

Teaching Remedial English to Navajo Students: Problems with Reading

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Several pieces of previous literature (e.g., Conn 1; Hartle-Schutte 644; Janzen 28; Miller and Johnson 550; Rosier and Farella 379; Spolsky 349; Vorih and Rosier 263; Wieczkiewicz 20) have indicated that many Navajo children live in an environment on or near the reservation which likely encompasses poverty, high unemployment, high absenteeism, high dropout rates in high school, reading level below national average, lack of reading materials, incompatible assessment measures, etc. Janzen writes that “[s]tudies of reading instruction with Native Americans and with Navajo learners in particular are limited” (27). Culturally compatible instructions and reading materials and students’ learning styles and native languages were all taken into consideration as previous scholars attempted to help Native American students improve their reading levels.

I have been teaching English composition for almost nine years at a two-year branch campus near the Navajo reservation in New Mexico. The composition of my students is mostly Navajo with some Hispanics, Zuni, and Caucasians. The Navajo tribe is considered the largest tribe among all of Native American (“Navajo Indians”). The word Navajo is originally from “the phrase Tewa Navajo, meaning highly cultivated lands” (“Navajo Indians”). The majority of the Navajo live in New Mexico and Arizona (“Navajo Indians”). The Navajo tribe began in the

1500s (“Navajo Indians”). The Navajo government, the Navajo Tribal Council, was established in 1923, and the first election took place in 1938 (Navajo Tourism Department). According to the Navajo Tourism Department, The Navajo Nation is the sovereign Navajo tribal government. The Navajo Nation consists of more than 27,000 square mile land among Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah with population currently more than 300,000 (Navajo Tourism Department). Based on my observation, the majority of my students in my remedial English Composition classes had difficulties with reading comprehension. Several of my students had problems reading the vocabulary, and they seemed not to have understood what they read. This made me explore the reasons behind this problem in hopes of better helping my students improve their reading comprehension.

In his study on Navajo fifth graders’ literacy development at Black Rock Elementary School on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico, Hartle-Schutte writes that the income range in the community the study took place is low, with “more than 80% of the children qualifying for free or reduced school lunches” (644). Hartle-Schutte states that “[i]t would be extremely rare for two-income families to earn \$40,000 or more per year, with the more common range of \$20,000 or less for two-income families and below \$12,000 for single-income families. Unemployment is estimated to be in excess of 35%” (645). Hartle-Schutte states that “[o]n the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) Reading Test given each spring, the Black Rock elementary school fifth-grade class scored at the 39th percentile (when ranked by average grade equivalent). Sixty-seven percent of the Navajo fifth graders at BRES [Black Rock Elementary School] scored below the national mean, and 57% scored below 40th percentile” (645). The majority of the fifth graders at

the Black Rock elementary school scored below the national average based on Hartle-Schutte's study. Low employment rates and low household income are probably some of the reasons contributing to Navajo students' low level of reading in reading comprehension tests. Janzen indicates that Native American students are at risk academically partly because of their reading levels are below national average, high dropout rates in high school among all ethnic groups, and below national average low scores in verbal section of SAT (28).

Spolsky indicates that there were not enough reading materials in Navajo and "written Navajo is not common on the Reservation" (350). Spolsky writes that in his 1970 survey sent out to schools on or near the Navajo reservation, among these 3,500 six year-old Navajo students, 30% students only spoke Navajo, 20% were both Navajo and English speakers at home, and 5% were English only monolingual speakers (348). Spolsky states that in his study, he found that accessibility to town or school is the reason Navajo students can speak more English. Spolsky points out his study suggested "the importance of accessibility to the centers of diffusion of English as a major factor in language maintenance and loss" (349). Spolsky adds the quality of roads and accessibility associated with distance to off-reservation towns or schools as factors. Spolsky concludes that the closer the student live near the off-reservation town, the more English is spoken at home, and "the public school children knew much more English than the boarding school children when they first came to school" (349) because the students who attend public school live near the school, and the students who attend the boarding school (Bureau of Indian Affairs) live further away from the public school. However, more than 40 years later, I observed

that the majority of my Navajo students admitted to facing difficulties speaking Navajo or communicating with the elderly who speak only Navajo.

Conn writes that “Navajo education is based on personal vision quests” (2) which is the opposite of the American educational model which focuses on the majority’s needs based on all the information available (2). One of the interviewees, Lila, a former high school dropout, states that “most of the Navajo young children only speak English. And it’s hard for our elderlies to talk to them in Navajo, because they don’t understand” (Conn 10). Lila states that “[b]ecause so many students at Northridge qualify for free lunches, Northridge feeds all students breakfast and lunch for free” (Conn 10). Lila states she appreciated Northridge for including Navajo culture (Conn 10). Another interviewee, Jeremy, a high school graduate, states that reading is the primary course for Navajo high schoolers because “like 75% of our tribe don’t speak English” (Conn 9). Jeremy also expresses the difficulties to adapt to the public-school culture, and he claims that the high dropout rate in high school is due to “shame and fear” (9). Conn states that “[a]ttendance is an on-going issue” (11) due to poor road conditions and a Navajo home environment living with many family members (11). The teachers in Conn’s study pointed out that they would like “a different educational model” (12) and to “see more vocational opportunities and cultural relevance in school” (11). Conn seems to point out family obligation or family-related issues could contribute to Navajo students’ low attendance rate.

Conn stresses that the majority (91.55%) failed to meet the attendance requirement in the Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010 (1). I agree with Conn that students’ attendance is a continuous issue. Due to the Navajo traditional culture, several of my students indicated that they

did not attend class because their grandparents, uncles, or aunts were sick. Some of them claimed that they had to babysit their siblings' children, so they were absent. Also, the culturally related ceremonies could be a contributing factor to student absenteeism.

The elementary school teacher, Peter, stated that certain elements inherent in the Navajo language, including its lack of modern technical terms and inherent body language and hand gestures, along with reservation life contribute to the low performance of standardized tests (Conn 12). Conn writes that only 14.63% of the Northridge elementary school students meet the minimum requirement in reading (1). Conn states that “[t]ranslating from English to Navajo is difficult” (9), e.g., this word, computer, which is translated as “metal that thinks for itself” in Navajo (9). The low-income and lack of employment opportunities on or near the reservation and the severe difference between Navajo and English could probably contribute to the poor performance of the majority of the students taking the standardized tests.

Nonetheless, given the fact that the majority of the Navajo students cannot speak Navajo fluently, the Navajo language should not completely contribute to their poor performance on standardized tests. Considering the majority of the Navajo students now use computers and own iPhones and iPads, they may lead lives heavily influenced by Western culture, even though some of them live on the reservation. However, Navajo cultural traditions are still practiced.

Conn writes that Navajo “[s]tudents overwhelmingly underperform on high stakes tests, written for and by a dominant culture, and often they do not want to go where standards movement is designed to take them. They want to live by their clans, raise horses, and live the rural Navajo lifestyle” (12). By contrast, however, based on my experiences teaching mostly

Navajo, there are more and more young Navajo college students who already assimilate into the English-speaking only culture. During class presentations, some of them conveyed to the class that they are distant from the Navajo language, tradition, and culture.

Rosier and Farella write that “sixth grade students at Rock Point were still two years below national norms on the Standard Achievement Test” (379). Rosier and Farella state that “initial literacy in the mother tongue and continuous bilingual instruction can lead to better academic performance in English by Navajo-dominant students” (388). However, more than forty years later, the situation has switched. The majority of the Navajo cannot speak Navajo fluently and speak English as the primary language.

I have been teaching many sessions of English Composition classes each semester for several years, but this was my first time teaching the remedial English classes to mostly Navajos and some Zuni. I usually broke the students into small groups after I assigned the reading questions at the end of the assigned essay. I regularly required my students to read the required essays at home before the class period; however, the majority of the students did not read before coming to class. Due to that, I would let them read in their groups in class as Wieczkiewicz states that “[s]tudents should have ample time during the day in which to be involved in the actual reading process” (26). My students usually read the readings out loud to their group members. They then picked the reading questions at the end of each reading themselves and worked on the answers from the readings and reported them to the class as a whole. During the group discussions, I observed that most of the students did not discuss or talk in their groups. When they answered the questions, my students could not even understand the reading questions they

chose. I was shocked, and this made me wonder what caused this problem. This could be somewhat consistent with Wieczkiewicz's study in which she writes that "many Navajo children in public schools on the reservation have difficulty learning to read English" (20). The existing low level of reading comprehension also contributed to their limited options for taking college classes. Moreover, a few of the students in each class did not purchase or could not afford the textbooks.

The textbook I selected for this course was for developmental English students, which I believe is a proper material for their reading level as Wieczkiewicz points out that "[r]eadability levels of reading materials should be carefully checked" (26). DuBois points out that "[t]hese Navajo readers appeared to better understand stories which were more relevant to their culture. Teachers who preview reading materials can anticipate possible problems their students may have with certain concepts" (694). When I called students to read a paragraph in class, I observed the majority of my remedial English students could not read or struggled to read some of the vocabulary. I reminded them that they could use dictionaries or look up the words they do not know using their phones. Almost all of my students have cell phones and social media accounts. I observed that they were often on their social media accounts on campus. I assumed that the technology could increase their reading levels in English, but it might not. In an article in 1978 by Vorih and Rosier, they write that 90% of the students who entered the Rock Point Community School, kindergarten and elementary school in the center of the Navajo reservation and other schools on the reservation, were Navajo monolingual or dominant speakers (264). Vorih and Rosier state that the Navajo six graders were "two full years" (264) below the national reading

level (263-264). Vorih and Rosier write that “[t]here were relatively few Navajo reading materials and no learning-to-read materials” (268). Considering Navajo language was not written down until the late 1880s (McCarty 73), the reading materials were few. Wiczekiewicz states that an average of 20% of primary Navajo speaking students who had problems with reading in the summer program were absent each day and the absent rate reached 50% at the end of the five-week program (21). Wiczekiewicz states that in her reading program the teacher needs to ensure students’ “total classroom involvement, or small group presentation” (26). However, time has changed, and the technology should provide more convenient methods for students to access online written materials, e-books, or any electronic documents through the library online.

When I requested my students to do library research for their essays, several students spoke up in class and asked why library research is required for the assignment. They then told me that the library link did not work to avoid doing the library research. The resistance to doing library research from my remedial English students triggered me to wonder whether their low level of reading comprehension plays a role in it. Wiczekiewicz emphasizes that “[i]n my observations, many students appeared to be avoiding tasks because they were too difficult” (27). Doing library research involves reading, and if students perceive that reading is difficult, then they would find excuses to prevent themselves from doing it.

Miller and Johnson state that one of the major problems that contributes to Navajo’s low level in reading is the difference between the Navajo culture and white culture (550). Eder emphasizes that oral tradition is a major part of Navajo culture (285). Philipsen indicates speaking/talking is important in public discussion in Navajo rhetoric in order to reach a

consensus (138). Moreover, Philipsen states that Navajo does not possess a written rhetorical theory and its rhetoric is different from the Western rhetoric (139). McWhirter and Ryan state that due to the oral tradition of the Navajo culture, reading is not embraced or promoted (77).

Allen emphasizes that “the most essential step to make reading immediately meaningful to the student is to make it interesting” as cited in Miller and Johnson (553). If the reading materials are related to the students’ culture, the students would have motivation to read and therefore develop an interest in reading. Moreover, Allen recommends “class discussions, peer group writing, and reading materials written by and about Indians” as cited in Miller and Johnson (554). Allen stresses that “[r]eading must not be forced on the student. Instead, the student must be nurtured and brought to the point where he wants to read” as cited in Miller and Johnson (553). Instructors could utilize supplemental reading materials written by the Navajo or related to Navajo tradition and culture in the hope that these materials can increase students’ interests in reading.

Fearn’s and Mickelson and Galloway’s language-experience approaches to teaching reading to Native American students were successful as cited in Miller and Johnson (554). In the approach, Native students were able to use their native language and read the materials that they can relate to (Miller and Johnson 554). Hartle-Schutte points out that in his case study on four Navajo students’ reading experiences, the school “failed to recognize, value, and adequately build upon” (643) these various individual literacy experiences. Hartle-Schutte stresses the inadequacy of the standardized reading tests on minority students including the Navajo with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Altwerger writes that “[i]n a study of non-school

literacy use and literacy accessibility in the state of New Mexico, McKinley County had the highest poverty and unemployment rates, one of the lowest accessibilities to literacy materials, and the second lowest high school graduation rate in the state” as cited in Hartle-Schutte (645). McKinley County, where I teach, is approximately twenty-five miles away from the Navajo reservation. The majority of the students here probably do not have many opportunities for literacy due to many reasons, e.g., geographical, financial, historical, or psychological reasons. I remember the first year I taught here, several of my students wrote about the Long Walk in their essays, which was definitely a learning experience for me. The Long Walk is a very significant historical event in Navajo history which took place “[b]etween the summer of 1863 and December 1866” during which approximately 10, 500 Navajos were forced to march from their homeland Eastern Arizona/Western New Mexico to Fort Sumner and Bosque Redondo, approximately 400 miles away in East New Mexico (“The Long Walk”). During the walk, more than 2000 Navajos lost their lives. This horrific incident is also called “Hweeldi” (“Navajos at Bosque Redondo”). This event caused tremendous pain and resistance on the Navajo to the Western dominance, e.g., education.

Students’ attitudes toward reading can have a huge impact on their performance on standardized tests. Hartle-Schutte states that the Navajo 5th grade students’ attitudes toward reading instruction and materials were usually negative. However, since the majority of the Navajo students could be distant from the Navajo language, and their reading problems remain, the cultural factors should be taken into account as a possible contributor to their reading problems. Navajo oral tradition or culture should be a possible factor since Navajo did not

become a written language until the late 19th century. Moreover, poverty and low accessibility to literacy could also play a part in the low reading levels of the Navajo students.

Navajo students should be provided authentic materials that are the same as the literacy practice of neighboring communities, so students can experience the real usage of the language (Hartle-Schutte 653). I believe this is true but not just for Navajo students. This could be applicable to any students from any backgrounds. Considering the reservation with poor conditions of non-paved roads and water hauling (no indoor plumbing) and its neighboring city, e.g., Gallup, which is an economically depressed city, at least 138 miles away from a city, located in a poor county, the resources our students receive for literacy are definitely not enough. However, as educators, we have to address and tackle this unpleasant reality that McKinley County itself lacks resources and faces similar challenges.

I agree that educators should “build upon what the children already know” (Hartle-Schutte 653). If students can select reading materials based on personal interest, they could develop strong interests in reading. Because those materials they select can be related to their experiences, they can bring meaning to the texts; therefore, learning to read becomes easy (Hartle-Schutte 653). Janzen points out that “the majority of the Navajo students in her study were not reading prior to attending school” (646). Due to Navajo traditional culture, some of the Navajo students were not provided books before school age. Educators could create an environment that interests students in literacy activities by providing reading materials that the students are familiar with. In Navajo culture, rites are used at any time when needed (Witherspoon 15). Navajo rituals are performed through singing, praying, and speaking

(Witherspoon 16). Navajo world is formed through thoughts realized by singing in the ceremonies. These rituals consist of many repetitive phrases or ideas, which could be similar to poetry in Western sense. Instructors can also integrate singing as activities for students to learn and have fun in the process of learning to read.

The Navajo also very much believe in “the power of thought” (Witherspoon 29). They believe that a positive thought can bring a positive outcome. Therefore, materials related to any concepts of positivity should be available for students to read in the classroom.

Creation of beauty and obtaining beauty within oneself are very important concepts in Navajo culture (Witherspoon 151). Therefore, art associating with beauty derived from creation of thoughts is an essential part of Navajo culture. Witherspoon writes that “[n]early all Navajos are artists” (152). Materials associated with Navajo weaving, sand painting, or silver jewelry, could be utilized as supplemental reading sources in class to boost interests in reading.

As a matriarchal society, many of my Navajo students frequently mentioned their grandmothers when presenting on their assignments. A female character, “Changing Women,” is the only female deity in the Navajo origin stories (House 97) where she created the Navajo people (Benally 25). The Navajo introduce themselves by addressing their clans, their maternal clans first and then paternal clans; therefore, family structure is a major part of their lives.

Eder writes that Navajo has a culture of oral tradition (285). In the Navajo culture, Navajo creation stories and Coyote stories (House xix) are told to the young to teach them their traditions and values. Storytelling practices have existed in the Navajo culture; therefore, Navajo students could be possibly interested in reading stories, this type of genre. In spite of the

importance of the materials that the students can relate to, nowadays the majority of the Navajo cannot speak Navajo, and their use of the internet and social media are pretty frequent, where the content they read is primary in English.

Allowing students to have enough time to read and discuss in small groups seems to be a useful strategy for Navajo students. Janzen conducts a study on Navajo third graders using strategic reading instruction. The results suggest that the students' behavior regarding reading produces positive results in comparison to the other class which did not receive the intervention. In Janzen's study, the teacher in the class without the strategic reading instruction emphasized "decoding and understanding the meaning of individual words" (31), which might hamper students' comprehension of the text. The students in the intervention class had more time to read aloud or silently and discuss in small groups, and they also "wr[ote] out their thoughts in a notebook" (Janzen 31), and shared in class. The Navajo students in the intervention class with the reading instruction focused more on the "overall understanding of the text" and spent more time to read in class (Janzen 48). Wieczkiewicz stresses that instructors should provide students with plenty of time to read in school (26). Focusing on the content instead of the meaning of individual words can really make students pay attention to the overall meaning of the reading content.

I let my remedial students spend enough time reading the articles and discussing the questions regarding the articles in small groups. The majority of the students would take turns reading the articles out loud together in their groups, and after they are done reading, they would discuss. Most of the students do not read the required articles before class. They would not

discuss or form a group when they did not read beforehand. I would have to assign these quiet students into different groups already formed. This silence from some Navajo students could be associated with the Navajo culture, which is centered in thinking (Witherspoon 29). Maybe instructors should give students some time to think about the reading before they are ready to speak to their group members.

Instructors should not disregard students' learning styles. Janzen states that “[m]aterial published on teaching Navajo and Native American learners has focused on the use of instruction that is culturally compatible or that emphasizes preferred learning styles” (49). However, Janzen also points out that “traditional culture undoubtedly has been affected by contact with the dominant society” (49). Janzen mentions that Native Americans' learning styles might change due to the impact from the dominant culture on their culture. This impact has been observed in my classes that the majority of the students use social media accounts and use cell phones typing in English.

Janzen indicates “watch-then do” strategy (49) is usually the approach that was recommended for Native American learners. Field stresses that Navajo children may be used to questions that are asked to a collected audience rather than an individual, so they assume that the response is volunteered or is not required to be given immediately as cited in Janzen (50). Besides learning approaches that are suitable for the Native American students, their interactional styles should also be considered in order to develop a better approach in teaching them reading. Furthermore, in the Navajo culture, children are not allowed to speak when elders are talking. This may relate to the unwillingness or inability of some of the Navajo students to

participate in class or in group discussion by speaking. As their instructor for the past nine years, I believe that reading books or articles related to the Navajo culture and language helped me better provide suitable instruction to my Navajo students.

This problem with reading comprehension among the Native American students cannot be ignored. Navajo students' learning and interaction styles, oral tradition, or culture should all be taken into consideration when providing them instruction in class. Considering, nowadays, the majority of Navajo college students cannot speak Navajo fluently, the reasons behind this lack of reading comprehension in English should be investigated. Instructors may consider providing reading materials that Native American students can relate to or written by Native American writers in hopes of lifting their confidence towards their traditions/cultures, increasing their interests, and inspiring them to the culture of reading. Supplemental reading materials associated with Navajo culture such as arts, family, etc. may be provided in class to validate their culture and raise their interests in reading. Reading materials that students can associate with or are interested in can motivate them to read. Perhaps instructors can allow students to choose their reading materials as part of a written assignment to motivate them to read and reflect on the readings they choose through thinking which according to Philipsen and Witherspoon is part of the Navajo culture. When assigning group discussion, instructors should be flexible, allowing time for them to read the material, think, and discuss with peers. Previous studies on Navajo students' reading comprehension and teaching pedagogies are insufficient. Future research on this or related topic is necessary to help Navajo students improve the level of reading.

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