

Inuktitut Second Language Learning in an Urban Setting A First-Hand Account

*Inuktitut Uqausituqarinngitamnik Ilinniaqpallianira
Qablunaat Nunangani*

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When I was in my early twenties, I started to learn Inuktitut as a Second Language (ISL). As I live in Ontario, and outside of *Inuit Nunangat* (Inuit homelands in the Arctic), I have been learning Inuktitut in mostly non-immersion settings. My learning journey is ongoing, but, as an intermediate speaker, I think it is a good time to reflect on what I have learned about my learning process thus far. In this paper, I will address the following question: What pedagogical methods and goals did I choose to make the learning process easier for me as an ISL learner in an urban environment?

Background

There has been very little research done on what learning strategies are most effective for adult ISL learners, particularly in urban environments. However, there is a growing number of Inuit and non-Inuit who wish to learn ISL, both inside and outside of *Inuit Nunangat*. Inuktitut is the Indigenous language with the second-largest number of speakers in Canada, at approximately 35,000 (Wordon 2015). It is also the most spoken Indigenous mother tongue in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, which is on traditional Algonquin/Anishinaabe territory (Statistics Canada 2016). Despite the relative strength of Inuktitut, it continues to decline among youth (Wordon 2015). In this context, it is important to consider which learning approaches will be most effective in creating a new generation of fluent speakers, including in southern Canada (Rosborough 2012, 248).

I hope that sharing my story may be helpful for ISL learners, particularly those in urban settings. Most ISL learners who have reached an intermediate level live or lived in *Inuit Nunangat*, whereas I live *taunani* ('down there') in Ottawa. In Nunavut and Nunavik communities, Inuktitut is spoken fairly often and one dialect is usually predominant in each community. In Ottawa, on the other hand, English (and French) predominates and there are fewer opportunities to hear Inuktitut. Also, because Inuit in Ottawa come from across *Inuit Nunangat*, there is more dialectal diversity in Ottawa than there would be in a typical northern Inuit community.

I started learning Inuktitut because I admired Inuit culture and worldview and hoped to deepen my understanding in those areas. I learned through a variety of methods, such as using print and online resources, and engaging with speakers in formal and informal ways. As a non-Inuit person, I recognize that my experience learning Inuktitut does not carry the emotional complexities that Inuktitut learning can carry for Inuit community members (Rosborough 2012, 25). Inuktitut is my third language, since English is my mother tongue and I learned French in school. Rosborough (2012, 25) describes how the structure of Kwak'wala makes learning the language fun for her, an experience I can relate to as I learn more about the structure of Inuktitut. It has been said that "to speak a second language is to possess a second soul." When I am speaking Inuktitut, my brain operates differently than when I am speaking English or French, perhaps because, as noted by Inuk leader John Amagoalik (2001, 9), the Inuit language was shaped by the land. Also, learning Inuktitut provided unexpected opportunities for me to meet new friends and mentors, and to better appreciate the resiliency of the growing

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Inuit community in Ottawa. I would like to encourage anyone else who is trying to learn Inuktitut, both in *Inuit Nunangat* and in southern Canada. It has been, and continues to be, an enriching journey.

Inuktitut Second Language (ISL) Learning

Inuktitut can be challenging for adult European language speakers to learn as a second language, even in immersion environments. This is partly because Inuktitut is a polysynthetic language (Kell 2014, 7-9). Goodfellow (2005, 6-7) describes it this way: “[p]olysynthetic languages express in one term, by the addition of affixes to a stem, what analytic languages such as English express in a sentence with separate words.” This has led Inuktitut teachers Alexina Kublu and Mick Mallon to state that words in European languages are like beads on a necklace, whereas Inuktitut words are like Lego blocks (Kublu & Mallon 1999). For an example, consider the following sentences:

English:	<i>I want to go to Paris.</i>
French:	<i>Je veux aller à Paris.</i>
Inuktitut:	<i>Parismunngaujumajunga.</i> Paris-munngau-juma-junga Paris-go.to-want.to-I

I found the process of learning French as a teenager more straightforward than learning Inuktitut as a young adult, partly because of the grammatical similarities between English and French, and the differences between Inuktitut and European languages. However, it was the intriguing differences between European languages and Inuktitut which also made learning Inuktitut so rewarding.

Along with the polysynthetic nature of Inuktitut, another challenge ISL learners face is the lack of a standardized version of the language. Whereas Greenland uses Roman orthography and officially adopted Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic Inuktitut) as the official language, a similar standardization process did not take place in Canada (Worden 2015). In Nunavut alone, there are estimated to be eight Inuktitut dialects and two writing systems (syllabics and Roman orthography) (“About Inuktitut” n.d.). Also, the syllabics system was developed by missionaries based on a mix of Braille and Pitman’s shorthand, which makes it very different from Roman orthography, the writing system familiar to most European-language speakers (Worden 2015; Library and Archives Canada Blog 2015).

There has been a long-standing debate within Inuit communities in Canada about whether to standardize the oral and written forms of Inuktitut, a debate this paper does not have space to explore in depth (Worden 2015). In general, those who oppose standardization are concerned about the preservation of local dialects, and those who support it are concerned that not standardizing will mean losing the language entirely (Madwar 2015). In relation to learning Kwak’wala, Rosborough has noted: “[A] linguist would likely perceive issues of literacy, orthographies, and dialect as separate topics, but for me, a community member hoping and working for the survival of our language, these issues merge and present as a common barrier” (2012, 190). Likewise, the absence of a standardized form of Canadian Inuktitut creates a barrier for learners which does not exist when learning standardized languages like French or Kalaallisut.

Pedagogical Methods and Goals in my Learning Process

Like many learners of Indigenous languages in urban environments, I have limited time slots that I can dedicate to language learning (mostly evenings and week-

ends). Thus, I try to make my learning process as efficient as possible. This brings me to the main topic of my paper, which is: What pedagogical methods and goals did I choose to make the learning process easier in an urban environment?

The three learning choices which have been most helpful for me are as follows:

- (1) I focused on one of the easiest dialects to learn according to linguists (the Aivilik dialect).
- (2) I focused on the easiest script to learn for most European-language speakers (Roman orthography).
- (3) I followed a blended approach of both conversational and form-focused learning.

Dialect Choice

First, I decided to focus on learning one of the easiest Inuktitut dialects for adult ISL learners, which is the Aivilik (‘people of the walrus place’) dialect of the northwestern shores of the Hudson Bay in Nunavut. The Aivilik dialect (also know as Aivilingmiutut) has a relative lack of gemination of consonant clusters compared to other Inuktitut dialects, which makes it easier for second language learners to detect grammatical patterns (Mallon 1999, Int-15, 7-9, 9-7). Gemination in this context means that consonant clusters resulting from two different consonants coming together inside a word become assimilated into one long (geminate) consonant, which obscures one of the original consonants. For instance, in the examples given below the cluster *-pt-* becomes *-tt-* and the clusters *-mn-* and *-ngn-* both become *-nn-*. The amount of gemination of consonant clusters in dialects generally increases as one moves from eastern Nunavut to western Nunavut (Mallon 1999, Int-15). The following quote from Mallon’s *Intermediate Inuktitut* textbook contrasts Aivilingmiutut with the more eastern dialects in North and South Baffin (Mallon 1999, 9-7):

The plural form of *-nnut to my ...* is *-ttinnut to our*

Compare the different dialectal forms. Notice how increasing gemination blurs the function of those tiny elements:

Aivilik	uv am nut	to me	uv ap tingnut	to us
	nun am nut	to my land	nun ap tingnut	to our land
N. Baffin	uv ann ut	to me	uv at tingnut	to us
	nun ann ut	to my land	nun at tingnut	to our land
S. Baffin	uv ann ut	to me	uv att innut	to us
	nun ann ut	to my land	nun att innut	to our land

It also made sense for me to start by learning Aivilingmiutut because many Inuktitut exercise books have been written in this dialect or in the related North Baffin dialects (such as Mick Mallon’s *Intermediate Inuktitut*). I do my best to understand and try to speak other dialects. However, I still find Aivilingmiutut, and the closely related Igloodik dialect, to be easier for me to understand as a ISL learner in an urban environment.

Script Choice

Second, I focused on using the easiest script to learn for most European-language speakers, which is Roman orthography. As noted on the Tusaalanga learning resource website, English and French speakers have an easier time learning Inuktitut when using this system:

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Learning to write Inuktitut well in Roman orthography has a number of advantages: you will begin writing Inuktitut more quickly by using a writing system that is more familiar to you; you will see the patterns in the language more easily than if you are trying to decipher syllabic characters; it will be much easier to master syllabics later on. (“About Inuktitut” n.d.)

Roman orthography is more easily and frequently used with computer technology, e-mail and text messaging, even in communities that normally write in syllabics (such as those in Nunavut and Nunavik). Also, youth are more likely to use Roman orthography (“About Inuktitut” n.d.). When I started learning Inuktitut, I began with syllabics, but as I found that I progressed slowly, I decided to switch to learning Roman orthography. After about a year and a half, I tried studying syllabics again and was able to learn it more quickly. I am glad to be able to read syllabics as many Inuktitut materials from Nunavut and Nunavik are written using that system. However, I still find it easier and more practical to read and write in Roman orthography.

Conversational and Form-Focused Learning

Third, while learning Inuktitut, I followed a blended approach of both conversational and form-focused (or grammar-focused) learning. This method was also followed by Rosborough in learning Kwak’wala and was recommended by Kell in a report on teaching Indigenous polysynthetic languages in British Columbia (Rosborough 2012, 151; Kell 2014, 28). As Kell notes, when learning polysynthetic languages, “a command of word-building patterns frees learners from having to simply memorize long lists of vocabulary” (Rosborough 2012, 43).

Kell’s findings mirror my own learning experience. Although I was able to pick up French conversationally without studying the grammar, I was not able to replicate this method with Inuktitut. Indeed, because Inuktitut is grammatically so different from English, linguist Mick Mallon has stated: “‘Picking up’ Inuktitut would be like putting together an IKEA space rocket kit” (O’Toole 2018). Thus, drawing from both conversational and form-focused methods has been an essential part of my learning process (see the Appendix for a list of some Inuktitut grammatical resources). Also, as Rosborough notes, knowledge of suffixes, root words, and patterns of speech helps to reveal the beauty embedded in polysynthetic Indigenous languages (Rosborough 2012, 151). I still struggle at times with using more complex Inuktitut grammar, and I think it would be very helpful if an Inuktitut grammar book was written for learners at the upper intermediate and advanced levels.

Conclusion

This paper describes the methods that I found effective for learning Inuktitut in Ottawa as an adult. More research is needed on how choices of dialect, script, and learning method can influence learning outcomes for ISL learners, particularly in urban settings. As noted by Rosborough, it is vitally important that learning strategies are clearly focused on the goal of language outcomes (Rosborough 2012, 140). The traditional Inuit saying, *uumajurniut iniquunariaqajjangillaq* (Nungak 2007, 50), speaks to the value of pragmatism which has been central to my learning process:

Uumajurniut iniquunariaqajjangillaq, “A hunting implement need not be good-looking at all.” Some hunters always have well-made accessories which not only serve their purpose, but are also pleasing to the eye in their obvious good quality. Competent hunters (*angusuqtut*)

with such equipment are doubly blessed. But this saying declares that a decrepit-looking implement is nothing to be ashamed of, as long as it serves its purpose.

The learning methods and goals described in this paper, my “hunting implements,” were somewhat unorthodox and unembellished. Although I originally tried to learn all dialects spoken in Ottawa, use only syllabics, and learn conversationally without studying grammar, I decided these goals were not realistic for me. In the end, my “hunting implements” helped me to learn intermediate Inuktitut in an urban setting. Thus, I believe that they served their purpose, and I hope that other learners may also find “hunting implements” that work for them on their language journey. *Qujannamiik uqalimaqqaugavit* (‘Thanks for reading’).

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Appendix

A Selection of Inuktitut Grammar Resources

- Harper, Kenn. 1979. *Suffixes of the Eskimo Dialects of Cumberland Peninsula and North Baffin Island*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada.
- Mallon, Mick. 1991. *Introductory Inuktitut*. Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College.
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- Spalding, Alex. 1998. "Inuktitut—A Multi-dialectal Outline Dictionary (with an Aivilingmiutaq base)." Nunavut Arctic College. Accessed November 26, 2020. <http://www.inuktitutcomputing.ca/Spalding/index.php?lang=en>.