

Report on the Workshop “World of Inuktitut”

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The workshop “World of Inuktitut” began with a brief overview of the Inuktitut language. While the true origin of Inuktitut is a matter of controversy, linguists believe the language belongs in the Finno-Ugric language. This categorization ties Inuktitut to Hungarian and Finnish, among other languages. The Finno-Ugric language family developed West of Bajkal Lake in Siberia. It is believed that the ancestors of the Inuit migrated across the Bering Strait land bridge 12,000 years ago.

Inuktitut consists of two main branches: Yup’ik and Inupik. Yup’ik is spoken along the eastern tip of Siberia, on St. Lawrence Island, and in southern Alaska. “Inupik” is a term coined by linguists to describe all other dialects throughout northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Yup’ik and Inupik languages are believed to have split 2,000 years ago and to have developed independently. Although there are words that are similar between the two groups, the level of mutual intelligibility is low. Within the Inupik group, there are dialects that seem quite different. However, on closer examination, it is clear that there is a shared structure and vocabulary among the dialects.

After an overview of the structure and vocabulary of Inuktitut, participants shared their thoughts on the question: How does one teach high context communication skills to second language learners of Inuktitut? First, let’s look at what “high context communication” is. In *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall describes cultures as either low context or high context. In low context cultures, grammatical intricacies and vocabulary convey most of a verbal communication’s meaning. High context cultures, however, rely more on context than spoken words to convey the actual meaning of a communication. Thus, a high context language is suited to people highly capable of observing and interpreting their environment. In high context cultures, language confirms what is understood from the circumstances, but words are not relied on for the essential communication. Typically, European and Slavic cultures (e.g., British, German, and Russian) are low context. Many indigenous cultures are considered high context.

When teaching Inuktitut to students from a low context culture, a dilemma inevitably arises in the first class. For example, English first language speakers are eager to learn “some basics” like how to say “hello.” It is a low context cultural impulse to reach out verbally in order to make contact. In Inuktitut, however, it is not impolite to be silent upon first contact, allowing the other to observe and to get a feel for the “context” or situation. Body language and facial expressions are far more important than saying hello. In fact, there is only one dialect (in over 20) with a word for hello (*Ai* or *Ainngai* in Nunavik, South Baffin). So the real issue in the above question is, how can culture be effectively transmitted along with knowledge of the language in order to create true competency in communicating?

The following notes are from the brainstorming sheets of workshop participants. Although most ideas refer to second language learning in general, some interesting comments were made on the specific topic of “transmitting culture.”

Indigenous Languages Across the Community

- Give students experiences: go to the park, do drama, make bannock, bring fish in and eat them.
- Listen to tapes or radio in the language to gain a feel for the flow and the sounds of the language. Allow it to become familiar.
- Engage in the music, literature, poetry, and drama of the culture.
- Practice a lot. Try to say the words out loud and in your head.
- Use games.
- Learn from small children. Be ready to mimic and play with words like they do. Become child-like.
- Keep diaries of experiences. Write in your mother tongue at first and then some in Inuktitut. The teacher can check the notes from time to time. Comment on ideas, not language. Stories can be shared with future students.
- Gather wisdom of how others accomplished fluency. Use them as role models for learners.
- Answer the question of why you are learning Inuktitut. How do you see yourself in the context of Inuit society? Working? Travelling? Married?
- Are you ready for the “transforming experience” of language learning? Do you know you are entering a new world? What are you prepared to give up to enter this world?

In the Japanese language program at York University, instruction is divided equally between language and culture. For example, in learning to name the different parts of a Japanese house, the students first examine the cultural uses of space. Only after use of and relation to space are explored from a Japanese point of view are the names for the spaces given in Japanese. With this teaching method, fewer words are introduced, but students are more able to communicate intelligibly with those in Japanese society. The students demonstrate cultural awareness, which opens more doors for language learning opportunities.

When teaching culture, a program should be set up to teach students things they never had to observe before. This way, awareness is fostered. Half of the success of language learning depends on the learner, but the other half depends on the society that uses the language. How does the society receive learners? What training in a language program can make that entry smoother for students?

The general discussion that followed the brainstorming session concluded that teaching culture is as important as teaching language in language programs. Learners must develop a new worldview in accordance with the new language. Any effective program must have culture built into the curriculum. The cultural components should reflect the values of that society so the language learner has the opportunity to experience these values in contrast to his or her own society's values. The language teacher should also help students to appreciate how the cultural values and worldview are reflected in the language. This would encourage students to make their own observations of the cultural worldview and to accept this new language on its own terms rather than trying to make it fit what they already know of language through their mother tongue.