

Resources for Shawnee Immersion

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Shawnees, like many Native American tribal communities, have always invested in language transmission in one form or another. Until 2020, the Shawnee Tribe's language classes were in-person only, relying heavily on teachers and students in northeastern Oklahoma to carry out the bulk of language reclamation work. However, during the pandemic, all classes shifted towards online-only instruction in an effort to protect the health of our communities and still engage in language work. This shift would set the Shawnee Tribe's language program—known formally as the Shawnee Language Immersion Program (SLIP)—down a path of unprecedented growth, connection, and community-building. This paper discusses this path, including its challenges, successes, inspirations, and future plans.

Despite its name, the Shawnee Language Immersion Program has not followed a standard approach to immersion teaching. Whereas most envision immersion as lessons spoken primarily or only in the target language and without explicit grammar instruction, our language context makes this curriculum style difficult and less generative than other education models. With few speakers interested in teaching online classes but the majority of learners being spread out across Turtle Island, we have had to create curriculum and learning programs in real-time and based on the feedback of all program participants, allowing us to adapt and create resources that are meaningful to our unique context. One of our recent and most drastic changes began in January 2024 when the Shawnee Tribe was awarded a Living Languages Grant, which funded the development and implementation of a mentor-apprentice program modified to fit the needs and goals of our teachers and learners.

We began by pivoting most of our teachers into apprentices and selecting mentors from those who had access to and/or previous knowledge of the intricacies of spoken, communicative-competent Shawnee. As opportunities for speaking and listening to Shawnee were extremely rare, we designed our new program to create these opportunities and also empower learners with resources and the skills necessary to train themselves outside of class. To do so, we developed an online platform with weekly units that taught specific grammar skills by introducing vocabulary and phrases paired with pictures, audio, and language games. Learners were asked to go through one unit a week before a live Zoom class to be prepared to listen, speak, practice, and translate Shawnee in real time. Additionally, the mentors created weekly worksheets and activities that taught learners how to use our online dictionary, emphasizing the importance of developing language practices out of linguistic resources. Some of these activities were collected and shared with Shawnee citizens in our official Shawnee Journal so that the community at large could see the language and find linguistic patterns on their own. Overall, investing in resource creation with each participant of the program has nurtured a supportive, collaborative, and progressive language program where learners, apprentices, and mentors are all valued and necessary to the success of the program.

Building this program in conjunction with existing curriculum, teachers, learners, and stakeholders has been challenging but highly rewarding. We have learned that explicit grammar instruction accompanied by a larger dialogue context is needed to make the most out of the limited time learners have in our mentor-apprentice program. Learners thrive with image- and audio-based lessons that are then expanded upon in class. Interactive activities, like playing BINGO or telling stories, are also helpful for learners to internalize Shawnee. While these methods are not generally considered immersion, they are necessary and successful for our immersion program. As a result, our program has experienced new levels of language growth.