

Developing Web-Based Learning Resources while Managing Language Classes in an Endangered Language

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This paper proposes a method to develop endangered language materials based on a case study of Amami-Okinoerabu island. First, research on endangered languages is constantly moving forward, and therefore types of media that can easily allow revisions and additions are desirable. Second, so that materials will actually be used by locals, endangered language materials should not only be suited to local needs, but should also be actively promoted. Considering these points, in this study, I develop language materials on the web, revising and promoting them through trials in language classrooms. I observe that this process allows me to create suitable language materials, which reflect some of the local needs, for the present situation of endangered languages.

Keywords: language revitalization, Ryukyu language, language education, endangered language, language materials

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1. Background

1.1. Background

The Ryukyu languages are at risk of disappearance, and much ongoing work has been done to revitalize them. Development of materials for these languages is growing (cf. Toyama 2016, Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education 2014); however, the methods by which such materials are being developed have received less attention. The creation of instructional materials for minor languages can be quite a different experience from creating them for major languages such as English or Japanese. This

paper proposes an approach that could be used for making instructional materials, which takes into account some requirements for endangered languages.

1.2. Case study background

This paper describes a case study that I am currently conducting. I am examining Okinoerabu, a language that is spoken on Okinoerabu Island in the North Ryukyu archipelago. The population of Okinoerabu Island is approximately 14,000, but only people over 60 years of age speak Okinoerabu, which has no mutual ineligibility with Standard Japanese. Yamada et al. (2018) reported that university school students in Tokyo understand less than 5% of spoken Okinoerabu. This language, like many other Ryukyu languages, is endangered. Young people living on the island typically speak only Standard Japanese. According to Kibe (2014), who judged the degree of endangerment of Okinoerabu using the UNESCO (2003) criteria, the lack of materials for education in a language is one of the main factors used in determining its status as an endangered language. Although Okinoerabu has several dialectal dictionaries (cf. Kinoe 2006, Nishie 1968), a vocabulary database (cf. NINJAL,¹ *shimamuni takarabako*²), and grammar descriptions (van der Lubbe 2016, Yokoyama 2017), no systematic language materials have been created for teaching. Hence, my project is designed to develop language materials that can allow Japanese speakers to learn Okinoerabu as a foreign language.

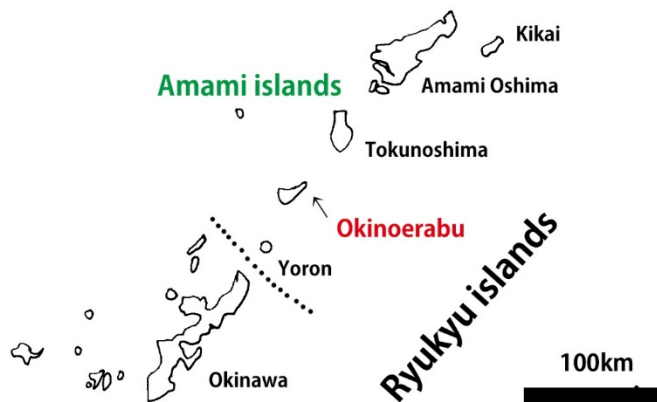


Fig. 1 Map of Okinoerabu Island

¹ Endangered languages database: <http://kikigengo.ninjal.ac.jp/>

² *Shimamuni takarabako* [Treasure box of Okinoerabu language]: <http://erabumuni.com/>

2. Development of language materials

2.1. Basic principles

Instructional materials for minority languages must differ from those used by widely spoken languages such as English and Japanese. First, research on endangered languages is constantly moving forward, which means that revisions and additions are often necessary as that research proceeds. Second, endangered languages face extinction across the globe, and Okinoerabu might disappear in the next 20–30 years, considering all present speakers are over 60 years old. Therefore, learning materials must be distributed as soon as possible instead of waiting until they are perfect. Furthermore, the purpose for which the materials are being created should not be forgotten, i.e., to help local people pass their language on to the next generation. For this reason, we must not only focus on creating materials but also on developing materials that will actually be used by the members of the community. Thus, materials should be created that suit local needs, and such materials should be promoted.

2.2. Procedures

Taking into account the above points, I have designed a procedure for developing materials. The characteristics of these materials are as follows: First, I intend to distribute them on the web, enabling me to revise them or add more material easily. Second, I am developing materials while also teaching language classes, and this allows me to promote my materials and receive feedback on them from the teaching and learning communities. I follow the “Action Research Cycle” (Figure 2) as I work to improve the quality of my materials.

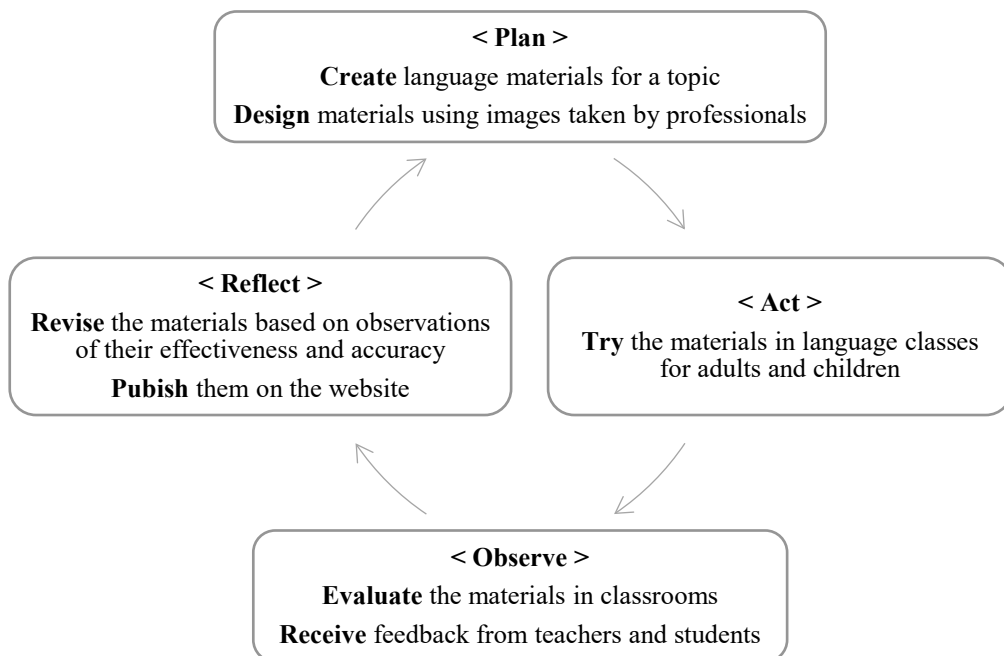


Fig. 2 “Action Research Cycle” to be followed for improving the quality of language materials

I create my materials for each topic, like “greetings (conversation lesson 1)” or “case markers (grammar lesson 3).” If I can publish such materials separately, i.e., on the web, then there is no reason to wait until the entire series is complete. Hence, I publish them as soon as possible. After finishing a draft, I hire a professional to design images for the materials. Visual design of language teaching materials is widely considered to be as important as user content. As a result, my drafts, which resemble Figure 3, are altered to resemble Figure 4.

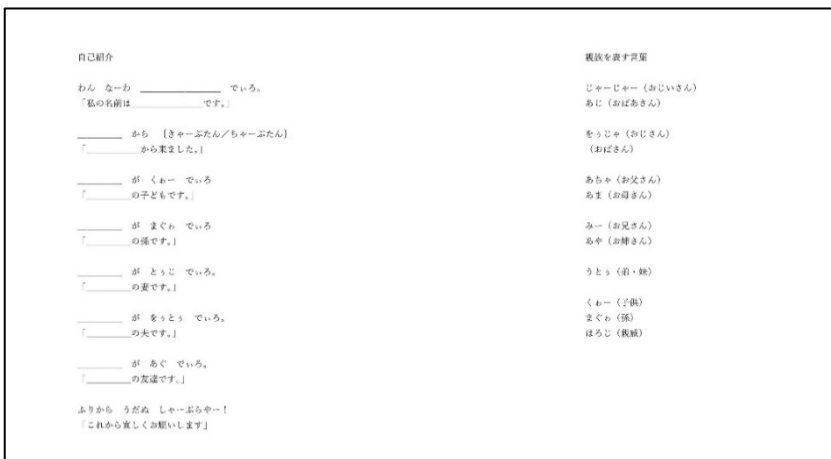


Fig. 3 Draft for a chapter on self-introduction

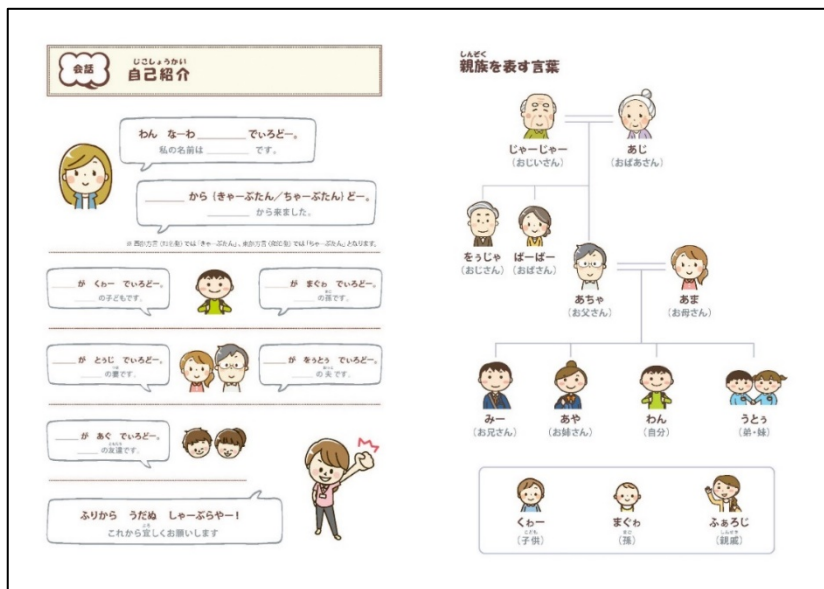


Fig. 4 Final version of a chapter on self-introduction

Second, I use the materials in my language classroom to assess their usability. I can then simultaneously receive feedback on their usability and comprehensibility from teachers and students. Currently, I teach two language classes on Okinoerabu Island: one for adults and the other for children. The former is held every two or three months, i.e., when I am able to travel to the island. A local native speaker of Okinoerabu assists

me in teaching, and generally 5–10 people attend my class. Most participants are migrants from outside the island and are very motivated. The children’s class is conducted monthly. I teach the language when I visit the island, and a local collaborator teaches it in my absence. This class is based in the Kunigami community, which has 1000 residents. In general, 3–10 children attend the class, or as many as 50 children attend when the language class collaborates with a local event.



Fig. 5 Class for adults (©Okinoerabu Branch Office of Amami Shimbun on facebook, 2018/8/31)



Fig. 6 Class for children

Third, I revise my materials using the findings from the preceding steps. After my revisions are finished, I upload the latest version to the website. The website is accessed approximately 30–40 times daily, and it has drawn a definite audience.



Fig. 7 Top page, overview of materials page, and sample material page on the web

3. Effects

The observed effects of this process include the following:

1. I have been able to tailor my materials to be more suitable for the local state of affairs owing to the trials they have gone through and the feedback I have received. For example, I changed some of the vocabulary used in the introduction unit. The expressions I had originally used were chosen for their unique pronunciation, but then I learned that some are not generally used in daily life and are less suitable for the introductory part.
2. I have been able to promote awareness of these materials through my classes and by publishing them on the web. Since I first began my classes, I have been receiving requests for my materials from local residents and others who are native to the island but live elsewhere. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, my website receives 30–40 visits daily. In my opinion, the website has enabled people to access materials other than in book form.

3. The materials have led some residents to teach Okinoerabu themselves. Some of those who attend my classes are now teaching themselves, using the materials I developed. This would not have occurred if I had not shown how they could be used in classrooms. In the future, more people may be empowered to pass down their language to a new generation.

4. Future Issues

Although this report is based on my observations, the findings are still relevant to other work on endangered language revitalization: I think developing materials on the web and revising them based on trials in the language classroom have allowed me to create materials that suit the current circumstances of endangered languages and that reflect some of the local needs. However, the final goal of language revitalization studies is to cultivate local autonomy and to achieve sustainable language revitalization in a community, and in this sense, since I am currently developing materials on my own, these activities would not be sustained without me. In order to cultivate local autonomy, I must increase the involvement of local participants during the initial stages of the process of planning materials and provide them with the experience of creating materials and managing language classes on their own, so that they can be empowered to sustain language revitalization through their own activities.

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