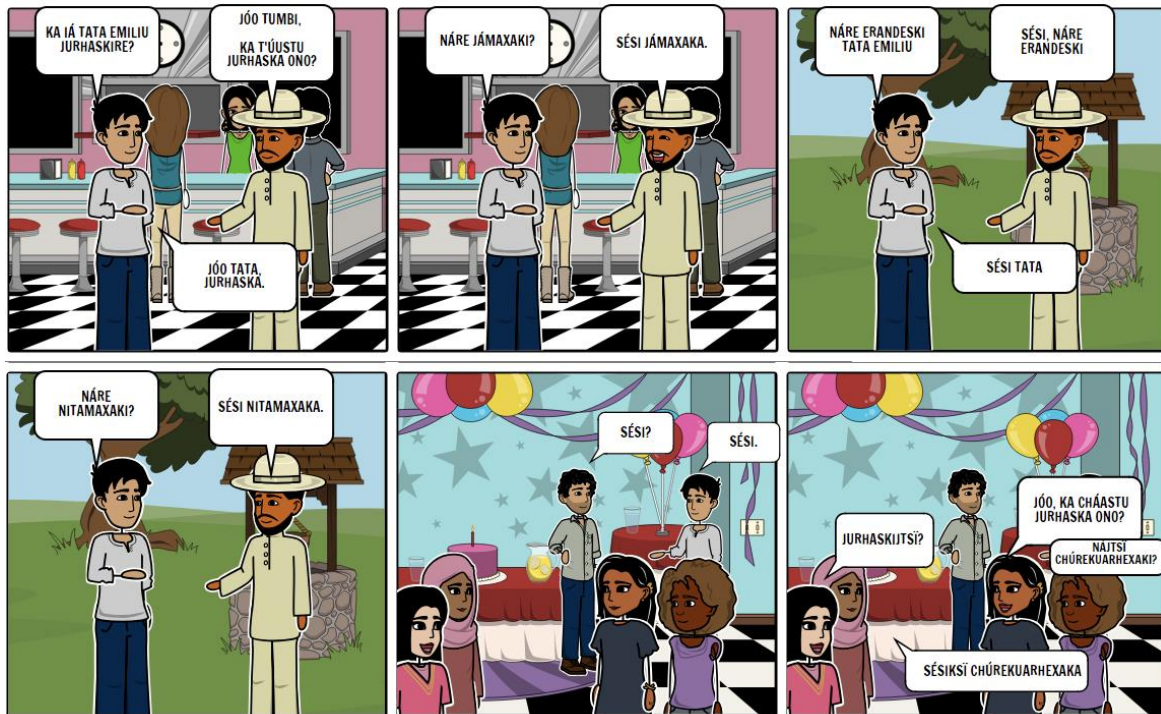
The learner will be able to greet others in formal and informal situations

Structure	Activity	Implementation Techniques
Warmup	<p><u>Immersive circle:</u></p> <p>Personal presentation: name and origin</p> <p><i>Ji arhinhasinga (name)</i> <i>ka (place) anapueska.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use 100% target language</li> <li>- Activity modeled by instructor and advisor using comprehensible input and TPR</li> <li>- Activity repeated in pairs</li> </ul>
Content presentation	<p>a. Introduction of new expressions with comic that include greetings in different situations within the socio-cultural context (morning/afternoon/evening; formal and informal)</p> <p>b. Expressions are presented individually in short dialogue form to develop form-meaning connections and pronunciation</p> <p>Example: Question: <i>Nare erandeski?</i> Answer: <i>Sesi, erandeska.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use images on comic and PowerPoint for Comprehensible Input of new vocabulary</li> <li>- Handout in 100% target language with vocabulary/expressions</li> <li>- Use Focus-on-form to explain difference between the interrogative morpheme <i>-ki</i> and indicative morpheme <i>-ka</i> for 1<sup>st</sup> /2<sup>nd</sup> person</li> </ul>
Practice	<p>a. Practice forms through communicative interactions between learners and instructor/advisor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use the new vocabulary in different contexts to increase</li> </ul>



	<p>b. Present different situations where learners decide which expression would be the most appropriate based on the context (time of day; formality)</p> <p>For example:</p> <p>How would you greet your aunt and uncle when arriving at their home for dinner?</p>	<p>the amount of comprehensible input</p>
<p>Closing</p>	<p><u>Immersive circle:</u></p> <p>Repetition of the warmup activity, but adding on an appropriate greeting and farewell.</p>	<p>- Use TPR (e.g., shake hands) and encourage output by letting pairs produce short dialogues</p>

Sample comic (www.storyboardthat.com)





Sample PowerPoint slide

