

## Language key to cultural survival in modern times

To the Editor:

The Nov. 23 issue of *Indian Country Today* printed a letter by a Ron Anderson from Yakima, Wash. After reading it, I felt compelled to respond and to at least try expose his total lack of knowledge in the area of bilingual education, a subject near and dear to me.

After chastising Tim Giago for perpetuating racism, Mr. Anderson goes on to express his displeasure with Native Americans' learning their own language, telling us that "colleges upon the reservation teach in the language of the various tribes." This is totally false and gives the impression that math teachers in reservation schools around the country step up to their blackboards and teach the concept of division in Lakota, Ojibwe or some other language other than English. I would like to know how many Indian educators Mr. Anderson talked to or how many reservation schools he visited to form this unique opinion. My guess would be none.

A human language is a window into the soul and is a deep pool of knowledge about a given culture. Language tells so much about the speaker. For instance, to quote Mr. Anderson's letter, "This does nothing to help the students at all. The real world, in case you didn't know, speaks English." I find Mr. Anderson's use of the words *real world* fascinating. In case he hasn't noticed, the real world is composed of literally thousands of different cultures and languages all with something to teach us. Far from being a threat to the cultural integration he seems to desire, Native American languages — and sadly most languages around the world not connected to commerce in some way — are hanging on by mere threads. Statements like that go a long way toward strengthening the stereotype that Americans are linguistically lazy or just plain ignorant.

Mr. Anderson obviously knows absolutely nothing about Native American bilingual education, the reservation system or the history that sought to destroy Native peoples first militarily, then culturally. Less than half of the 500 languages present when Columbus stepped ashore have survived the reservation and boarding school periods. Of these, less than 50 could be considered linguistically healthy today.

It saddens me that so few non-Indians like Mr. Anderson take the time to actually visit reservations and meet the many intelligent and creative educators, artists and just plain folks who are trying so hard to preserve what is left of their beautiful cultural traditions. Despite enormous odds, these languages and cultures still exist today for us to learn from and appreciate.

I do agree that English is and should be the dominant language spoken in America. But the truth is that there is plenty of room on the table for both English and a native language: it's called bilingualism.

Instead of fearing cultural diversity, Mr. Anderson, why not go out and shake its hand and hear its story. You may actually learn something.

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