Treasure Language Storytelling
Why “treasure language”? 

"Treasure Language" is a term coined by the Rama people of Nicaragua.
Collaborator: Steven Bird
Overview

• What is Treasure Language Storytelling?

• What we’ve learned

• Where TLS is going

• Feedback, other applications
Language Realities in Urban Spaces

Many small language communities in proximity

Immigrant and indigenous

Opportunity for solidarity, connection, cross-pollination

Prevalence of mainstream “monolingual mindset” in spite of multilingual contexts

Photo credit BRJ INC. on Flickr
Aims

• Bring people together

• Push against the monolingual mindset

• Attempt to address the status crisis of treasure languages
Qualitative Research Origins

• 25 interviews
• 5 language communities
• interviewed in 2 languages
Storytelling Performance Format
Format Details

- 2 hour event for public audience
- Audience priming
- Blessing
- ~5 stories in original language, then interpreted
- 10 minutes total, each
- Language champion discussion
Stories told in original language, then interpreted
Performed for a Public Audience
How to be “language positive”
Language Champion
Discussion
TLS so far...

- 6 major events
- ~10 smaller events
- 50-100 attendees at each event
- Tigrinya, Lu Mien, Dafine, Shona, Twi, Ewe, Hawaiian, Ma’di, Irish, Djambarrpuyngu, Ohlone Chochenyo, Lopit, Tagalog, Yoruba, Southern Min, Kannada, Woiwurrung, Swahili, Bahasa Malay, more...
- 1 DIY TLS Resource Kit [https://goo.gl/uOcHXU](https://goo.gl/uOcHXU)
What TLS emphasizes

- Spontaneous sharing in vernacular (from learners and speakers)
- Rehearsal together
- What is culture is determined by storyteller
What TLS it is not

- Written word
- Re-experiencing trauma
Who are the experts? Who are the listeners?

- Dynamics are important
- Could be a performance only
- Audience vulnerability
Audience Priming

- Focus on one goal
  - Celebrate and connect
- Establish agreements
  - Listen to appreciate
  - Accept translations as they are
  - Lift each other up
- Learn new words
- Greet, welcome, and thank storyteller
Vincent, Chochenyo Ohlone Speaker

“The purpose is to have a living language that connects us to our home and connects us to our ancestors and connects us to our family and connects us to our land. When we speak the language I genuinely feel that we connect to all of those people before us, and it raises our self-esteem, and boosts our connection to our land, and fosters our community with each other, because we’re able to speak something which is unique to us. And so it’s a process but listening to the old songs and going through the old documentation and understanding what’s true of our language helped me be able to reconnect and share it with my community.”
Tigisti, Tigrinya speaker

“In a place like this, whether you speak a native language or not, it makes you feel less alone, because those of us who are really fighting to hold onto their language — it’s a lonely place....

And then there is me, who is kind of in between worlds, who speaks English, but who has to make that effort to make sure my daughter speaks the language — which she does by the way...so it’s a daily effort, it feels like a fight sometimes. You don’t always have people telling you, ‘you’re doing a great job’. You don’t know how it’s going to pan out later.

And then you come here and there are literally people trying to revive a language, and there are those of us who have people who speak the language all over the place but we don’t see them on a day-to-day basis. *Just to know that there are people who care, who are trying, who are making a difference — it kinda makes you feel like, ok, I’m on the right path, I’m doing something right and it’s going to have its benefit down the line.*
What is the impact?

- Written audience evals
- Storyteller interviews
I learnt how the stories made people feel powerful by telling them.

To learn some local Aboriginal language.

I would like to be involved in future events as storyteller or supporter.
Audience reactions

“I loved getting to sink into the sound of the language.”
Audience reactions

“Listening to stories in languages could/would empower people in my community to feel pride in their language and stories of their culture and ‘normalise’ multi-languages.”
Audience Reactions

"I didn't know what to expect from the event. After seeing it, I can see the potential for healing, not just connecting.

I knew one of the storytellers already. Or I thought I knew him, but I realized when he told his story I only knew part of him. I felt like I was taken back with him to his country, instead of him being in my world. There is much more to him than what I know of him here. That's where it has value for community members and storytellers. Knowing people as refugees or migrants, that's what they are here. But they are so much more, and this helps to bring that out."

--Andrea VanDerWerf, Melaleuca Refugee Centre
Post-event Interviews with storytellers
“I felt another level of pride attending this event because I was appreciating other languages. It’s really powerful that there are other people out there trying to preserve their languages.”

--Mien interpreter
“This was an awakening thing in Darwin. It inspires us, particularly me, to keep teaching my grandson. We have to ensure that even though my grandson is getting English in school, he should get Shona at home. Like eating his vegetables.”

--Shona storyteller
“[Telling our stories] brings us freedom and liberation to be able to express ourselves as ordained. It’s a really empowering thing for us.”

- Australian Yolngu storyteller, Djambarrpuyngu language
“It’s quite personal because I have migrated away from my family. That story stayed strong with me. It is what binds me to my mother...the story is part of my relationship with my mom.”

--Bahasa Malay storyteller
Relating TLS to Well-being

- Taking action around language
- TLS creates opportunities for connection, recognition, belonging
Learnings & Reflection

• Storytellers want more connection with each other
  • Focused rehearsal get-togethers

• Audiences want more personal connection
  • how to do this sensitively and protect storytellers?

• More sustained engagements

• How to balance treasure language community focus and “entertainment value” for broader audience
Next Directions

• School engagements
  • High school
  • Elementary

• More community-directed events
  • Storytellers
  • Interested community members (Staff at immigrant-focused organizations)
  • Other treasure language folks
  • Young people
Turning to you...

• Observations

• Feedback

• Applications in your work
You, too, can host Treasure Language Storytelling

Check out our TLS documentation that explains how to do your own:

TLS Resource Kit [https://goo.gl/uOcHXU](https://goo.gl/uOcHXU)
Many thanks to Treasure Language communities and their inspiring language work everywhere, with particular thanks to the Mien and Eritreans in the Sacramento and SF Bay Areas.
References


Mclvor O, Napoleon A. Language and Culture as Protective Factors for At-Risk Communities. Journal de la santé autochtone, novembre 2009.
