

SAN MARCOS: Video games to help teach native language

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Cal State San Marcos professor Joely Proudfit, front, is working on a project to restore Luiseno tribal language with the help of students Tommy Cooper, left, Michael Murphy, Tommy Devers and Temet McMichael. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff Photographer)

Hand-held video games may help Luiseno tribal members restore their traditional language, as tribal members and local professors devise a novel approach to teach the ancient language on Nintendo devices.

The Pauma Band of Luiseno Indians has provided a \$50,000 grant to Cal State San Marcos' California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center, and Palomar College's American Indian Studies Department, to create Luiseno language cartridges for the video games.

The cartridges will be distributed to members of the tribe's seven bands in Riverside and San Diego counties.

"What we're hoping to do is preserve the voices of current speakers for future generations, and to make learning the language fun, easy and accessible for all Luiseno people," said Joely Proudfit, a Cal State professor and director of the center.

The first \$40,000 of the grant will go toward the university's efforts to develop the game cartridges, while \$10,000 will support language workshops at the college, said Proudfit, who is descended from the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians.

The project began last month and the devices should be in hand by the fall, she said, noting that the university and tribe chose Nintendo devices because they lend themselves to interactive programs, and are ubiquitous.

"Almost any home with a child in the family has one laying around," she said.

An American Indian-owned technology company, Nevada-based Thorton Media, Inc., is creating cartridges that would combine words, songs, letters and images in Luiseno language, Proudfit said.

For instance, she said, a picture of a dog would be accompanied by the spoken word for dog and its written spelling in the native alphabet, which includes some characters not found in English.

"Nintendo (devices) are very colorful," she said. "You can put stories in there and songs. You'll hear it and see it, so you are not only learning to speak it, but write it. It's pretty exciting. It makes your jaw hit the floor."

Yolanda Espinoza, tribal librarian with the Pauma Band, said some members practice with flash cards through a daily language program, but said this project will extend their participation.

"With this device, we'll be able to sit there and share with each other," she said. "I just think it's going to be exciting, to break loose and get more involved."

Tribal members see their language, which diminished during federal assimilation campaigns in the last century, in danger of perishing without such revival efforts.

Proudfit said it's uncertain how many fluent Luiseno speakers remain among all seven bands. Espinoza said only about four elders out of the 200 Pauma Band members still speak the language.

"By restoring the language we can bring back a part of our culture that we've been missing," said sociology graduate student Tommy Devers, a Pauma tribal member who is working on the project.

"By learning our language we can actually learn more about our culture and our people," Devers said.

Devers said he has occasionally heard Luiseno spoken in greetings or at ceremonial gatherings, but didn't grow up listening to its cadence in common speech.

"We just had little snippets of the language, but nothing as a whole," he said.

Proudfit said the Nintendo program would include voices of men, women, children and elders, and cater to tribal members of all ages.

It will offer a starting place for tribal kids, she said, and a second chance for adults such as herself and Espinoza, who were one or two generations too late to learn the language from birth.

Although the first phase of the training will generate language proficiency at the level of a 3- to 5-year-old, the goal is to create true fluency among tribal members.

"We want them arguing in Luiseno, we want them singing in Luiseno, we want them humming in Luiseno and we want them praying in Luiseno," she said. "It should be first nature."

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