

Lessons on the Land: The Role of Kaska Elders in a University Language Course

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The 13 Kaska Elders who participated in a recent university-level Kaska language course held in three locations on the land took different approaches to teaching than those associated with institutional settings. The diversity of Elders facilitated the modeling of gender roles, the mentoring of family members, and the representation of dialect diversity. They demonstrated a depth of experience and knowledge including a particularly wide-ranging knowledge of narrative traditions, prayers, and cultural practices. They provided balance to academic modes of instruction by communicating orally; by providing models of complex, extended use of native language; and by using the language in the context of daily activities.

Introduction

The Kaska First Nations and the University of British Columbia (UBC) jointly sponsored a Kaska language course that was held in Kaska territory in the Yukon in the summer of 2002. This article focuses on the role of Kaska Elders in determining how the language was taught at this course. Kaska is an Athabaskan language spoken in the Yukon and northern British Columbia. Like other Yukon First Nations languages, Kaska became endangered in the post-war period when the non-Native population of the territory increased dramatically and attendance at residential mission schools became compulsory. The UBC Kaska course was conceived as one way of addressing the needs of adults in the Kaska communities who would like to know more about their language and culture.

The UBC Kaska course built on the experience of Kaskas with earlier projects that were designed to document and teach the language. These included a dictionary project that resulted in the publication of a noun dictionary (Moore, 1997) and a narratives workshop (Moore, 1999). Kaska Elders were the main sources of information in these projects, and they also gradually assumed a more dominant role as language teachers. In 1999 the Kaska Tribal Council conducted a series of six-week language workshops that brought together language learners of all ages with Kaska Elders and other fluent speakers. The morning routine at these workshops included formal language instruction, including activities focusing on literacy, vocabulary, grammar, and conversational skills. The afternoons were devoted to lessons using the language for cultural activities such as hide-tanning, snowshoeing, drum-making, singing and dancing, storytelling, and cooking. This model of language instruction was chosen because Kaska Elders believed it was important to teach about their culture, values, and traditions while teaching the language. Marie Skidmore, the

language coordinator for the Kaska Tribal Council, who planned and directed the initial language workshops for the Kaska Tribal Council, said,

We were in our natural environment, which was something the Elders were used to. There was nothing formal about it ... no formal structure: no place where people had to be, or were not allowed to be—no children in the corner. Everyone was free to interact. We didn't separate people. (Moore, 2000, p. 199)

The approach to language instruction taken by Kaska Elders and administrators was similar to the approaches that were advocated by the many First Nations Elders and educators who served as advisors for the *Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs* (Governments of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, & Saskatchewan, 2000).

Thirteen Kaska Elders participated in the first year of the university course and were a major factor in its success. Because they had many years of experience with a traditional way of life, they were able to take on an important role as cultural and spiritual guides. They also functioned as linguistic tradition-bearers, as authoritative sources of information on the language and its many dialects. They provided effective models of oral language performance that served to balance the emphasis on written materials in more academic approaches. Their high level of oral language competence also served to encourage language use at a sophisticated level. Finally, the Elders were highly effective experiential teachers who involved the students in cultural activities using the language throughout the day.

A University Course in Kaska

The participants in the earlier Kaska language workshops believed that the language lessons should be offered as a credit course for those who were training as teachers or for other careers. The university-level Kaska course was arranged through the UBC, which already had an established First Nations language course in the Musqueam language.

The course was held in three locations in succession: at *Tū Łídlíni* (Ross River) at the confluence of the Pelly and Ross Rivers; at *Ts'ulq̓* (MacMillan Pass) in the Mackenzie Mountains on the border between the Yukon and Northwest Territories; and at *Tū Chō* (Frances Lake) in the heart of Kaska territory, equidistant between the communities of Ross River and Watson Lake. Josephine Acklack, a fluent speaker of Kaska, and I were the nominal instructors for the course, but the rich knowledge of Kaska Elders was the true foundation of the course.

The Kaska Elders conducted a variety of cultural activities at the three locations. At *Tū Łídlíni* Kaska Elders from various regions gathered to share their knowledge of Kaska traditions with the students and to visit with lifelong friends. In the long summer evenings they gathered beside the home of one of the Elders for stick gambling (hand games), a traditional guessing game played by two teams of competitors. Students and Elders

also used the computers in the community school's computer laboratory to document the course and their personal stories.

For the second week of the course the participants made their way along the winding North Canol Road to where Hos Tué' (the MacMillan River) originates in the snow patches of the Continental Divide. A tent camp had been erected in the pass to the Northwest Territories, and from there the Elders took students hunting in the nearby mountains; taught them how to cut and dry caribou meat; and how to clean the hides with bone scrapers. They also took students into the alpine tundra above the camp, where they collected medicine plants and later shared fresh-cooked bannock and caribou stew with them back at camp.

The last two weeks of the course were at *Tū Chō*, the historic home of many Kaska families and an important resource base. There students caught and cleaned fish, picked berries, made birchbark baskets, and sewed everything from dog packs to book bags. The evenings were again filled with stick gambling, feasting, and visiting. At every location students learned vocabulary that enhanced cultural activities, including the names of scores of plants and animals; the names of the local rivers, lakes, and mountains; direction terms used for travel on the land and water; and more verbs than they ever dreamed existed.

Many of the Elders were the parents and grandparents of students in the course. Three of the four weeks of the course were held on the land, where family members were able to camp together, and this facilitated the mentoring of less fluent speakers by Elders. Hinton (1997) reports that mentoring of language learners by fluent speakers has been applied with some success in language revitalization programs in California, and this model has also been applied in other regions. As Hinton points out, adults, particularly young professionals and parents, often play a vital role in language revitalization efforts because it is they who are most capable of organizing and carrying out projects with children. Many of the Kaska students in the course were either professionals working for the Kaska First Nations or teachers working in the public schools. Many Kaska parents and professionals understand the language, but are not able to speak it fluently as a result of the language policies of residential schools in the post-war period (Moore, 2000). These students were highly motivated to learn the language, and many could learn rapidly because of their previous exposure to Kaska.

Pairing language learners with fluent speakers in their own family is a logical form of mentoring, because learning can continue beyond the end of the course. The Kaska course facilitated cooperative learning across generations, because family members were able to be together throughout the day. One of the obstacles to language retention, as cited by the Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (Dejong, 1998), is the lack of opportunity for speakers to practice at home. Even the young children who accompanied their parents and grandparents came away

with increased interest in learning the language. Instructor Josephine Acklack commented on the effect the course had on the attitudes of the children, "If kids hear their parents and grandparents speaking Kaska, it will make them proud of their language" (personal communication, July 29, 2002). The success of these activities may inspire some families to engage in more of these activities using the language throughout the year.

Conducting this course according to the preferences of the Kaska Elders posed many challenges that are not encountered in ordinary university courses. First Nations students had to be admitted to the UBC and registered in the course. Fortunately, the Musqueam First Nation had established a precedent that facilitated admission to the university for students taking First Nations language courses. Tents had to be erected at MacMillan Pass to function as living quarters and as a classroom. The safety of participants, especially the children, was always a concern in remote areas, although radio contact was always available. It would be desirable to have a concurrent culture and language camp for children, but funding would have to be identified for such a camp. Because the Elders selected many of the topics during the course, it was necessary to prepare materials on the spot. Notes were taken on flipchart paper and taped to the walls of the classrooms, which consisted of plastic tarps. Students took most of their notes by hand as there were no photocopiers at the remote locations, and the instructors copied the notes from the day during breaks or in the evenings. The UBC provided significant support for the course by hiring the instructors, and the Kaska First Nations assumed a major role by arranging funding for students and Elders and by preparing the facilities.

Elders as Cultural and Spiritual Guides

Kaskas traditionally start gatherings with a prayer, and the Kaska attitude toward prayer is similar to that articulated by Blackfoot Elder Pete Standing Alone, "Prayer is what has brought all the good in our lives" (Mistaken, 2000, p. 26). The Elders and students in the language course took turns saying a prayer at the start of each class. Kaskas and other Native groups in this region draw on a wide base of spiritual traditions (McClellan, 1975; Ridington, 1988; Cruikshank, 1998), and the Elders and students offered prayers from a variety of traditions in both Kaska and English. Despite the overt differences in their prayers, their common base of spirituality transcended the divisions that characterize many institutionalized religions.

The Elders also guided both instructors and students toward culturally appropriate behavior. Kaskas have an extensive ethical code of *á'i*, respect, taboo, that governs relations with the natural world as well as social relations. The Elders who were involved in class activities drew attention to possible violations of these principles. Once, when the language students were gathering medicine plants on the mountain above their camp at the Yukon-Northwest Territories border, they misidentified one plant,

thinking it was one that anyone could pick for medicine. Fortunately, they were prevented from picking it by the Elder who was with them, who explained that it was a special medicine plant that was used only by those who had been trained in its specialized uses.

The Elders also told me what I should do, although I sometimes only appreciated the significance of their advice after some reflection. One incident at *Tū Chō* seemed especially significant to me. In the mornings there I accompanied one Elder in his boat to collect fish from a net. The Elder who owned the net had told us to distribute the fish to everyone in the camp when we returned. A group had gathered on the beach, and I prepared to hand out the fish one at a time to those present. They all just looked at me, and then the Elder who owned the net said, "You can't hand out the fish. You have to put them all out on willow branches on the beach, and people will take what they need." The wisdom of this approach to distributing fish became immediately obvious as it gave everyone the means to determine and meet their own needs. Reflecting on this incident, I concluded that it epitomized a basic Kaska approach to education and human relations: that the capabilities and needs of each person should be respected. A similar level of concern for individual autonomy has been reported in studies of other groups in this region (Helm, 1961; Scollon & Scollon, 1979; Goulet, 1998). The students were all gently guided by the teachings of the Elders as we engaged in various activities and by the Elders' accounts of similar incidents from the past.

Elders as Tradition-Bearers

The Kaska Elders functioned as linguistic tradition-bearers, as authoritative sources of information on the language and its many dialects. Although Kaska men and women share many skills, some activities are more gender-specific (Moore & Wheelock, 1990). Women have taken a dominant role in language teaching and language documentation projects, and all the Kaska native language instructors are women. The participants in Kaska language workshops have often mentioned the need to involve more men. In an effort to increase the participation by younger men, the older men organized activities such as hunting, fishing, and stick gambling. More activities such as these will be necessary to increase the participation of Kaska men, who have been alienated by their experiences in both residential schools and public schools and who often have jobs that preclude their participation in summer courses.

Like many other languages, Kaska has significant dialect differences, with at least six regional dialects that differ in grammar, sounds, and vocabulary (Moore, 1997). Although most Elders understand other dialects of Kaska, as well as neighboring languages, language students often find the differences confusing. The language learners would also prefer to learn their own dialect as it reflects their heritage and experience. On the other hand, language instructors can most effectively teach in their

own dialect, so the dialect used in most of the materials for this course was the Pelly Banks dialect spoken by the Kaska-speaking instructor Josephine Acklack. Fortunately, the Elders included speakers of five Kaska dialects, representing the heritage dialects of all the Kaska students in the course. Students were able to learn how to say expressions in their family's dialect by working with these Elders. Formal study of dialect differences was also incorporated into the course as a way of building an understanding of the nature of the differences. Some vocabulary, such as plant names and habitats, were recorded in each of the dialects. This provided written materials in each of the dialects that students could use in studying their own dialect and to compare dialects.

Community-based courses such as this provide recognition to Elders for their knowledge and their role as language teachers. There are many knowledgeable Elders in the Kaska communities, and most have been involved with language teaching and documentation over a number of years. It would not have been appropriate to single out one or two as the main resources for a community language course. They were all necessary to the success of the course because each had particular skills and knowledge to share and represented a particular extended family and dialect group.

Kaska Elders are the recognized authorities on both Kaska language and Kaska cultural traditions. Although they share a common base of knowledge that includes fluency in the language, each Elder also has more detailed knowledge of specific skills and traditions. For example, some of the Elders had extensive knowledge of hunting, whereas others knew a great deal about plant habitats and the use of medicinal plants. Each was also familiar with overlapping, but distinct oral traditions including accounts of historical events and traditional stories. Most of these stories are based either on personal experiences or on the accounts of prominent older storytellers in their own families. It was necessary to have as many Elders involved in the course as possible, because each made a unique contribution. Marie Skidmore, who administered the earlier Kaska narratives project, commented on why she chose to gather such a large group of Elders together.

It was an Elder who told me that it was important to invite all the Elders. Sometimes the Elders don't remember the whole story. However, the Elders help each other and encourage each other. Each family grouping has its own versions of each story. It is important for younger people to realize that so they understand when they hear the stories told in different ways. (Moore 2000, p. 199)

One of the goals of the course was to allow students to experience first hand the richness of Kaska traditions. Although many of the students had heard stories told by one or more of the Elders, the course was an occasion for sharing traditions between communities. The Elders spoke in great detail about a wide variety of topics, providing information that is not available in written sources. The level of language used was beyond the

level of comprehension of the students who were not fluent in Kaska, but English translations were provided for their benefit.

The six Kaska language teachers who took the course especially benefited from the opportunity to interact with a large number of Elders. They had questions about both vocabulary and cultural practices that the Elders discussed with them. The Elders were also important models for fluent use of the language. The language teachers realized that they needed to extend their own language skills and their knowledge of Kaska traditions continually, but they may lack opportunities to interact with Elders.

Native communities in northern Canada and elsewhere in the circum-polar region have experienced rapid social and economic changes (Freeman, 2000). Kaskas experienced rapid social change following the construction of the Alaska Highway and Canol Pipeline and Highway in World War II and again during the development of the Faro mine site in the 1960s (Honigmann, 1949, 1966; Weinstein, 1992). As Wilson (1996) points out in his study of Gwich'in Elders in Alaska, many studies of the detrimental effects of social change and resulting social ills fail to identify the positive resources and coping mechanisms that are available in these communities.

Kaska Elders are sources of resilience in the face of social changes that have contributed to social problems such as poor health, crime, and alcohol and drug abuse. The Kaska Elders have lived through this period of change, and many were affected personally by various social problems or have seen the effects on their children. Their determination to live a full life guided by traditional values remains an inspiration to the entire community. Despite their age, the Elders prefer to remain active and enjoy sharing their knowledge and visiting with people from other communities. One Elder had tanned half a dozen caribou and moose hides by hand, and another regularly provided caribou, moose, and fish to participants in the course whenever possible.

Elders as Oral Models

The Elders who participated in the UBC Kaska course taught the language, cultural skills, and oral traditions in ways that complemented academic modes of instruction. Their ability to speak fluently and to use the language for storytelling and as a medium for teaching about Kaska traditions served to balance the use of written Kaska in language instruction. In much of the earlier literature on literacy, cultures were often contrasted as being dominated by either oral or literate forms of knowledge (Ong, 1982). In fact, most groups, including Kaska, have a diversity of practices that relates to both orality and literacy (Collins, 1995; Zepeda, 1995). The Kaska Elders have a strong base of oral language skills, but they may also have skills associated with literacy such as the ability to recognize designs and photographs or interpret maps. (People in areas where photographs or

maps are uncommon may not be able to interpret them readily; see, e.g., Ahearn, 2001). Some Kaska Elders can also write their names and read in English.

Historically, both symbolic designs and written language were used by Kaska spiritual leaders, who were called *nédet̃e*, dreamers. Catherine McClellan recorded a description of the drawings that appeared on the drum of one Kaska *nédet̃e*,

K'uci'ic used to put a picture on his drum, you know. It showed the way the game travelled—the caribou, the sheep, the moose—things like that. The game itself is just going around like that all of the time [motion in a sunwise, i.e., clockwise, direction]. Then the soul rises up again. That is why we can't get short of game. (McClellan, 1975, p. 558)

Another Kaska *nédet̃e*, Old Meji, reportedly carried a book of teachings similar to the Christian Bible. All Kaska Elders also have an awareness of the role of English language literacy in contemporary society as they must be able to monitor their bank accounts, respond to letters, and evaluate complex documents such as proposed land claims settlements.

Similarly, although literacy has an important role in Canadian society, oral uses of language are primary in many contexts. Children become fluent speakers before they are able to write, and many forms of communications are oral. Language teachers generally recognize the need to develop oral language skills as a base for language fluency, but they vary in the emphasis they place on the development of reading and writing skills. Adult language learners who are accustomed to writing in English expect to use written materials to study Kaska. The Kaska language teachers and interpreters who took the course had a professional interest in improving their ability to read and write Kaska. Leda Jules, Kaska interpreter for the Yukon Bureau of Aboriginal Language Services, said, "I took the course because I really want to write my language. I need to be able to write. You can do so much with writing" (personal communication, July 28, 2002). As students become familiar with how the sounds of Kaska are represented in the writing system, the written materials can be used to practice sentences and increase oral language skills.

There are, however, several common problems associated with teaching literacy in an introductory course. Many of the sounds of Kaska are unfamiliar to English speakers, and mastering how they are represented in the writing system takes extensive practice, which diverts attention from practicing basic conversational skills. There needs to be a balance between learning to write and using the language in real-life situations. Literacy is also unduly favored because it is widely associated with formal education, power, and prestige. Fishman (1982), in his studies of the sociological foundations of language education, for example, said, "The language of formal education is recurrently more bookish than is the bulk of human verbal interaction and definitely more so than is informal face-to-face spoken interaction" (p. 2). The prestige associated with literacy is common

in many cultures and is not unique to Kaska (Goody, 2000). More than the optimal amount of time may be spent on reading and writing because of this prestige and the prominence of reading and writing in other academic courses.

The Kaska Elders served to balance a possible overemphasis on Kaska literacy by demonstrating the utility and prestige of spoken language. Students had to understand and speak Kaska in order to interact with the Elders. The Elders enjoyed a high level of prestige because they were recognized for their extensive knowledge and their lifelong contributions to their communities. Many of the materials used by the class in their studies were dictated by the Elders who were there. Although written Kaska was used to help students study what the Elders said, the oral knowledge of the Elders was recognized and respected.

Language teachers usually start with simple expressions that are more readily comprehended by language learners, but they vary in how rapidly they progress to using more complex sentences at a normal rate of speech. The belief that simplified language facilitates language learning may also be related to culturally grounded beliefs about language learners and their social roles. Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) found, for example, that upper-middle-class caregivers in the United States used babytalk, a simplified form of language, in addressing infants as conversational partners, whereas adults in the other cultures they studied rarely used this type of simplified language in addressing young children.

Kaska Elders prefer not to simplify their usage for language learners, although as an alternative strategy they may shift to English when English speakers are present. Their preferences influenced the complexity of the language that was used in the UBC Kaska course. The students rapidly progressed to practicing complex conversations such as dialogues. By the fourth week of the course, they were able to assume the roles of narrators and actors to perform a play based on a historical narrative told by Amos Dick, one of the Elders. Amos Dick's story describes the experiences of a Kaska boy who traveled to the Peace River country of British Columbia in the 19th century and discovered white traders. The play that was based on this story included much of the complex vocabulary found in Amos Dick's story. Both the story and the play made extensive use of perfective verb forms (used for completed actions), directionals (terms used to indicate relative direction of movement), and particles (used to indicate clauses, sentence types, and larger discourse units such as scenes). Although these types of terms are among the most common used by fluent speakers, they are often omitted from introductory language materials such as those used for primary instruction in the public schools. Students became aware of the existence of these complex features as they memorized their parts in the play and listened to others performing their roles. Mastering the use of each of these systems would require more extensive practice, but having students exposed to the full complexity of the language was consistent

with the approach the Elders themselves take. Amos Dick and other Elders listened each day as the students practiced their parts and later performed the play, and they were pleased that the students could use their language skills to produce a performance that was meaningful for all involved.

Elders as Experiential Teachers

At earlier Kaska language workshops, formal language lessons, including writing practice, were conducted in the mornings, and lessons using the language in real-life activities were held in the afternoons. This model was also used for the UBC Kaska course. A preference for experiential knowledge gained from actual experiences has been noted for Kaska and other groups (Honigmann, 1949; Scollon & Scollon 1979; Goulet, 1998; Whitford, 1998). Similarly, Kawagley (1999) advocates language camps for Yupiaq that, like the UBC Kaska language course, would feature activities on the land integrated with language learning and that would be under the direction of Elders.

The Elders directed the cultural activities, drawing on their knowledge of traditional skills. They sought to involve as many students as possible in these activities, including subsistence activities, tanning and sewing hides, traditional games, drumming and singing, and sharing Kaska traditions. The students did assume a less active role in listening to the narrative accounts of Elders, but then took on a more active role in performing the play based on Amos Dick's story. By involving students as equals, the Elders avoided some of the stratification of roles that characterizes education in many institutional settings (Collins, 1995). The students in the course became accustomed to using the language to complete tasks cooperatively and interact with fluent speakers.

The students also assisted the Elders with getting wood and water and performing other tasks as Elders are traditionally honored in this way. Leda Jules, one of the students in the course, commented on this revitalization of traditional practices:

We're on the land. One of the Elders was saying, "You can't work on your language without your culture." We used to work for our stories. We used to get George Dick water and wood. We paid for our stories. We said, "he!" to let him know we were paying attention. He listened for that. If he didn't hear it then he stopped. Every story has a lesson in it. It's a lot of work, but we do it because it's ours. (personal communication, July 30, 2002)

The students also took an active role in using computer technology, although in this case the Elders learned alongside the other students. Computer-based language materials had been developed that students could read and listen to even before this course. Students took a more active role, however, in the computer activities that were conducted as part of the UBC course. During the week in Ross River they learned to combine written Kaska text, digital photographs, and sound files they had recorded into the computer to make PowerPoint presentations about

themselves and the course. This approach to using new technology, which emphasized an active role for all participants, was consistent with the general philosophy of the Elders, and they were impressed by what the students produced.

Although most of the participants in the course were Kaska, there were also students from other First Nations as well as non-Native students. They were well respected for the interest they demonstrated in learning the language and participating in activities. When one of the non-Native students returned from a brief visit to another community, one of the Kaska students said, "It's good to have you home again." For many of the Kaska students the course was an opportunity to return home to the land, to their Elders, and to the language they spoke or at least heard as children. It is a home from which many Kaska children were taken away when they were forced to attend residential schools, where they were forbidden to use their language. Kathy Magun, the Education Director for the Liard First Nation, described her own experiences.

I went to the mission school and I was taught to be ashamed of my language. I just didn't see what the advantage of having the language would be. Now it's accredited and I'm really excited. The language is being given the acknowledgement it deserves. It's all part of recovering—recovering your identity. It tells us that we're someone in society. (personal communication, August 2, 2002)

At *Tū Chō* the course was held at a facility constructed by the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS), a group that was established to promote a positive lifestyle for all Kaska. The formation of this society formalized the strong role of women in the Kaska communities in organizing programs to promote Kaska language and culture, in facilitating recovery from the abuses of residential schools, and in developing healthy lifestyles. This organization has conducted extensive workshops, both in the Kaska communities and at the tent-frame camp they constructed at *Tū Chō*.

The Kaska First Nations hosted the course on their territory to make it more accessible to Kaskas and to facilitate the use of the language where it has traditionally been used. Kaska postsecondary students usually have to travel to distant communities to take classes, which results in a "brain drain" from the Kaska communities. Because the real authorities on Kaska language and culture are the Kaska Elders, it was appropriate that this course was held in Kaska territory. The Elders, the students, and their families formed a community dedicated to reviving their language and traditions. The Elders were pleased to be on the land and to be recognized for their knowledge. One Elder commented that he felt as if he had been treated like a king. Another said, "We've traveled with you a long ways. We went to the mountains. We eat good. A lot of people tell stories. Everybody's happy. They learn from old people" (M. Donnessey, personal communication, August 2, 2002). The last Elder to speak on the final day expressed the hopes of many of the participants when he said, "God

willing, I'll be here with all of you again next year" (T. Smith, personal communication, August 2, 2002).

Conclusion

The Kaska course that was jointly sponsored by the Kaska First Nations and the UBC offers possibilities for developing Native language curriculum in other communities. Elsewhere Elders who are brought into Native language classrooms often have limited control over how the courses are taught, but in this instance the Elders took a leading role, possibly because so many were involved in the course. Spirituality is often restricted in institutional contexts, although it is an essential element in First Nations cultures. The increased participation of Elders is clearly one culturally appropriate way of facilitating the expression of spirituality in Native language courses. First Nations languages have traditionally been used for a wide variety of activities including many that are specific to First Nations cultures. As the Kaska Elders reminded students, it is only through active use in a variety of activities that these languages can continue to function as common modes of communication.

Although the Kaska Elders emphasized the use of oral language throughout the course, this did not diminish the interest of students in writing the language. When the Elders took the time to explain meticulously the details of the language, the students were careful to note every point. They also used their notes to memorize not only words, but also longer discourses such as conversations and plays. The students knew, however, that eventually they had to interact with the Elders in Kaska and the Elders made sure that fluency remained the ultimate goal.

The Kaska experience demonstrates possible advantages to having a group of Elders involved in a course in order to create a context for fluent language use. A larger group of Elders also offers advantages in terms of the diverse experiences and knowledge that each Elder has to offer. Although other universities and First Nations may find it difficult to commit the necessary resources to a course such as this, some of the approaches of the Kaska Elders may find broader application in other First Nations language courses.

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