

# **At the Convergence of Theory and Practice: Nourishing the Learning Spirits of Indigenous Language Teachers in Schools**

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In this chapter we illuminate theory and present practical considerations for Indigenous language teacher preparation within the context of K-12 schools and short-term immersive experiences. Centering Indigenous knowledge within schools and preparing Indigenous language teachers for second-language teaching is complicated. However, understanding this complexity has the potential to fuel passions and sustain teachers through challenging times. In this article we explore methodology, curriculum, and theory that guide the preparation of Indigenous teachers and the evaluation of student language learning. The authors explore their new understandings and describe how they have expanded their teaching repertoires as they engage in teaching and learning with Indigenous language teachers.

## **Background**

Each summer for the last 20 years, the University of Alberta has hosted the Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Institute (CILLDI). CILLDI is modeled loosely on the American Indigenous Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona. It offers courses on Indigenous language pedagogy, linguistics courses about Indigenous languages and courses intended to help adults learn various Indigenous languages at levels ranging from introductory to advanced. CILLDI began with one senior-level Cree language class offered jointly between two western Canadian universities, and within two years several other courses were developed, including curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment of learning, as well as introductory linguistics tailored to Indigenous languages. We have offered several Indigenous language courses over the years, including Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, and Michif. Currently, we offer a Cree immersion course for adult beginners to begin to address the need for a new generation of Cree speakers and, we hope, new teachers. The development of the curriculum for the Indigenous language teaching methods, curriculum and assessment courses took place over several years, in collaboration with a team of representatives from the local Indigenous colleges, Indigenous languages graduate students, and scholars, led by Dr. Heather Blair as the CILLDI coordinator in the Education faculty. The courses that we discuss in this paper are part of the six-course education stream offered each summer to students from across western and northern Canada.

The authors are honoured to work on Treaty 6, the traditional territory of the First Nations and Métis people, during the summer.

All four authors of this paper teach at CILLDI. Currently, Dr. Heather Blair teaches Leadership in Indigenous Languages Education, Belinda Daniels teaches Introduction to Teaching Indigenous Languages and Literacy, Noreen Buffalo teaches Using Immersion Methods to Teach Indigenous Languages, and Velvlee Georges teaches Assessment in Indigenous Languages Education. These are key courses in CILLDI's summer offerings.

Indigenous language teachers attend CILLDI during the summer to learn how to become better teachers. For the most part, they teach children who are learning their Indigenous language as second languages. However, in some northern communities in Canada children continue to come to school speaking their Indigenous languages as first languages; therefore, CILLDI courses take

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into consideration this range of needs. Some of the teachers who attend CILLDI are learning their Indigenous languages as second languages themselves and are working very hard to reclaim their languages. This additional burden, being learners and teachers of Indigenous languages simultaneously in contemporary contexts, also requires consideration.

The unique learner characteristics of students who attend CILLDI and the Indigenous languages contexts in which they teach are at the forefront when instructors plan, deliver, and support successful course implementation. Instructors and the authors of this paper address methodological and immersion possibilities and explain how they are introduced to teachers. The authors also discuss in this article how to measure student learning. They bring a depth of experience to these topics through their multiple roles as teachers, language leaders, graduate students, and community members.

### **Heather Leads the Way by Illuminating Theory and Setting the Stage for Further Learning**

In the past few decades some foundational work has been done around the world in the field of Indigenous language education and revitalization. According to Joshua Fishman's (1991; 1996; 2001) principles, the idea of ideological clarification is that the members of any language working group need to be on the same page: Why are we doing this? Why do languages matter? What do you lose when you lose your language? In my Leadership in Indigenous Languages Education course at CILLDI, I ask my students to do that exercise first for themselves as a reflective activity: What do you lose when you lose your language? Then they talk about that in groups and think about it, and in each case they come to value their language in new ways. Joshua Fishman's principles remind us about things that we need to include when we are preparing our language teachers. We need to model good communicative language teaching and make sure that our students have ways to use authentic oral language texts and hear as much "talk" as possible. We demonstrate how learners can be in a situation in which they have to use their language as much as possible in each class every day. We also attend to the work of Canadian scholar Jim Cummins (1984; 1990; 2005; 2015) and his theory, including two terms that he gave us over 20 years ago. The first is *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS). That's what kids learn early on. When they're starting to introduce themselves, it includes asking simple questions and giving directions, such as "Where's this and that?" "Sit down," "Stand up," and "Welcome," and introducing themselves to others—the kinds of things that they need to be able to do to begin to make themselves understood and to get and give information. But we remind our teachers that they can't stop at BICS; we need to make sure that we go on to *cognitive academic language proficiency* in our classrooms. If our immersion programs are going to be successful, we need to ensure this kind of proficiency so that these young learners can learn through their new language, so that they can learn all subjects such as science or math in Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, or whatever their language is. As teachers, we need to provide opportunities and levels of language so that these youths can learn content through their language and have the academic language to do that. This is what immersion is all about.

As CILLDI instructors, we are working at increasing the awareness of the needs in the field of Indigenous languages education and revitalization. We are working with our students to learn new teaching techniques, try out immersion methods, and find creative evaluation or assessment tools. We ask them to explore what classrooms could look and sound like. How can we use immersion methods in all classrooms? We ask them to think about the uniqueness of these

second-language learners and to be sensitive to their emotional well-being. We challenge our students to find new ways to take stock of the language learning in classrooms and assess the youths' language learning. Most importantly, we try to ensure that we employ Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous knowledge systems in a meaningful and authentic way.

### **Belinda's Journey as a Second-Language Learner and Teacher**

I have been teaching for 18 years. The majority of my work has been on and about language revitalization. As soon as I completed a BEd degree, I was assigned to a second-language Cree classroom with no training or theory on language or literacy. The learning has been nonstop as I am constantly researching these two aspects. I am also learning my own language and getting involved in issues with others who are thinking and acting on language reclamation. Distinguishing the differences between language revitalization and reclamation has also been part of the process. In my earlier research I was doing it backwards. I was working through Western ideologies of thinking, and things were not making sense for me; then I decided to go home—literally, to go home and figure out, Who am I? How do I learn this (as in language and identity)? And then, how do I teach others? Later, I came to realize that ceremony is critically important in teaching our languages and participating in various types of ceremony with regard to Indigenous learning and theorizing. Learning to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and methods is relevant for me because I am a *nêhiyaw*, part of a distinct nation. All Indigenous people are vastly different in ways of language, governance, societies, customs, and traditions. As Wilson (2008, 14) states, “We can decide for ourselves what research we want and how that research will be conducted, analyzed and presented.” I am now looking within the Indigenous paradigm when I research language.

Language reclamation has a very different meaning to the Indigenous collective than to those who are not Indigenous. Our languages have a rhythm, a tone, intonation, a spirit that needs to be constantly honoured. “Language is believed to have a sacred spirit, and this spirit will leave if the language is not utilized. There is a spirituality embedded in the words, songs, prayers, and history” (McAdam 2015, 25). All Indigenous people have this: songs, prayers, and history of their lands. Second-language learners, especially adults, are dealing with a significant amount of trauma, especially as a result of the residential schools. At the same time they are learning to face the pain, as evidenced in this quotation from Elise Chartland (1993, 34):

It is very difficult for me to talk about my life because it was full of pain. Today I accept that pain. That pain has helped me grow mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. I am now learning my language and heritage, learning to love, to look at my family and community as the Great Spirit's creations. I am learning to understand the pain and suffering of others without saying, “Don't worry, it will go away.” I listen now. I hear and see.

Because of the DNA that we carry, the pain we carry, the blood memory we carry, the dreams we carry, because we are a collective people with a collective thinking, acquiring an Indigenous language as a second language is unlike learning any other language. An Elder stated, “We don't speak in lines. We speak in a circular motion, thinking around that subject. Our sound system, is a neural pathway to our memory ... [that] we inherited through our cellular memory” (Steinhauer-Hill 2008, 19). Because we suffer from a similar type of trauma, it is important

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that we have trauma-informed education. I know that teachers need sensitivity training and residential-school facts, and they need to become familiar with the Indian Act. I share from an article, “onikanew: She Who Leads: Learning to Lead in Education”: “The effects of the Indian Act and its policies are still felt deeply, and among countless others who are like me” (Daniels 2018, 286). Regarding the treatment of Indigenous peoples of Canada, all of the social injustices continue to be roadblocks for new learners, and teachers need to be aware of these.

### **New Kinds of Complexity Emerge when Adults Learn Their Indigenous Languages as Second Languages and Then Teach Them to Second Language Learners**

Teaching adults their Indigenous language as a second language is often emotionally charged, partly because of the systematic and historic eradication of Indigenous languages, but also because of the personalization of this legacy by both teacher and students.

It is important that teachers acknowledge this, be supportive, and know how to address it when it arises. More often than not, I have seen teachers stymied by the emotional pain that learners demonstrate. Johnson (2014) found a way around this pain by filming language acquisition entirely in *n̄sylixn*, “a choice reflecting a commitment to the power of immersion and the courage to break the silence imposed by generations of colonialism” (Johnson 2014, 142). This happened to me in the past when I was relearning who I am and how significant language learning had been for me and how it is tied to land. The experience was both joyous and painful. To teach about language or learning language, being supportive has to be part of the teacher training, because sometimes teachers do not know how to deal with someone in emotional pain triggered by language learning.

Meaningful communication is a good teacher practice, and scaffolding the language is a great tool for learning when it comes to teaching a language; they result in optimal learning and long-term memory utilization. I’m a second-language learner, and as a second-language learner, because of my teachers and my relationships with them, they can see in my face, my expression, my body language, what I am missing and what I am struggling with; they can read me well. Good teachers scaffold learning. Leading students from one concept to another concept is slow and consistent and therefore requires a gentle way. It is important not to overwhelm students’ learning.

Language learning and vocabulary acquisition come in stages and depend on the amount of practice and exposure, as well as on vocabulary exercises. I say this because, having been involved in this for a while, I was accumulating language and hours with vocabulary and phrases, all the while thinking, when will this all come together? And then it happened! I was at a feast ceremony, and we were preparing for a round dance after we had eaten. An Elder began to talk to the crowd in the circle. I was standing on the edge of the circle, listening to him, and all of a sudden I understood. Speaking in Cree, this Elder was teaching us a lesson about why we do the things we do and why is it important to listen and to eat food in this manner. I understood what he was saying, not word for word, but the heart of his teaching. I was focused and intrigued with his voice, the rhythm and intonation. Soon I was receiving little two- or three-second video images in my head, and I thought, Oh, my God! I can understand what he is saying and what he is describing! It was remarkable, and I had tears in my eyes. My brain also felt different, as though I had had an epiphany. I felt the sensation of a click, as a dial on a radio or a heater dial in a car, and my perspective morphed into a Cree worldview. That clicking in the brain had never happened to me before and hasn’t since.

My language learning has been enjoyable. I create language-learning opportunities by talking about my day or referring to the weather. I also enjoy listening to others conversing in Cree and take note of the words that I know and understand. I began to watch video clips of other people conversing and speaking Cree, and I started dreaming in Cree. Small video scenarios were playing over in my mind as I listened to people speak Cree in public. I was finally learning to speak in Cree, and it gave me shivers. Battiste (1988, 17-18) explained that “languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and critical to the survival of the culture and political integrity of any people. Aboriginal languages provide a direct and powerful means of understanding the legacy of tribal knowledge.”

After a long, arduous journey of reclaiming language, I finally feel connected to my family, my ancestors, our collective customs, and our traditions; and now I understand why they do what they do. Language learning occurs in stages, and it is important that second-language Indigenous learners document the process so that others know what to look for and what will happen. Sylvia McAdam (2015, 63) stated, “Language is critical in understanding the spiritual, verbal, emotional, and physical way of *nēhiyaw* being. It is also said language carries a vibration that connects it to the Creator’s creations; thus, the singing and almost a humming sound while in prayer state. The vibration is a connection to all spiritual things, including the universe.”

I did not understand this until I began to work with Elders and feel that rhythm, especially in ceremony. I also want to point out that it is true that if we do not use the language, we lose it. It happens, and I have to constantly practice, converse, and be in the context. This makes a difference in learning to relearn Cree. My language is my lifelong journey.

### **Language and Land**

I am also studying environmental anthropology, exploring lands in my home territory, where I come from, the names of specific places. We cannot really learn an Indigenous language without recognizing that land is part of the learning process. My (late) grandparents had a connection to such sacred places and space, and because they had that connection, they taught me the significance of place in the original Cree names. This place-based connection is also attached to becoming a land defender, which I have come to realize and experience. Land, places, and spaces are inherent pieces of my identity.

Language is sacred to my identity; reclaiming it has been a sacred act, a ceremony that connects my original being as a *nēhiyaw* to my mother tongue and that, simultaneously, connects land and sovereignty. I have learned that when other second-language learners learn Cree or Dene, there is a difference between Indigenous peoples who are reclaiming their language and non-Indigenous people who are learning an Indigenous language as an additional language. They don’t have quite the same spiritual connections that we do, as I have learned from experience and through conversations and surveys.

As *nēhiyawak* people, we believe that our languages are alive with a spirit, like the rivers, the sun, the mountains, and so on. The *nēhiyawak* have the story of syllabics, in which the writing system came from the spirit world. Calling Badger went to the Spirit World and brought back the written language. Those symbols spoke to him, all the while in the Creator’s presence. When we teach this sacred story to students, we need to help them to make an offering: Plan a smudge ceremony, plan a feast, plan a two- or three-day Fasting Ceremony, depending on the students’ time, commitment, and sacrifice, to give language an offering. This helps.

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Helping students to form relationships with the seen and unseen forces within our lives—this is what we call Indigenous epistemology. As Wilson (2008, 74) says:

It is important to recognize that the epistemology includes an entire system of knowledge and relationships. These relationships are with the cosmos around us, as well as with concepts Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos.

Making these kinds of offerings is missing from our mainstream schools. We don't make them part of common practice or embed it in curriculum or our everyday lives. This is important: acknowledging Indigenous systems of knowledge in reclaiming and revitalizing our language and relearning who we are.

### **Indigenous Second-Language Work as Recovery**

I'm still in recovery. So many of us are in this recovery stage. It has been like healing from a traumatic brain injury that I suffered as a child. It has created emotional and psychological damage that does not emerge until we participate in various language contexts. Past stories and memories arise for me. To even begin to form words in my head and to make sounds come out of my mouth and tongue has been painful. At the very beginning of my language-learning journey I remembered the stories of my parents and (late) grandparents. I was emotional and cried for a long time when I began to speak Cree out loud—easy nuances such as *tansi etawiya*, Belinda *nisihkason*, Sturgeon Lake *ohci niya*. These things were difficult for me to say, especially in public. I carried that burning tickle in my throat for a long time as a second-language learner. It's still there, and if it's still there for me after I have practiced speaking Cree for 10-15 years, can you imagine what it is like for other people? That burning tickle in my throat feels more like a scar. There are many like myself. If we want our students to feel better, to feel safer, we must offer Cree love—Cree words of love and encouragement. Offer to be a lifeline that makes people feel whole and complete as a *nêhiyawak*. Remember this for our students, for those young people who are learning how to speak their mother tongues.

In my studies I've come to realize that much more investigation is needed in regard to second-language adult and young-adult Indigenous learners. Little research literature exists in this specific area. Wherever I go, I talk about that, and I try to share a fierceness as a collective people; as a nation. As McCarty (2003, 148) states, "more fundamentally, language loss and revitalization are human rights issues." Wherever I go, I try to share this fierceness because as a nation we never were conquered nor did we relinquish any inherent right to our nationhood. Our languages are part of the Constitution, but nobody ever talks about that. McCarty (2003, 148) suggested, "Through our mother tongue, we come to know, represent, name, and act upon the world. Humans do not naturally or easily relinquish this birthright. Rather, the loss of language reflects the exercise of power by the dominant." This is what has happened to us. How do we overcome and we rise above this? We begin to learn, relearn to speak and teach one another the language.

### **Norine Finds Language Teaching Methods That Work**

*Kitatamiskatinawaw kakiyaw*, Norine Buffalo *nitisikason*, *Maskwacisihk ochi niya*. I greet you all. I am from Bear Hills. I've been working in the education system for 18 years. I have found my passion in teaching Cree, utilizing my basic

understanding of Cree language and culture, along with Western education methodologies. In preparation for my life, I knew that I had to embrace education to make my livelihood easier for myself and my children. I also knew that I wanted to increase my knowledge of the Cree language and use it in my education, but I didn't know how to start.

During my early years in education I received certificates and diplomas in areas pertaining to education, but I was not fully certified to teach in K-12 classrooms because I did not have a Bachelor of Education (BEEd) degree. I thought about furthering my education to qualify as a fully certified teacher and received my BEEd in the spring of 2003 from the University of Alberta. During the winter of 2005 I met Heather Blair at my place of work on the Ermineskin Cree Nation in the elementary school. She was there to promote the CILLDI program. She was convincing enough that I persuaded a co worker to attend CILLDI with me that summer. I attended the CILLDI Summer Institute for five summers, I received the Community Linguist Certificate in 2009, and took the core courses in Indigenous languages teaching and assessment that we discuss here. I graduated in 2017 with my master's degree from the University of Alberta, and for the past two summers I have taught at CILLDI. I will continue to return to the institute because it rejuvenates my spirit each time that I attend.

### **Changing My Teaching**

During my teaching career I struggled with utilizing the Western ideals of teaching the Cree language using a second-language approach. One approach to teaching language that I learned was to teach children to repeat and memorize lists of vocabulary words. The vocabulary lists did not work unless we used the words in context, but I found that a word on the list would change as soon as we put it into context. This did not follow the created lesson-plan format, so I struggled to teach fluency because this format was not appropriate for the Cree language.

Cree is a descriptive language, and I decided that I needed to change my teaching. I stepped back and analyzed my teaching style. I envisioned *Nohkompan*, my late grandmother, Nancy Cabry, talking Cree fluently; and I understood everything that she said. I also remember listening to advice from *Nimosonpan*, my late grandfather, John Cabry; at that time he said "*Nohsih, akameyimoh, kisi kisinohamakosih, wayihyaw ketohteykon, maka, kaya wanikisih kinehiyaweyiwinaw, ewikoh ka kiwey tayikon*" ["My grandchild, don't give up; keep trying. Go finish school; it's going to help you here. But don't forget our language and our culture, which will take you home"]. As a child I understood almost everything, but not to the full extent. It wasn't until I became a parent that I fully understood his advice.

I realized that I was busy trying to cover the Alberta curriculum and not utilizing what I knew about the fluency of Cree language and culture, which encompasses the mind and heart and creates spirituality and identity. I therefore created my own resources to use in my Cree language classes, such as stories, nursery rhymes, and songs. It took a few years to fully formulate my planning to my liking. I immersed my students in the language from the moment that they entered my room until the moment that they went out my door. This sample lesson demonstrates my style of teaching. My routines were structured daily, using repetition in simple phrases and sentences. I had to account for every minute allotted to my class.

Grade(s): K4 & K5

Time: 30 minutes

Student activities: Singing songs: "*Awina Kiya*" ekwa "*Nawayoh kapawihk*"; coloring, map

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Student materials: Maskwacis map and crayons

Teacher resources: Flashcards, display posters, smartboard

Teacher to students about translations: When new vocabulary is introduced, it is translated for only a couple of classes.

Daily vocabulary: *Waciye, tatawaw, pihitkwek, apihk, nitotamok, kinstohtenawa, oteh petapihk kakiyaw*

- Students had to ask in Cree to get a drink of water and use the wash-room.
- Water phrase: *okiskinohamakew enohtey apakweyan nakitaw minikwan ci nipiy.*
- Washroom phrase for girls: *okiskinohamakew enohtey nahapiyan.*
- Washroom phrase for boys: *okiskinohamakew enohtey wayawistamasoyan.*

This week's theme: *Maskwaciyiniw*: Person of Bear Hills

Methods: Cree greetings, commands, and oral presentation and flashcards

Greet students at the door with a handshake and say, "*Waciye, tatawaw, pihitkwek, apihk.*" As last student to shut the door: "*kipahah iskwatam.*"

Students know that they should sit on the rug in a circle.

Daily routine: 5 minutes

- Take attendance and ask, "John, *ci ota ayaw*"; students to respond *ota* when called upon by name and to respond "*namoya ota ayaw*" when students are not present
- Sing *Kakanatahk* (O Canada), say the Child's Prayer, and review the syllabic sound system using the syllabic chart

Identity song: 5 minutes

Singing: *Awina kiya, awina kiya, tansi esikasoyan, awina kiya*: Who are you? What is your name?

Student response: *Niya Nehiyaw awasis name esikasoyan*: I am a Cree child. My name is...

Greetings: 6 minutes

Pairs activity and teacher demonstrates:

1 - *Tansi*                      2 - *Namoya nantaw, kiya maka*

1 - *Peyakwan*                2 - *Miwasin esa*

1 - *Tapwe maka*

In pairs, students practice greetings and then find new partners.

Introduce this week's Cree words: 6 minutes

Move to Smartboard.

- Show students the Maskwacisihk map and ask, "Who knows what this is? What do you know about the map?" Class discussion of the four reserves of *Maskwacisihk, Nipisihkopahk*—Samson, *Neyaskweyahk*—Ermineskin, *Akamihk*—Montana, *Kispatinahk*—Louis Bull. *Maskwacisihk ochi niya*: I am from Bear Hills.
- Practice saying the names of the four reserves and the phrase.
- Ask students in Cree, "*tanite kiwikin*": "Where do you live?" Help students to respond correctly by demonstrating their answer, "*Nipisihkopahk niwikin*," or whichever reserve they live on. In pairs, students ask each of the questions and then find new partners.

Circle time: 5 minutes

Songs and actions:

- Break down the song for students to understand Cree words for *kiya* – me, *Nehiyaw* – Cree person, *awasis(ak)* – child(ren), *niyanan* – us, *wiya* – him/her: *Nehiyaw awasis niya, nehiyaw awasis niya, nehiyaw awasis niya Maskwacis ohci*  
*Nehiyaw awasis kiya, nehiyaw awasis kiya, nehiyaw awasis kiya Maskwacis ohci*

Nehiyaw awasis wiya, nehiyaw awasis wiya, nehiyaw awasis wiya  
Maskwacis ohci

*Nehiyaw awasisak niyanan, nehiyaw awasisak niyanan, nehiyaw awa-  
sisak niyana*

*Maskwacis ohci*

Line up routine: 3 minutes

- Teacher says “*Nawayoh kapawihk awasisak*” to ask students to line up, sing the song “*Nawayoh kapawihk, nawayoh kapawihk, nawayoh kapawihntan*,” and exchange the word *Mwestas* later between teacher and students.
- Teacher sings and waves as students leave the classroom: “*Wahpaki ka wahpamtin, wahpaki ka wahpamtin, wahpaki ka wahpamtin, kiwey, kiwey, kiwey*”: “I will see you tomorrow (3); go home (3).”

I found that, with my teaching strategies geared toward communicating with one another, the students comprehended and spoke the Cree language more often. With the daily lessons it became easier to introduce and add activities such as coloring or writing. I used the Cree language repetitively and taught the same lesson for a week, sometimes for two weeks. I drew on what I was learning in my graduate work. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory gave me ideas and confidence in what I was doing. Vygotsky’s well-documented statement “Play creates a zone of proximal development in the child” (1978, 102) reminds educators that children, through play, are able to reach past themselves.

I received positive feedback from teachers about their students’ singing of Cree songs in class, as well as from parents on how proud they were of their children at home. The children had no opportunity to be disruptive because the strategies kept them active and engaged throughout the allotted time. Attendance was good because the students enjoyed learning the Cree language, as the activities were geared to comprehending and speaking the Cree language.

### **Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling® (TPRS®)**

In my capacity as a resource and curriculum developer for Nipishihkopahk Education Authority, I attended professional development workshops to enhance my expertise to do my job. During a workshop that I attended at Blue Quills University in January 2016, Blaine Ray introduced me to the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling® (TPRS®) method. I was skeptical at first because I thought that it would involve more lists of vocabulary words. However, as the day wore on, I realized that this method, even with its list of words, was actually working. I was surprised and pleased to find that the procedure and format are written simply and adaptable to any language. The following illustration and explanations are paraphrased from the TPRS® website.

TPRS® is a living foreign language teaching method that began as a teaching strategy that a Spanish teacher, Blaine Ray, created in the late 1980s. It is based on the idea that the brain needs an enormous amount of comprehensible input into the language. TPRS® focuses on the use of the most common words and phrases in stories, conversations, and other activities, so that the students understand everything in the language that the teacher talks about. The main goal in classrooms is to utilize comprehensible input to help students to become proficient in understanding, reading, writing, and eventually speaking their new language (TPRS Books 2019).

Over the years, thousands of teachers have contributed to the evolution of TPRS®. It is based on the idea that children need to hear many things that make sense to them in the language. It makes sense because we expect a great deal from our children, and we correct them: “You have to say this word like this. This is how you do it.” However, we don’t give them time to become immersed

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and hear a great deal of the language. In Western society we learn to teach this kind of correctness. We need to take a step back and look back at how we learn. I have adapted this to Cree; the following is an example.

TPRS® has three procedures. The teacher says the following:

Procedure 1: “When I make a statement, you will respond with an expression of interest. It sounds like this: *aahhhhhhhh Tapwe*.” We give the students a visual cue to remind them to respond with an expression of interest. As a visual cue, the teacher might raise his or her hands. When something negative happens, we react in a negative way. We might say, “Oh no, oh no, that’s terrible!” and ask the students to repeat it. The Cree words for a negative response are *wacistakac*, *wahwah*.

Procedure 2: “When I ask a question and you know the answer, your job is to answer out loud in the Cree language.” This is a key procedure in the TPRS® class. The primary purpose of asking questions is for the students to respond chorally. Their responding to the questions is evidence that they understand.

Procedure 3: “When I ask a question and you do not know the answer, your job is to guess.” The following are the student rules for guessing:

1. “You must guess in the Cree language.”
2. “You can guess, but with English proper nouns, if the question allows for a proper noun.”
3. “When you guess, surprise me. If you don’t surprise me, I will surprise you.”

TPRS® Format:

1. Positive statement
2. Question with a yes answer (verify)
3. Either/or questions (verify)
4. Question with a no answer
5. Restate the negative and restate the positive
6. Who question (verify)
7. What? Where? When? How? Why? How much? etc. (Use the one that fits; verify)
8. Positive statement

Circling is a method of asking repetitive questions when students do not understand the vocabulary being taught. Reviewing the format increases students’ understanding of oral language and builds confidence. Students act out the story. For younger children, we can use pictures with sentences. Color coding is important to indicate for students when to respond. Once they master the TPRS®, format mapping becomes an essential part of planning. A storytelling map, like the one illustrated on the next page, follows a basic lesson helping to expand vocabulary and enhance the contextual knowledge of the language.

In a storytelling map we create characters, assign names to them, and describe their likes/dislikes. Teachers can identify places in the community and activities in which the students are interested. They can add character details such as gender and with whom they live. Teachers can change the map to reflect the contexts in which they teach. This generates vocabulary lists; however, students use the words in the context of a larger sentence or unit of meaning in the Cree language. I have found this method very effective, and I have used it with children, adults, and our non-Native teachers. A school-wide initiative required our non-Native staff to learn Cree as well. I wondered, how will I teach the *moniyaw*? I used

this method, and it worked well. When I had to leave the school, they said, “Can you come back? We love the way you teach; it is so easy—such an easy method to learn.”

In July 2016 we hosted a TPRS® workshop in Maskwacisihk at the Nipisihkopahk Education Authority Administration building and invited language teachers from the surrounding areas. Blaine Ray attended this four-day workshop. It was very overwhelming for some, but I enjoyed the opportunity to enhance what I had learned in January. By the end of the fourth day I was comfortable enough to teach a lesson and demonstrate what I had learned.

I teach a course at the University of Alberta called Second Language Acquisition: Teaching Indigenous Languages in an Immersion Context, in which I use the TPRS® format as one method. I have formatted a template to follow the three TPRS® procedures that I outlined earlier in this paper. It can easily be adapted to any First Nations language. I encourage all Indigenous language teachers to view the TPRS® website or attend workshops. This format has helped me to develop lessons over time and expanded my vocabulary. The end result is a story in the Cree language. The lessons can last up to two weeks, possibly longer, depending upon the vocabulary.

## Storytelling

**Map out story you want to tell in the language.**

Activities interested in	Names	Gender
From community	Characters	Lives with
	Likes or dislikes	

### Transitioning to Education Administration

In January 2017 I was transferred to the Nipisihkopahk Elementary School as the vice principal, and I was responsible for integrating a cultural component into the school. Within a matter of days, I noticed that the students in Grades 4 to 6 were overactive. I knew that something was missing from the Cree language program, and I implemented a Rites of Passage program weekly on Thursdays. The program taught the students their roles and responsibilities within our Cree community of Maskwacisihk. The teaching of cultural values intertwines with our understanding and the purpose of life here on Mother Earth. We must connect our spirits with our identity to preserve the Cree language and culture. The program was a success, partly because of the community members who are Elders and knowledgeable about culture and language. We draw on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012) to remind us where we have been and where we are going.

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Historically, Aboriginal people throughout North America have lived in successful and dynamic societies that have had their own languages, history, cultures, spirituality, technologies, and values. The security and survival of these societies has depended on the passing on of this cultural legacy from one generation to the next. Aboriginal peoples have done this successfully through a seamless mixture of teachings, ceremonies, and daily activities. Although they differ in specifics from one people to another, traditional Aboriginal teachings have described a coherent, interconnected world. Not only have they accounted for the creation of human beings, animals, and the physical world, but they have also described the role of supernatural beings—often shape-changing tricksters with the power to do good or harm—in shaping the relationships among humans, animals, and the landscape. There has been no rigid separation of daily secular life and spiritual life. For example, in some cultures animals were said to give themselves as gifts to the hunter. To be worthy of receiving the gift, the hunter had to participate in a ceremony prior to and after the hunt (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

I acknowledge that, as *Nehiyaw*, I am more connected to the students with whom I engage on a daily basis because of my understanding of and belief in my identity and spirituality and where I fit in this complex world in which we live. All of my life experiences, whether positive or negative, have contributed to my educational journey.

### **Velvalee Finds Ways to Help Teachers Measure and Report Learning Success**

Over the last three summers I have had an opportunity to teach a course titled Assessment in Indigenous Language Classrooms at the University of Alberta. Some of the main difficulties that Indigenous language teachers express emerge from their past personal experiences with evaluation in schools, as well as the tension between Indigenous ways of being in the community and the expectations of the education system. Indigenous language teachers feel apprehensive about grading and reporting to parents. They raise issues of validity and reliability and wonder whether they should make assessment instruments themselves or take them from other sources. Additionally, Indigenous language teachers struggle because of the focus on developing oral competence as opposed to reading and writing (literacy) in Indigenous languages, which is what most assessment tools attend to. Teachers sometimes express discomfort because they have not been taught the writing system themselves or the community in which they are teaching has not accepted a standard form. Moreover, oral assessments in schools are cumbersome, constrained by large numbers of students and lack of time. Finally, some Indigenous language teachers express tension with values: traditional values teach us to be a certain way in the world, and humility is highly valued in some communities. Elevating themselves above others and imposing a grade on a student's progress has real implications for teachers when they live in the community. These expressed concerns drive my desire to help teachers shift Indigenous language teachers' notions of grading from valuing to indicators that demonstrate growth. Assessment broadly conceived in this context promotes a continuum of ways to describe growth. Encouraging children to take responsibility for describing growth or learning helps them to develop the skills necessary to become lifelong Indigenous language learners. My intention is to try to make this process visible to you as readers.

I begin my classes by asking the students, the Indigenous language teachers, to explore how they learned or are going about learning a second language, essentially by looking at past personal learning processes against the backdrop of their current practices. Some questions to guide the discussion are, "How will you know

as a teacher that your efforts are resulting in Indigenous language acquisition?” “What do you see, hear, feel?” “How do you share this evidence of progress with your students, parents, and administrators?” The purpose of this discussion is to help teachers to understand that they share common concerns and that the purpose of education is the need to help language learners become lifelong learners. This is integral to what Elder Ken Goodwill from Standing Buffalo First Nation stated as the purpose of education: “to help students recognize who they are, to see their gifts, talents, and strengths, and recognize the responsibilities that accompanies these gifts, so they can survive, thrive and contribute as they navigate through both the broader world and Indigenous cultures” (Goulet and Goulet 2014, 5).

Many of the teachers don’t think about gathering evidence of learning as a separate aspect or separate piece of classroom practice. Perhaps this is what I am attempting to make visible, drawing it into focus or even separating it from the whole. What I mean is that teachers are always assessing their students. They’re always asking themselves, “What are the students saying? How are they feeling? What am I seeing?” Rarely, however, do they involve students themselves in the process. Teachers are doing all of this thinking and observing as they are teaching, which informs what they will teach next. Yet this process remains invisible to students. Shifting Indigenous language teachers’ gaze inward to seeing themselves as Indigenous language learners helps them to realize that they too are assessing their own progress, and it is this capacity that we need to develop in students. Simply guiding learners to question and think about what they learned today compared to what they knew yesterday encourages ongoing learning. Highlighting for teachers the power of self-assessment helps them to become more reflective about progress and aligns more favorably with the value of the ongoing learning encouraged in Indigenous communities (Canadian Council on Learning 2007, 5).

Another important aspect of our early discussions is the differences in the way that we learn Indigenous languages today compared to the past. In the past we learned language one to one, in families, and in smaller contexts with multi-aged peers over extended periods of time. Today we have one teacher; who instructs classes of approximately 20 same-age students in the confines of a school only meeting periodically for brief periods of time. Contextualizing this learning space and comparing it to expectations for other second-language instruction helps teachers address the unrealistic expectations to produce fluent speakers. Moreover, it reinforces for teachers how integral parents and community are in supporting children’s language development should they desire fluency.

We also consider how context informs feedback and the purposes of learning. The current teaching context reduces the quality and timing of feedback afforded students today compared to in the past. The type of feedback that teachers provide today is rarely personalized because teachers are speaking to a large group of students in a classroom, and they often deliver feedback after some time has elapsed. Context also shifts the purposes of learning an Indigenous language, which, in the past, involved communicating effectively by speaking and listening to those around you; whereas today, in the context of schools, there is a greater emphasis on learning an Indigenous language for the purposes of receiving good grades. These changes have shifted the focus of learning Indigenous languages for a lifetime in community to learning a language for reasons such as cultural pride and connecting with Indigenous knowledge, both abstractions in the minds of elementary school students.

When Indigenous language teachers make visible to students goals for learning and criteria for success, they are better able to direct their learning (Black and William 2009). It is impossible to assess everything; however, teachers in classrooms should clearly articulate for their students, “At the end of this lesson

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[or at the end of this 30 minutes], this is what I would like to see.” Students can talk about their learning, they can help one another, and they can assess how well they did. Not only are the goals clear, but they can also be determined locally according to the needs of the students. One of the concerns often cited in literature is resistance to learning because goals have been determined ‘outside’ the community (Canadian Council on Learning 2007). Moreover, clearly established goals have the potential to draw parents, the community, and administrators into learning Indigenous languages as well.

It is common to find one teacher responsible for all Indigenous language programming in a school. Therefore, encouraging individual teachers to become part of a larger Indigenous language teacher group facilitates greater reflection on practice and increases confidence. Drawing on the experience of others helps teachers to expand their repertoires of teaching practice while giving them opportunities for comparison. Of course, these discussions must take into consideration factors such as how much Indigenous language the community uses and how much support is available. However, when common practices exist, learning targets can be articulated over longer ranges of time, which can then facilitate or ground the development of benchmarks.

### **Using Benchmarks in the Indigenous Language Classroom**

Benchmarks can serve as specific indicators for specific communities and can be used to report progress. Teachers sometimes express a great deal of surprise at how much Indigenous language their students know when they join collectives, or they decide to adjust their targets because they feel that something else is worthier of focus. Opportunities to collaborate help Indigenous language teachers become more confident about learning goals and better able to clarify what the next steps might be to move their students along.

To help my CILLDI Indigenous language teachers understand the value of collaborative processes, I often share an experience I had with another group of Indigenous language teachers. We discovered that one of the common practices occurring in most Indigenous language classrooms was an adaptation of the game Simon Says. Instead of *Simon*, the teachers were substituting names of grandparents or relatives. They were using the game Simon Says to teach students to respond to and voice action words such as *stand up*, *sit down*, and so on. This game became a regular part of the class, and students took on the role of leaders of small groups. As the students’ confidence grew, they began to add two- and three-step commands to their repertoire of actions. So instead of “Simon says, ‘Turn around,’” it was “Simon says, ‘Turn around, then touch your toes.’” The teacher didn’t ask the students to do this; they expanded on their own, and this became part of the whole- and small-group classwork. Because students took the game out of the classroom and into the community, it also illustrates that children can teach and learn from their parents and peers and have fun doing it. They were responsible for tracking the commands that they could comprehend and then produce; however, as the commands grew in complexity, this type of tracking became cumbersome.

Indigenous language teacher collaboration can support the creation of benchmarks, whether they use a common game such as Simon Says or the same texts. Perhaps it is a familiar picture or a sequence of photos of a familiar process, such as picking berries, or medicine or a wordless picture book, teachers can collect language samples using audio or video recordings. They can then use these language samples to create a rubric or continuum of stages to demonstrate Indigenous language development over time or across grades. Learning becomes explicit, and both students and teachers can use these benchmarks to assess Indigenous language development, particularly during the middle and senior years.

Part of making learning visible for students involves negotiating criteria, which become the building blocks of rubrics. When students understand the criteria, they are more likely to focus their learning. Perhaps Indigenous language teachers are simply trying to move students beyond one-word utterances. This means developing a rubric in which the criterion, a one-word utterance, is the lowest level of performance. When teachers negotiate these criteria, students help to shape the language used to illustrate performance, and they will understand excellence more fully. To make criteria accessible to learners, teachers should illustrate through drawings, photographs, or video. Written rubrics have proven problematic for Indigenous language teachers because they are often over simplistic or rely too heavily on the English language. Because the rubric building process takes a great deal of time and effort, teachers need to ensure that the criteria are enduring and meaningful. The use of pictures and symbols helps to avoid the overreliance on English text to create one-, two-, three-, and four-level exemplars in different contexts, such as home, school, or community, or on different topics. Rubrics lend themselves to communicating with others, including parents and administrators.

### **Using Feedback in the Indigenous Language Classroom**

An important and necessary part of learning an Indigenous language involves giving and using feedback and giving students opportunities to practice and reflect. Finding time to practice in private, whether with a mirror or a recorder, and in small, safe groups helps students to make the language their own before they are asked to speak in public. Indigenous language teachers must model gentle and encouraging feedback and acknowledge all efforts to use the language. The quality of the feedback must be judged according to how well the words build a climate of trust and a space where all students are encouraged to sound their Indigenous language voices. Many of the values that Indigenous traditions and Elders promote help to build that climate of trust. However, we are also working against years of colonization, which is often the root of resistance. Feedback can help us reinforce and expand traditional teachings by helping one another and growing in good relations with one another, with the language, with everything around us. Goulet and Goulet (2014, 60-61) expanded on this notion in the Cree language:

The idea of individuality within an interactive concept such as the helping relationship is exemplified by *weechihisowin* (helping oneself/ themselves). *Weechi* can be used by itself as a command, but when combined with the medial stem *-iso*, as in *weechihisowin*, it becomes a generic term that includes both the individual (helping oneself) and the self-help group who help themselves.

The real strength of feedback is developing students who take language learning to heart. They monitor their own progress, help and learn from one another, and set their own goals, now and into the future. If we continue to frame Indigenous language learning this way, year after year, we are developing the capacity of our students to assess themselves, and we are getting closer to the goal of self-determination. Well-known scholar Gregory Cajete (2016, xiii) stated:

Indigenous teaching focuses as much on ‘learning with the heart’ as it does on ‘learning with the mind.’ It also facilitates learning to see who one really is rather than the image self-manufactured by one’s ego or by the ego of another. This real perception of self helps the student

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realize that he or she is essentially responsible for any barriers to his or her learning.

Understanding that we as individuals, teachers, and students have a major role to play in learning Indigenous languages helps to shift the burden of responsibility from ‘just the teacher’ to everyone. This approach seems to help teachers to reach out to others and to realize that they are only one small part of a greater whole and that reporting progress can be a positive and affirming process.

### **Summary**

This paper addresses theory and practical considerations to examine Indigenous language teacher preparation within the context of K-12 schools and immersive experiences. We talk about personal experiences with language reclamation and teaching second-language learners. We include assessment practices that have the potential to inspire and sustain Indigenous language learners for life. We are all convinced that the most promising practices are immersion experiences, whether they be during outings on the land, in daily lessons, or on whole days. The task ahead in this country is to pay attention to revitalization efforts for all ages and for quality teacher preparation. No one size fits all, and each community and language group will have to assess its own human resources and prioritize. Leadership at the local level is very important. Let’s join together and support each other in this reclamation movement. *Hiy hiy!*

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