

How to Re-Invigorate Your Language in Five Easy Steps

By Freda Dan

A boarding high school was built several air/water miles from my village one year. It was my sophomore year, and my older brother and I went there and stayed with different families. My brother stayed with our grandmother with several other boys from home.

She was not our true grandmother but our grandmother's sister.

She was a very old lady; lines were many and deep on her face. Her head was very large as was her body. Everything seemed to sag on her. She was so old that the muscles on her cheeks hung like sacks, her arms, and belly as well. She walked heavy and bent against gravity. She was decent and fair, and ran a good household with all those young high school boys and two of her own grown sons. In all my times with her I found her to be kind and friendly.

I would visit my brother here and there, and one day I entered into her kitchen, she was sitting, breathing deep and heavy. She looked at me and said, or tried to say what was on her mind but she was so upset and agitated that her words needed her mind to slow down to say what she wanted. She calmed down and began to tell me in a loud, strong, and angry voice that a man and a woman, both white, from the school had come by. They

wanted to know if she would teach Inuqiaq at the school. The request returned her to a very sore spot in her life. She told them that when she was in grade school she spoke her language in the playground and was punished. She told me that, at the time, she did not even know what she was being punished for, all she was doing was talking to her friend.

As a child, she did not even know why it was wrong to speak her language. I can't recall what the punishment was, something enough so that she would not forget that she was not allowed to speak in her language.

My grandmother said that after she told the couple of her experience, she asked them rhetorically, "... and now you want me to teach my language after what was done to me?" She relayed that the man seemed to understand her anger and seemed sympathetic but the woman got up and said to the man, "Come on, let's get outta here," in a disgusted tone.

I think the woman's attitude and response upset her more than anything.

I have heard of others like my mother, brother, and other folks who were punished for speaking in American. I call any Native American, just 'American' because that is what we are, American. A shout out to the Italians for naming our country

after Amerigo! I call every immigrant after us, New Americans.

As a middle-aged woman, I asked my mother why she and my dad had never spoken Yup'ik so that I could hear it and learn it. She said that they thought if they spoke only in English, we, my siblings and me, would do better in school.

Throughout my more than half century, I heard, learned, and experienced everything in English, so very little of my experience was in my language. I butted my head into a language-learning book. I had to keep ramming my head into the first chapter over and over again to figure out what was said and what it meant. I suppose I could have shelled out \$750 and taken the class at the college in town but raising four offspring swept away the financial resources and time.

One day I was waiting at the grade school vehicle pick-up queue when my third-grader came toward the car with his hands behind his back. As he's getting into the car, he whips out a trophy from behind his back. I say, "What's this, let me see." I read the

plaque on the trophy saying it is third place for the school spelling bee. My mind goes into left gear wondering if there is a spelling bee in my language that I could get my crew into.

I begin searching for a spelling bee to sponsor my guys into. I find one but it is a closed spelling bee and only meant for that particular school district. I wheedle and charge and retreat at the director of the spelling bee to open it up and allow me to enroll my son's school into it but it is a no go. I find another but it is for Navajo country. I widened my search and found an article from some college about indigenous languages. It stated that we Americans complain about what happened to us but we do not do anything. If someone, anyone would just do something ... I think to myself, who do they mean when they say 'someone, anyone' should do something? The school? Indian education? Does anyone include me even if I do not have any credentials?

I decide that the article is giving me permission to do something to invoke my language. I study the Navajo spelling bee system as a model. Once the formula is figured out, I went to one of my children's



middle school principal and asked him if he would take on a Yup'ik spelling bee. I'm fortunate that the principal had spent time in a place that had people of my language and he was not against it.

I talked to a bilingual/bicultural teacher, a cousin from my home village to take it on, who then turned it into an all school districts spelling bee. 2017/2018 was the spelling bee's seventh season.

I gained a lot of insight about the state of my language. I learned that many adults are learning to spell—I can tell they are learning by the errors in their spelling. I know from experience that very few of us ever had a class in our language, thus it is understandable. I see students who just want to have some involvement with their language and don't mind if they do not make it into the spelling bee competitions, they just want to take part in the practices. I see the limited amount of resources that teachers have for teaching the language. I see that non-natives do not include themselves into our world but they will take French and Spanish, though they live amongst us.

The spelling bee, which is called, Yup'ik Spelling Bee for Beginners, includes optional weekly practice material, covering practices in family terms, numbers, gemination and so on. Though the coaches are told that this is not a language course but a course covering the spelling and orthography of the language via spelling, pronunciation and definition in reverse (experiencing the meaning of a word, how to pronounce it, and how it is spelled), I've learned that some of them have used the practice emails as a model for teaching beginning grammar, which points to the lack of support language instructors get in designing a language course.

One might be saying to oneself that the author did not even say what the five easy steps are to re-invigorating one's language. I did not directly say what they are but here it is:

Do it.

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This Article may be cited as:

Dan, Freda (2018). How to Re-Invigorate Your Language in Five Easy Steps. *Fourth World Journal*. Vol 17, N1. pp. 24-26.



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