

EDUCATION: Video games teach traditional tongue

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Pauma tribal member Cyndy Bond, 11, has grown up speaking English and playing video games. So to learn her tribe's traditional language, she whips out her Nintendo DSi.

Members of the Pauma Band of Luiseno Mission Indians hope that Bond and other tribal kids will be the first generation in about 40 years to speak Luiseno fluently, reviving a language that has nearly vanished.

To accomplish the revival, tribal members from toddlers to elders are turning to language lessons delivered on video gaming technology.

And they're looking ahead to language apps for smartphones and other technology.

Last year the tribe, along with Cal State San Marcos' California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center, created game cartridges programmed to teach Luiseno vocabulary through a combination of writing, pictures and spoken words.

Tribal members ranging from children to elders lent their voices to the project, in many cases speaking words they had only recently learned.

The lessons offered on the Nintendo device introduce Luiseno words for basic concepts such as colors, animals and simple commands.

Participants click through a series of images depicting different words. A can of orange paint illustrates the color, while the Luiseno word "alee pax" is written below, and spoken by a tribal member ---- in this case Cyndy Bond, who had mastered the guttural sound represented by the "x."

Cyndy, who learned the words through flashcards and worksheets, said the Nintendo program is more fun.

"I like doing it more like this," she said. "I get to use it on a DSI. There are more things to do, instead of writing it down."

Project coordinators developed the program with a [\\$50,000 grant](#) from the tribe, and distributed about 150 cartridges to tribal members 21 and older, as well as to the tribal library and after-school program.

With 45 to 50 homes on the reservation, and about 250 members, that means every household should have at least one cartridge, tribal officials said.

Students use the program to complete language lessons in the afternoons with after-school program manager Chelsea Gonzalez, who said she encourages kids to use the new vocabulary during playtime.

"I try to get them to replace their words with Luiseno," she said.

Tribal librarian Yolanda Espinoza said she uses the device for library presentations.

The accessibility of the video games, coupled with children's aptitude for language, has allowed them to progress rapidly through the lessons, said Joely Proudfit, a CSUSM professor and director of the culture and sovereignty center.

They are inspiring their parents, and even grandparents, to revisit the language.

"We now have a new generation of children who are more advanced than their parents," said Proudfit, who coordinated the project. "They're teaching their parents. Using a toy inspires the kids, and it's easy, but the toy's also a mini-computer."

The project requires some improvisation, and subtle modernization of the language. For instance, Proudfit said, there's no Luiseno word for "stapler," so tribal members will have to agree on a way to describe the object.

Other languages also play a role. The Luiseno words for "beans" and "cat" are "frijoles" and "gato," revealing the Spanish influence on the language. And because most tribal members are native English speakers, the long vowels and guttural consonants of Luiseno are difficult to pronounce.

"With Indian, you speak from the throat," said Cyndy's mother, Venessa Brown. "In English, you enunciate all your vowels and consonants."

Brown hopes that switching between the two languages will become second nature to her daughter. Proudfit also said she's introducing her own 11-month-old daughter to the program.

"Because of this Nintendo DSI, I can share this with my daughter, because we're both Luiseno, and she will learn more words than I ever knew at her age," Proudfit said.

The tribe plans to expand the program by offering it to the other five Luiseno bands. They'll also release advanced versions of the program to build on basic vocabulary with Luiseno phrases, sentences and whole stories.

Some of those additions might take the form of a smartphone app, Proudfit said, although the tribe hasn't determined which system they'll target.

There are successful precedents for that approach.

Isreal Shortman, a software engineer based in Phoenix, said he developed a free [iPhone app](#) to help his 3-year-old niece learn their Navajo tongue. Thirty thousand people have downloaded the app since its release last year, he said. He's recently added similar apps for the Lakota, and for the Northern Californian Konkow language.

"There are a lot of families that live off the reservation, and their kids don't have access to the language itself," Shortman said. "This was a way to bridge that gap, using the latest technology."

The Pauma band aims to see the current generation of children become fluent speakers by adulthood, and eventually teach their children Luiseno as a first language.

"That's the ultimate goal," Brown said. "This gives us the opportunity to bring it back."

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