



Teaching an Alaskan Indigenous Language

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Abstract

Gwich'in, an Athabascan language, is one of twenty Indigenous languages spoken in Alaska. All of Alaska's Indigenous languages are on the verge of endangerment because children are not learning their ancestral language [1]. In addition, as many commonly taught languages worldwide, such as Spanish, there are no language specific learning materials for many Indigenous languages [2]. Through experience and education in second language acquisition, the author has not only learned her ancestral language as a second language, but has also created curricula, objectives, language lessons, and activities in order to teach adults at the university level. One of the best ways to teach an Indigenous language to adults, and others, is to incorporate facets of the culture, which includes cultural norms such as humor and engage the students through high expectations [3]. Engaging students through high expectations requires the facilitator to be creative using immersion that does not intimidate the students, and providing students with their thoughts about learning a second language [4]. What are obstacles about learning an Indigenous language? What can they do as language learners to overcome these obstacles? This presentation will focus on some language teaching strategies that help relax adult language learners, and subsequently may be inspirational for worldwide language teaching of any language.

Keywords: *Gwich'in, endangered languages, less commonly taught languages, second language acquisition, language learning myths.*

1. Introduction

Alaska has twenty Indigenous languages, all of which face a morbid loss of culture and worldview [5]. There are two major language families in Alaska—Indian and Eskimo languages. Gwich'in is an Athabascan Indian language taught at the university level since the 1960s. The department whose mission it was “to cultivate and promote Alaska's twenty Native languages” [6] did very little for developing language learning or teaching materials. Furthermore, non-Native linguists who did not know how to teach a second language trained the Alaskan Native linguists. The non-Native linguists focused on the structure of Native languages. The Alaskan Native linguists did not have any type of training for teaching their ancestral language. Consequently, all that was required to teach their ancestral Alaskan language classes at the University of Alaska Fairbanks was that one could speak their ancestral language.

The author of this paper learned her ancestral language, Gwich'in, as an adult in 1995 and by 2002 became the university language instructor after a mere seven years of language learning. The lack of curriculum, objectives, language lessons, learning and teaching materials or no training on how to teach an ancestral language to adults was the foundation for a severe handicap in the complexities of teaching an ancestral language. Lack of appropriate materials and lack of second language acquisition was which the author found herself in a quandary.

2. Second language acquisition

Learning one's ancestral language as an older adult was not a positive experience because most speakers of the language were unkind and unsupportive. Not all speakers of the language have this attitude, so it was with happiness that the author met a kind, patient, and supportive Gwich'in language mentor. Having gone through this negative experience as an adult language learner has helped shape how the author teaches adult students so that they have a positive learning experience in the university classroom. Many students come from all over the world, such as Greece, Japan, Scandinavia, Canada, United States, and different Alaskan Indigenous groups. Students exit the class with various forms of proficiency based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency standards [7].



Depending on the student, some students attain a Novice High proficiency level. To obtain this level after 15 weeks of a beginning language class requires an enormous amount of work for both the professor and the students. The role of the professor is to understand tenets of second language acquisition, and to believe and execute one of the many theories of second language acquisition. The role of the students are to attend class, fully participate, and study and practice the target language. The realization of how languages are learned came through years of education on second language education. Education on second language theories has brought to light obstacles that learners face and for the teacher, how to overcome those obstacles.

3. Developing the class

What is important in a culture is what provides the basis for a curriculum. To authenticate the curriculum it was necessary to consult with others in the same language teaching and learning community. Some units that resulted from the curriculum include self-introduction, family, greetings, weather, foods, etc. From the units, objectives for each class taught formed language lessons, complete with language learning/teaching activities. Each of the aforementioned were full-blown original materials that represented the culture. Rules of the classroom are fundamental to teaching. Without rules, there could be disruptions in the classroom that are not conducive to speaking or learning. The main rule is not to chew gum or eat because the language has a lot of ejectives, such as *nats'ahts'à'* where gum or eating would be a deterrent to say. There is, among others, another important rule. This rule is that if the student knows how to say something in the target language, then their first language, usually the English language is subordinate.

The overall goal of the Gwich'in language class is for learners to speak, but reading, writing, and grammar are also covered. Over time and experience, the author discovered the sequencing of the language units, and use them to this day. Some examples are that once students learn kinship terms, they then learn greetings or feelings. During their bi-weekly presentations, students cannot only say how they feel, but include their family members' feelings. The subsequent lesson is about weather terms, which in turn leads to "small talk" in every subsequent lesson that opens the class. During "small talk", each student picks a card of feelings or emotions. With the card they have picked, they must answer one of three questions: (1) "how are you?", (2) "how is your kin?", or (3) "how are your parents, grandparents or siblings?" In turn, they ask each other, and if they cannot remember the vocabulary, they are given helping language early on to say "help me" or "how do we say this in the language?".

Assessment is vital to determining if learning is taking place with students. Assessment in the Gwich'in class occurs in two ways. One is to require the students to have bi-weekly presentations that focus on what they are learning, and students are encouraged to incorporate any new and extraneous vocabulary. The second way to determine assessment is to provide the students with weekly quizzes, which cover the weeks' lessons. The professor also teaches a second year Gwich'in language class. In that class, which is intense, students work throughout the semester to provide a final project. Projects that have occurred in this class run the gamut of "how to" videos or specific Gwich'in academic language issues that need further development. An example of a "how to" YouTube video was how to maintain a Toyo stove [8]. Academic projects are also the focus of other students. One in particular concentrated on classificatory verbs, in which certain shaped nouns are required with different verbs to carry, sit/lie, or fall. There are certain parts of the Gwich'in language that needs research, and the classificatory verbs was one such project. This project resulted in a master's thesis [9].

4. Language teaching strategies

Language learning for adults can be a fragile and emotional experience, especially for those who share an ancestral language. Understanding the history of a learner is one of the considerations that needs to be explored [10]. Knowing this history provides a foundation for how one teaches. In addition, high expectations from the professor sets the tone for the pace of the class.

In this particular university class, sociocultural theory (SCT) is the theory used because it makes leeway for interaction to take place through student group work. The Gwich'in class is five days per week for one hour for each of those days, and takes place over a 15-week semester. SCT allows partial immersion to take place. Initially, there is a fair amount of the first language usage, but before long, the target language is crept into everyday lessons. Students, after a little time goes by, get used to this mode of teaching



through immersion. The strategy for using immersion is that understanding by the students is using regalia, acting out, props or pictures. When the students use and learn the target language during week one of the semester, they are still incorporating previous lessons into their learning as the course progresses.

The professor considers all of the students as beginners, and treats them as such. For their part, students have their fair share of studying vocabulary, word order, emergent grammar, presentations, full verb conjugations, full noun inflections, the target language's worldview, and participate. In order to engage students in all of the professor's expectations, the professor must be kind, patient, enunciate clearly, speak slowly, and above all, create a safe environment for the students to relax, allow ample time for repetition of vocabulary to take place, make mistakes and have a sense of humor, which is an integral part of the culture.

5. Summary

In sum, the 19+ years of teaching has afforded the opportunity for the author to learn about second language learning and teaching. The author is passionate about teaching adult students to speak because when they enter the classroom, beginning students have a clean slate about the Gwich'in language and culture. In turn, some of the adult learners have their own specialty, such as teaching the very young children who are 2 or over in a language nest [11] or in the K-12 setting. In addition, teaching Gwich'in helps to keep me up-to-date about speaking, learning and maintaining my identity as a Gwich'in person. Indigenous language transmission creates hope of language sustainability. Young Indigenous people want to speak or understand their language to secure their identity. This, in itself, is worth all of my efforts for teaching our Indigenous languages.

Teaching second language acquisition methods to other Indigenous groups—both Indian and Eskimo—in Alaska and Canada to become speakers or teachers of their own languages has been a fulfilling experience. Since both language families—Indian and Eskimo—have very different language structures and cultures, teaching or learning language methods are universal in their scope.

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