

# Transference of Concepts from Ojibwe into English Contexts

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Why is there so much talk about Native literacy? Is it because as Anishinaabe people we are unable to read, understand, and/or comprehend the structure of the English language? Many of us are fluent speakers in an Aboriginal language. For the past 41 years I have been a speaker of the Ojibwe/Odawa language. Of those 41 years I have taught for 20 about various idiosyncrasies of the structure of the language.

## *Situating Self in Relation to Ojibway Language*

I learn new ideas about teaching when visiting various people who struggle with the same issues as I do concerning language retention and revitalization. During these visits I have come to the conclusion that teaching the language in a school setting is only a Band-Aid solution to the real problem. In order to become a fluent speaker of Ojibwe, or any other language, you must be in an environment where the language is spoken all the time. This is how I became a fluent speaker. I grew up in the remote community of Rabbit Island situated on the Wikwemikong First Nation unceded territory located on the north shore of Georgian Bay in Northern Ontario. Here there were many opportunities to speak the language. Ojibwe/Odawa was spoken everywhere in my community, especially with family and friends.

I remember as a child going to grade 1. All the students were speakers of the language. We were lined up the first day of school to go to our new classroom. This was the time to meet our new teacher. She was a nun. She was the meanest woman I have ever met in my entire life. We were not allowed to speak the language anywhere in the school and especially not in the classroom. If we were caught speaking it, we were punished severely. One punishment I recall was being hit with a ruler or the Bible on the

side of the head. Another was being made to kneel on a cement block in the corner of the classroom. After these incidents I do not recall anything until grade 4. What happened to the rest of my grade 1, grade 2, and grade 3? I have blocked out something that happened in my life during this time.

#### *Language Recovery in the Classroom and Aboriginal Communities*

Many incidents that occur during our younger days affect us a great deal as we grow to adulthood. What damage was done to our self-esteem and pride as a people? Many of us struggle with these issues today. We need to discuss these with one another before we can go on with our lives.

Today people are discussing the problems in the residential school system. Many talks are taking place in many circles where people are acknowledging what took place, but not accepting it. However, acknowledgment is a huge step toward healing. When painful memories are blocked within, the healing process will not happen. You will continue to have the anger within you. I began to talk about these issues at many workshops and conferences where I have presented. I felt that I needed to share these issues and the struggles I personally saw during my upbringing.

Many of you may have seen the documentary produced by Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network (APTN) called *Talking My Talk*. It is a documentary on language issues throughout this country and where we are today. It talks about the trials and tribulations of teaching the language—on any given day, going from elementary school, to secondary school, then later in the evening teaching at a college or a university—not an easy task. I teach Ojibwe language and culture, and business at the Sutton District High School. I also teach Ojibwe language and culture at McMaster University in Hamilton and at Georgian College in Barrie. Recently I began teaching another evening course at Scugog First Nation. Every July I teach at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay in the Native Language Instructors' Program. As part of this program I teach Methods Part III and Approaches to Bilingual Education year IV.

I also work with the Union of Ontario Indians as the translator for the Annual General Meeting with all the chiefs of the Union Anishnabek. I am also a translator for Anishnaawbe Health and Treasurer for the organization. In my spare time I sit as President to the Board of Directors of Anishinaabemowin-Teg Inc. This is an organization that consists of a Board of Directors from Ontario and Michigan, which works closely with various language initiatives.

#### *Countering the Residential School Effects*

Many factors contribute to the success of our First Nations students. These need to be addressed or looked at in a different perspective from the usual mainstream view of success. Many of these students are carrying years of physical and emotional abuse from the education system that is being

passed down from generation to generation, which as mentioned above creates an emotional block to learning.

We need to look at programs that are flexible and supportive of the learning needs of each Aboriginal child. We need dedicated founders and successors to address the issues not addressed in forums such as the Aboriginal Literacy Symposium held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT) on May 3-4, 2002. We must look for a supportive education committee to address the issues and to play the devil's advocate where situations arise in relation to the development of the First Nations child, because this is where Native literacy of the First Nations adult begins.

#### *Aboriginal Self-Determination in the Education System*

A First Nations approach to curriculum development and methods needs to be developed for our people and by our people, because we have gone through the system and we know how it works. There should be innovative and experimental programs and curricula to meet the needs of the children we serve. First Nations and non-First Nations resources should be available to help improve our knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Parental support and commitment—one of the biggest areas of need—is often lacking in First Nations communities. Parents must take an active role in the development of their children, especially during the early years. Relevant curriculum development and implementation plans to assist the learning needs of all children and those around them are also necessary. A desire to succeed and work hard to become a better person for the betterment of First Nations people is needed.

Another area that is crucial is how to evaluate our students. Two forms of evaluation used are formative and summative. Formative evaluation focuses on the processes and products of learning. Summative evaluation occurs most often at the end of a unit of instruction and at term- or year-end. Both approaches are equally important for enhanced assessment of students' progress. It also enables teachers to see where they need improvement.

Some strategies that have worked with learners at all ages over the past several years are as follows.

1. Determining if the stated objectives were achieved.
2. Designing a program for the individual, groups, or class.
3. Determining the knowledge and skills students have acquired and observing the development of their attitudes and appreciation.
4. Determining where the curriculum needs improvement.
5. Determining the efficacy of the teaching process and methodology.
6. Gathering information on the quality of the learning environment for specific kinds of learning.
7. Assisting the teacher to determine the direction of future curriculum development.

8. Identifying the most useful information to communicate to students or parents.

In order for us to gather information about the progress of our students, we must obtain feedback from them indicating their learning styles, their ability to research various forms of data, and their ability to read and/or comprehend what is being instructed and required of them. Once they have helped generate this information with their knowledge and understanding, they will become more attuned to and comfortable with their surroundings. This will help increase their self-esteem, their self-confidence, and their ability to make decisions, which will positively affect their lives as future leaders.

*Band-Aid Solution to Justice*

How, then, do we use the Band-Aid solution to make teaching the language an opportunity for every student? Some aspects seem to work for some groups and not for others. It all depends on the form or structure that the teacher uses. The teacher must have the commitment and knowledge to keep the students "tuned in" to what is being taught. We must create an interest in the students' learning process.

Money is one of the biggest problems in acquiring resources for classroom use. We go to our principals to request funds to purchase material for classroom use. Their first response is that there is a "lack of money." Then we must resort to photocopying the material from other sources. We must resort to inferior materials that look unprofessional. We must emphasize that our language when it is taught in the classroom is just as important as math, science, or English, which have glossy textbooks.

Without funds to produce Walt Disney-quality resources for our programs, we have to be creative in using the materials available to us. I like to look at a video recreated by an Arapaho colleague. The Arapaho looked at how to solve the problem of language decline and how to get our children to speak and hear the language on a regular basis. They initiated discussion with the Walt Disney company about the video *Bambi*. *Bambi* translated into the Arapaho language is an enjoyable video for the children as they already know and understand the story.

My colleague gathered a group of speakers of the Arapaho language and made Arapaho voice-overs for the animal speakers. (This video can be obtained by contacting Dr. Steven Greymorning at the University of Montana). Parents and grandparents can watch this video with their children and grandchildren and teach their children, learning at the same time.

There are also CD-ROMs such as those by Martina Osawmick and Maryanne Corbiere of Laurentian University. The Ojibwe Cultural Foundation of the M'Chigeeng First Nation also has many resources that have been developed over the years. Another resource is my book called *Kid-wenan*, which is used in many universities and colleges around North America, and another book is presently being developed by Shirley Wil-

liams at Trent University. Many valuable resources can be obtained by searching the Internet using the search parameters "Ojibwe language resources."

*Wrap-up*

Let me show you something about the structure of the language and the success of the program that I have been involved in for the past 20 years. Ojibwe First Nations have individual differences in the language, and the spelling is not consistent, but if you understand the basic pattern, even where there are differences you can follow what people are saying and express your thoughts. For an adult it could take eight years of speaking the language every day to become fluent. This is just how it is with children learning [Ojibwe] at home. Still, it is easy to follow. Once you know the root word and the prefixes and suffixes, learning is just a matter of putting them together like the transparencies. As you learn the language, you get a better knowledge of the culture. Because the beginnings and endings and the middle are consistent, they fit together to make reasonable patterns that you can follow. Then you are on the road to becoming an Ojibwe literate. And you begin by introducing yourself in Ojibwe.