An Overview of Where Are Your Keys?

A Glimpse Inside the Technique Toolbox

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Introduction

Where Are Your Keys? (WAYK, whereareyourkeys.org) is a collection of *Techniques* for rapidly creating fluent speakers and teachers of endangered languages. Over the past 15 years, WAYK has been developed by and for language educators, learners, and community leaders to provide practical solutions for language revitalization. This chapter is intended as an overview of WAYK. We hope that some of the strategies you'll read about will be immediately useful, but just as it takes time and practice to achieve proficiency in a language, it takes time and practice to achieve proficiency in WAYK. The WAYK method continues to grow as our small team partners with communities to strengthen languages and generate new *Techniques*.

Origin of Where Are Your Keys?

Before he knew *what* he wanted to teach, Evan Gardner (the original developer of WAYK) wanted to know *how* to be a good teacher, to figure out the best ways of moving information from one person to another. He began a self-guided teacher training: working in classrooms, volunteering, tutoring, and observing his own teachers to collect their most effective strategies and improve on their least effective ones. After he had decided to become a Spanish teacher, an unexpected detour took him to a conference on Oregon's Endangered Languages in 2001. At that conference he was confronted with the problem of threatened Indigenous languages in his own backyard—a problem that, until then, he had unfortunately been ignorant of, but that he now knew to be far more urgent than Spanish language education. Evan decided to take the discoveries that he had intended to use in his own Spanish classroom and instead share them with young learners of endangered languages. Still, Evan knew that he needed more teaching tools, specifically he needed American Sign Language (ASL).

Evan had already seen ASL used with good results in special needs classrooms and had used basic ASL himself when he taught Spanish. After an inspiring Karuk immersion experience with Total Physical Response (TPR; Asher 2009), Evan knew how he wanted to apply ASL to endangered spoken languages. Instead of inventing gestures or acting out new concepts, ASL could be a visual and physical support for learners when overlaid with any spoken

language. Evan turned to his friend Bryce Folger, who is Deaf, fluent in English and ASL, and an accomplished lip reader. Initially, Bryce refused to teach Evan ASL because too many of his potential students had lost interest or motivation after just a few lessons. As a language teacher, Evan instantly understood and identified with Bryce's frustration. Evan could only imagine that fluent speakers of endangered languages must feel this far more acutely. Evan appealed to Bryce, explaining that he wanted to use ASL to teach endangered languages, and Bryce shared that he wanted to learn how to teach his family ASL. Evan and Bryce eventually agreed on a trade: Bryce would teach Evan ASL and Evan would teach Bryce *how* to teach it; together they would teach Bryce's brothers and sisters how to sign.

As Bryce taught Evan ASL, they would often take a "time out" from the lesson to have a meta-conversation about the speed and effectiveness of the language transfer and any issues that had come up. As they noticed patterns and recurrences in these issues, they began to establish "rules" (i.e., agreements on how to handle similar situations in the future). They would assign a gesture or ASL hand sign to each rule to remind them of their agreement. As they implemented these rules, they soon realized that they could move faster since they didn't have to rehash the same problems repeatedly, just check in occasionally to solve a new problem or make sure previous solutions were still working. The "time out" signal was replaced with the ASL hand sign for 'technical,' and the agreements evolved into what we now call WAYK *Techniques*. The longer Evan and Bryce worked together, the more *Techniques* they created for learning and teaching.

Evan and Bryce developed a mini-curriculum for ASL and piloted it with their friends. To ensure the language they were teaching was relevant and memorable, the lessons were based on the contents of each learner's pockets. Since every person they taught had a unique set of keys that inevitably became part of the lesson, the curriculum (and thus the method) was eventually called "Where Are Your Keys?" Equipped with a selection of these new *Techniques* (always explained in English), the students would dive into ASL immersion and emerge two hours later with the ability to carry on a simple conversation.

Evan and Bryce filmed and analyzed each session to further discover and eliminate sources of confusion and improve their curriculum. Together, and with the help of the students, they came up with more *Techniques*, incorporating elements from Evan's classroom experience and adaptations from TPR. In this way, they were practicing the art of identifying and solving issues that slowed down the creation of fluent signers and ASL teachers. No issue was considered too big or too small.

By this time, Bryce had taught countless lessons, and when he finally taught his siblings, they each walked away from their first lessons confident in their ability to learn and Bryce's ability to teach. Evan could see the ripple effect of this approach. He could already teach quite a bit of ASL even though he was not yet fluent. Students who had learned ASL from Evan and Bryce were independently able to teach their friends ASL and, simultaneously, some *Techniques*. Evan knew that learners would only be able to fully internalize *Techniques* if they were employing these strategies to actually learn a language. ASL was confirmed as the ideal language for this purpose because, in a short amount of time (made even shorter by an awareness of *Techniques*), learners would feel successful.

Now that he had the critical tool of ASL and snappy strategies for learning and teaching, Evan looked for a community to partner with where he could use these methods to support an endangered spoken language, and found this first partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Since then, the WAYK team has worked with many teachers, speakers, and language activists to apply these strategies to Indigenous, non-Indigenous, signed, and spoken languages.

At the heart of Evan and Bryce's ASL experiment is the idea that "being a good language teacher" and "being a good language learner" are teachable skills and can be broken down into discrete elements (*Techniques*). Moreover, they found that they were able to move ever faster the more they talked about the rules and created a shorthand (with a gesture) for each one. We now call this fundamental WAYK idea *Technique: Technique*. It stipulates that strategies (or *Techniques*) exist, that you can teach them to other people, that they come from a variety of sources, that you can make new ones as needed, and that everyone can collectively save a massive amount of time by seeking out and sharing the solutions to common language learning problems.

WAYK Techniques

What Are Techniques?

Techniques, or *TQs* for short, grew out of Evan and Bryce's rules. They are recognized strategies for maximizing the speed, ease, and efficiency of language transfer. *Techniques* address a range of problems: they can help control the flow of information; modify the learning environment; decrease risk, anxiety, and distraction; increase comfort, speed, and enjoyment; and, perhaps most importantly, train learners to be teachers.

When people see novice-level lessons using WAYK, it can be easy to misconstrue. WAYK is not merely the addition of props and sign language to any language lesson (i.e., rock + stick + ASL ≠ WAYK). While TQ: Sign Language (attaching gestures to spoken words) is important in WAYK, it is but one of many time-saving strategies. Rather, WAYK is the persistent use of *Techniques* in every aspect of your language program: identifying problems, creating solutions, coining new *Techniques*, and sharing them with others in the constant search for the fastest route to fluency.

Guiding Principles for Techniques

Techniques can be used to create a language learning environment with a swift pace and a high retention rate. Every new *Technique* that gets created is directed at one (or more) of these five objectives: speed, immersion, comfort, accessibility, and community. Spending time in target language immersion is one of the most effective ways to improve fluency, and learners who use WAYK *Techniques* get the most out of their immersion experiences. Additionally, *Techniques* are designed to reduce fear, anxiety, and boredom while increasing learners' self-confidence and receptivity to language. For learners whose heritage languages are threatened, the stakes can be very high, so creating a safe and comfortable learning environment where they quickly experience success is extremely important. *Techniques* make both language and language pedagogy accessible to as many people as possible by helping learners feel that fluency is achievable and language teaching is a valuable and attainable skill. *Techniques* can help language programs transfer responsibility for language survival from a handful of people to a large, coordinated, and supportive community.

How Techniques Get Made

A skilled craftsperson doesn't give up on a project if they don't have the right tool in their toolbox; they make the tool they need and keep it, knowing they will encounter that problem again. The WAYK method believes everyone can be trained as a *Techniques* craftsperson and,

as a community of craftspeople, we can create better tools together. Here's the process we use to create a new *Technique*:

1. Identify a specific impediment that is slowing progress in a language class, a team meeting, or a community gathering. You may discover this issue on your own or it may surface during a feedback session (TQ: Plus/Deltas).
2. Once you've isolated the problem, brainstorm potential solutions that address it.
3. Make an agreement with your language learning community about the chosen solution and how the group will execute it. Also, make sure everyone understands that they have permission to request the solution (or *throw the Technique*) at any time.
4. Give the *Technique* a memorable (preferably funny) name so that everyone can easily recall it.
5. Agree on a signal (either a word or gesture) to remind the participants that this issue has been discussed and a plan exists.
6. Once the group has a chance to try out the solution (i.e., the new *Technique*), its effectiveness must be evaluated. If the problem was solved, then the *Technique* holds. If not, then the *Technique* should be modified.
7. Repeat these steps for any other problems you previously noticed or new problems that arise.
8. Share your new *Technique* with your language community, your neighbors, and WAYK.

Sources for Techniques

Some *Techniques* are adaptations of established theoretical research, teaching standards and guidelines, other language teaching methods, educational best practices, anecdotes from teachers and students, and valuable tools from other disciplines, but most *Techniques* are tactics that we've discovered while working with languages in the field. Here are a few examples.

- An idea that comes from Second Language Acquisition theory is the "affective filter hypothesis" (Krashen 1982: 30–32). Essentially, this is the idea that a person's emotional state and their environment have a huge impact on their ability to acquire language. At WAYK we make this concept more user-friendly by referring to the "affective filter hypothesis" as TQ: Full. This gives us an easy way to talk about conditions for optimal learning and how to prevent learners from becoming overwhelmed (i.e., Full).
- The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has proficiency guidelines (2012) that explain what it means to be proficient in any language. TQ: Travels with Charlie summarizes ACTFL's proficiency scale in an easy-to-understand story, using TV show examples of the different proficiency levels (Novice = Sesame Street; Intermediate = Dora the Explorer; Advanced = Larry King; Superior = Charlie Rose). TQ: Travels with Charlie is not a replacement for an ACTFL training, but it is an easy entry into a conversation about developing a clear and customized scale for assessing fluency.
- We often share classroom strategies from other methods, for example, *backwards buildup* from Rassias Method (Rassias Language Programs 2016) and *circling* from Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS; Ray and Seely 2016: 66–70). We encourage communities to get trained in as many language teaching methods as possible so that they can incorporate the most pertinent and useful elements of each in their program.
- Some strategies are common best practices in language education, such as TQ: Sticks of Destiny (using a set of "pick sticks" in the classroom to randomly select students for

tasks), TQ: Sad/Mad/Glad (using overdone emotions to spice up a lesson), and TQ: Backwards Design (reverse engineering lessons to achieve a specific language goal).

- Some strategies are shared by teachers with whom we have worked closely. TQ: Stopwatch (using an actual stopwatch to count every second spent in immersion) is an adaptation of a strategy shared with us by Latin teacher Bob Patrick. Justin Slocum Bailey, another Latin teacher, shared his strategy for classroom preparation (TQ: 50/50): he spends 50% of his prep time actually designing lessons and 50% improving his own fluency or teaching skills.
- We've adapted strategies from other disciplines beyond language education. TQ: Project Wall is adapted from the kanban method of project management utilized by software developers. From group facilitation strategies, we get the feedback model of TQ: Plus/Deltas that we use daily when working with communities.
- Of the nearly 400 *Techniques* that WAYK uses (Where Are Your Keys 2017), the vast majority—including TQ: Sign Language, TQ: Angel on Your Shoulder, TQ: Set Up, TQ: Prove It, and TQ: Language Hunting—come from our experiences collaborating with communities on language revitalization projects.

How to Implement WAYK Techniques

WAYK can be thought of as a game, and like any game, this game has rules (*Techniques*). There are two different types of games, finite and infinite (Carse 1986: 2–10). Whereas finite games end with a winner and a loser, the goal of an infinite game is to play for as long as possible. The winners are those who help the game continue and, if the game ends, everyone loses. In the infinite game of WAYK, the goal is to create and maintain an *immersion bubble*, and the *Techniques* help everyone keep the bubble intact. All of the players are aware of *Techniques* and are expected to use them to keep the game alive. The more *Techniques* the players learn, the more skilled they become at maintaining the *immersion bubble*. If the *immersion bubble* lasts for even one second longer every time a group plays, then they have won that round of the game. WAYK sees all participants in a language community—students, teachers, fluent speakers, and administrators—as players of this infinite immersion game.

There are many times during language lessons when a teacher will say something that a student can't understand. Without *Techniques*, students don't have a lot of options for how to respond unless they pop the *immersion bubble*. Do they interrupt the teacher in English (or the dominant language), do they raise their hand and wait to be called on, or do they quietly surrender to misunderstanding? How can the teacher check for comprehension? By watching the students' body language? By periodically requesting translations?

In a classroom using WAYK, if the teacher is talking too quickly, a learner can make a simple gesture (the ASL sign for 'slow'), and the teacher understands that they need to slow their speech down. Without interrupting the teacher or breaking out of the target language, the learner can express their specific need ("slow your speech!"), and the teacher can instantly address it (by speaking more slowly). Thus the problem (speech that was too fast to be comprehensible) has an easy, student-driven solution (TQ: Slow Down) and the lesson can continue seamlessly, with increased comprehension. When a student request gets a positive response from the instructor, other students will begin making their own requests, thus taking control of their learning.

When someone uses the name or gesture associated with a *Technique* to make a request, we call that *throwing the Technique*. Like playing an action card in a board game or calling a rule on the playground, *throwing a Technique* is a shorthand that allows for instantaneous communication, and everyone is expected to work together to carry out the requested change.

While one student might request an adjustment in speed by throwing TQ: Slow Down, another student might need to hear the language repeated and can throw TQ: Again (the ASL sign for 'again'). Because the *Techniques* invoke a predetermined agreement, the teacher knows that this student doesn't need the information rephrased, but just needs the exact same thing repeated. Another learner, who might be having trouble hearing the instructor, can throw TQ: Louder and, without discussion, the teacher will know to increase their volume.

These three TQs (Slow Down, Again, and Louder) along with several others (Faster, Quiet Down, Three Times, Finished) provide a safety net for new learners. Like independently adjusting the base, treble, and fade on a stereo, students have targeted control of the learning environment, even if they don't yet have control of the language. Teachers can use additional *Stereo Control Techniques* (Copy Cat, Sing Along, Mumble, Accent Adjustment, and Perfect) to control student actions and language production. Students soon realize that making requests by using *Technique* signs is faster than raising their hands and waiting to be called on. Likewise, a teacher will get specific, silent, real-time feedback (in the form of *Technique* gestures) from their students, instead of a smattering of inscrutable raised hands. The WAYK *Stereo Controls* are, perhaps, the easiest and fastest *Techniques* to add to any language program.

Techniques for Language Transfer

While the *Stereo Controls* are some of the simplest WAYK *Techniques* to implement, they represent only a small portion of the *Techniques* available for immersive learning. A learner can use the *Stereo Controls* as a springboard to further pinpoint and express their needs. If a learner is stuck on a sentence, they might realize (only after using TQ: Slow Down and TQ: Again) that their lack of comprehension hinges on one critical word. The learner can indicate the source of their uncertainty by making the ASL sign for 'word' while saying (as best they can) the word they don't know. When the learner throws TQ: Word, the immersion game moves to a higher level. A speaker will still be able to accommodate the learner's request ("what's this word?"), but the *Technique* they must deploy (TQ: Set Up) is far more involved than the *Stereo Controls*.

TQ: Set Up is another fundamental WAYK *Technique*. By building a *Set Up* you create a demonstration of *how* the target language works, rather than providing a first-language explanation or translation. This demonstration might incorporate props, gestures, pictures, skits, and/or stories. By using at least three examples (TQ: Triangulation) in a *Set Up*, the isolated language target of the lesson becomes blatantly obvious.

If a WAYK player wants to be able to compare the sizes of objects, they need to build a physical *Set Up* to illustrate this idea. They would gather three examples of three different objects, like cups, books, and rocks in large, medium, and small sizes and organize them in corresponding rows to make their *Set Up* extremely obvious. By using TQ: Triangulation, they have three chances to elicit, practice, and confirm the language they're *hunting* for. With this *Set Up*, the concept of and language for 'size' should be evident based on the selection and arrangement of items without needing a chalkboard explanation or translation (Figure 13.1).

Set Ups can be built for countless language concepts: descriptions (colors, quantity, textures), locations (above/below, near/far, next to), discussions of time (before/after, always/usually/sometimes/never), and many more. Here's another example: to show the concept of broken and fixed, a WAYK player might use three pencils, three plastic spoons, and three index cards. They'll keep one of each in pristine condition, break or tear the other two, and repair one of each of these with tape. Then they'll arrange the examples in a grid: pristine examples in the first row, broken examples in the second, and mended examples in the third.

Figure 13.1 An example of a WAYK Set Up (a physical representation of a language concept) that a learner could use to elicit language about size
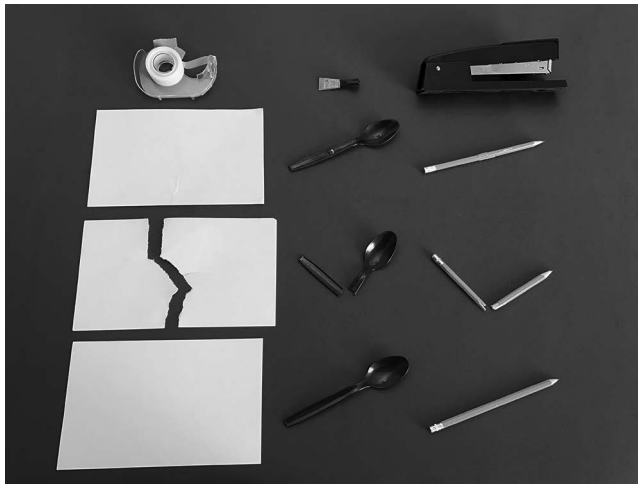

Figure 13.2 A WAYK Set Up built to demonstrate the ideas of whole/intact, broken/torn, and mended/fixed

Set Ups are launch pads for immersion conversation. Instead of just practicing isolated vocabulary words like 'broken' and 'fixed' or even phrases like 'large cup' and 'small cup,' players use other TQs (Make Me Say Yes, Make Me Say No, Full Sentences, Send It Around, etc.) to ask and answer questions like "Is this cup large?," "Do you want the small cup or the large cup?," and "Who is drinking from the small cup?" The complexity of these conversations should match the fluency level of the learners. As fluency increases, the same *Set Ups* with the same objects can be used to create increasingly complex conversations: "Is this pencil broken?," "Who fixed the pencil?," "How did you fix this pencil?," "If you didn't have tape, is there another way you could have fixed the pencil?," "In this digital age, why do we continue to manufacture pencils?" (Figure 13.2). *Set Ups* are a powerful and concrete way to learn

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language; mothers have been using *Set Ups* intuitively for centuries to teach their children how to speak.

Another fundamental WAYK *Technique* is TQ: Language Hunting, in which learners methodically and proactively use *Set Ups* to seek out language rather than wait for language to come to them. In an ideal *hunt*, learners identify a gap in their own fluency and create a *Set Up* to elicit that language from fluent speakers. Learners practice with fluent speakers until they feel confident, and, without translating, create further examples to demonstrate their command of the language (TQ: Prove It). At any time a speaker can adjust the *Set Up* to more accurately reflect their fluent perspective. Because the process is learner-directed, fluent speakers are reassured that learners are invested in the language. Just like hunting for food, *hunting* for language is a trainable skill that takes preparation, practice, and dedication. Once a learner has mastered the art of TQ: Set Up, they can *hunt* and teach any language.

Techniques for Community Building

Language revitalization is more than just supporting individual language learning. To turn the tide of language loss and build a truly sustainable language program, trust, safety, joy, and responsibility need to be shared among students, teachers, fluent speakers, administrators, and community leaders. WAYK *Techniques* have been developed specifically for strengthening community far beyond the classroom.

TQ: Set Up is an example of a *Technique* that can apply both at a small-scale interpersonal level and at a broad community-wide level. Simply *Setting Up* specific expectations for collaboration engenders a feeling of connection among everyone involved. When a learner asks a speaker to slow down by throwing TQ: Slow Down and the speaker obliges, a bond of trust is created between them. Thus, even in the smallest interactions, collaboration and mindfulness are given the highest priority.

In a larger group, TQ: Birds of a Feather ensures that nobody gets lost in the crowd. If one person *throws a TQ*, but the speaker/leader doesn't see it, everyone who does see it *throws* the same TQ until it gets acknowledged. A strong learning community is built through this show of solidarity, and the focus shifts from individual success to group progress.

TQ: Split the Cell and TQ: Plus/Deltas are specific ways of using TQ: Set Up to create a larger learning community by ensuring that everyone feels welcome, comfortable, and productive. At a community language event, TQ: Split the Cell can be used to divide participants into groups (newcomers, young children, returning learners, fluent speakers) to accommodate their varying levels of fluency with differentiated activities that all use the same underlying Techniques. TQ: Split the Cell ensures everyone will be included regardless of their level of fluency, that a new person could join at any time without bringing the whole group back to square one, and that returning learners get an opportunity to begin leading.

At the conclusion of every language event, participants gather and are invited to share "what they liked" (pluses) and "what they would change" (deltas) about the event. TQ: Plus/Deltas is a processing activity lead by event participants, not just by the instructors. Because of this, TQ: Plus/Deltas creates a stronger sense of camaraderie, collaboration, and control over the learning environment. Regular attendees know their feedback is valued, especially when they notice past suggestions have been implemented. When members of a community feel included, provided for, and listened to, the language movement gains participants and allies.

To create a community of deeply invested language leaders and learners, the *Set Up* process has to begin immediately, with an eye towards long-term payoff. TQ: Lead Dog comes to WAYK from communities in the interior of Alaska who have a long tradition of training

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dogsled teams. There is no way to tell which puppies will have the capacity to become lead sled dogs, so you must train every infant pup as though they will become a leader. Not every dog is suited to lead, and those who don't are still an essential part of the team, but if you don't train leaders from infancy, you'll never create any new lead dogs. Although every student might not become a fluent language teacher, they will still be a vital part of the language team. If we wait until someone is fully fluent to train them to be a teacher, we will have lost a critical opportunity. *Setting Up* new participants to lead lessons and facilitate meetings from the beginning prepares them to become teachers and community leaders as soon as possible.

Conclusion

There is no "silver bullet" or "quick fix" that will reverse language loss. WAYK is constantly looking for the best possible solution to this problem. So far we have created a low-tech system that can be quickly learned, easily transmitted, applied to any language, and modified to fit the needs of real people. We have seen that these *Techniques* can create a community culture of motivated students who are eager to practice their fluency by teaching others to speak.

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