Chitimacha Tribe cultural instructor Rachel Vilcan, center, works Monday with Tribal School student Trae Kitchens on a Rosetta Stone computer program teaching their tribal language.

Computer course teaches Chitimacha

BY RICHARD BURGESS
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CHARLESTON - A computer course used by millions of people to learn new languages could help revive an ancient tribal tongue that lost its last fluent speaker 70 years ago.

The Chitimacha Tribe first began teaching the tribal language at its school in the late 1990s, trying to breathe new life into the old words with a curriculum based on studies done by a linguist in the 1930s, said Kimberly Walden, the tribe's cultural director.

That effort got a big boost this year when Rosetta Stone - a company known for its interactive, computer-based language courses - completed a course for Chitimacha as part of the company's Endangered Language Program.

Rosetta Stone has selected only a handful of other indigenous languages for preservation, including Navajo and Mohawk, according to information from the company.

The goal of the Chitimacha Tribe's language curriculum is to give students enough of a grounding in grammar and vocabulary to have a basic conversation in Chitimacha by the time they graduate eighth grade, Walden said.

"This is definitely going to speed that up," she said of the Rosetta Stone instructional course, which has been years in the making.

The tribe applied for a grant from the company's Endangered Language Program in 2006 and was notified of acceptance in May 2007.

The tribe was given the basic skeleton of the Rosetta Stone computer-based course, and for the next three years, tribal members worked to input thousands of Chitimacha words and phrases and to record audio for examples of what the language should sound like.

Walden said Rosetta Stone also took about 200 pictures of tribal members and integrated those images with stock photography used for the company's standard instruction courses.

"Every lesson starts with a pair of tribal elders," she said.

The Chitimacha Tribe faces a daunting task in trying to revive the language, and the Rosetta Stone program might have been impossible had Chitimacha grammar and lexicon not been studied in the 1930s by a linguist working on a government project to document rare languages.

The linguist, Morris Swadesh, made dozens of wax cylinder recordings of the Chitimacha language and left behind extensive field notes and guides to Chitimacha grammar and vocabulary, Walden said.

Swadesh was deceased when the Chitimacha began the language restoration efforts, but the tribe did find another linguist who worked under Swadesh and had studied the language, Walden said.

She said the research materials were supplemented with bits and pieces of the language that tribal elders could recall.

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Starting anew with the language is a challenge, because Chitimacha, like other Native American languages, bears little resemblance to English or the other common European languages.

“It’s completely different,” said Chitimacha Tribe cultural instructor Rachel Vilcan, who teaches the language at the Chitimacha Tribal School.

Vilcan said the Rosetta Stone program supplements the normal classroom instruction, offering interactive exercises on vocabulary, pronunciation, listening and reading.

“Vilcan said the Rosetta Stone program analyzes the vocal inflection and tone of the students to determine if it matches with the audio recordings made by Vilcan and others.

Eighth-grade student Victoria Vilcan, the teacher’s niece, said the Rosetta Stone program has allowed her to advance a bit quicker.

“I can move at my own pace and don’t have to wait for the rest of the class,” she said.

Victoria Vilcan said it’s “exciting” to think about conversing with friends in Chitimacha, but she’s not there just yet.

That said, she seemed to be moving quickly through the Rosetta Stone instructional course during a lab session Monday.

“They know more than they think,” Walden said.