

Moving Toward the Language: Reflections on Teaching in an Indigenous-Immersion School

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A powerful tool for creating culture while at the same time, a cognitively rigorous exercise, Indigenous-language immersion could be a key for producing both language fluency and academic success in culture-based schools. Drawing on seven years of critical ethnographic research at Ojibwe schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin, this researcher suggests Indigenous schools consider shifting from a culture-based curriculum to teaching culture through the Indigenous language. In this article, the researcher chronicles her thinking that led to direct involvement in the founding of an Ojibwe language-immersion school. Reflecting on one year of co-teaching, some of the successes and challenges of teaching in a new immersion school are articulated.

Introduction

For the past 13 years I have been working between theory and practice. I feel compelled to enact what I write about, thinking alone is not enough (Lather, 1991). Always on the lookout for ways to improve culture-based education, I read, write, think, and just when I start to feel useless, I get drawn back to the act of teaching children. In the fall of 1999, I was having conversations with a friend about collaborating to start an Ojibwe-language immersion school. This article tells the story of how my research in American Indian education brought me to the point of shifting from research about Ojibwe culture-based curriculum to participation in founding an Ojibwe-language immersion school. Particularly, I focus on my year as a co-teacher at the school in order to reflect on what worked and what did not. Being a progressive teacher educator, I had a golden opportunity to research, design, select, and then enact the curriculum I was planning. I want to write about this year in a way that is accessible to others who may be contemplating starting immersion schools. As Cleary and Peacock (1997) emphasize, brilliant academic writing amounts to very little if no one working in the field or the community reads it.

As our Indigenous languages become more and more endangered, immersion schooling is the buzzword. As our Indigenous languages are said to be dying out, immersion schools and revitalization efforts are budding all over Indian country. The start-up years for these programs pose myriad challenges. This story is not a complete road map or how-to-guide; however, I hope it is one story among many more to come that will chronicle our collective thinking on how to revitalize our Indigenous languages.

Background: Culture-Based Education and Methods

Culture-based education has been actively funded, implemented, and researched for at least the past 30 years (Demmert & Towner, 2003). Some recent extensive literature reviews (Demmert & Tower, 2003; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lomawaima, 1995; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995) are helpful in consolidating the wealth of information that is currently available as well as considering the next strategic steps for the Indigenous education movement. In this article, I consider language revitalization as a powerful part of this broader movement and begin to create links between the ideas within these often time-separate literature bases: culture-based research and language-revitalization efforts.

Varied as the Indigenous nations are, it is difficult, and perhaps not desirable, to make sweeping conclusions about the culture-based movement as a whole. Following Lomawaima (1995), I agree that nation-specific research is needed and place my critical ethnographic research as a part of the literature on Ojibwe culture-based education. In the first part of this article, I summarize the research I conducted in culture-based education over the past 10 years. This work directly led me to see the importance of Ojibwe language in this area (Hermes, 2005a). The second part of this article is devoted to reflections on the work I did as a founder, and then a co-teacher, in a new Indigenous-language immersion school. In bringing the formal research and informal reflections together, I hope to interconnect the areas of language and culture. Within educational academic traditions these areas are most often disjointed, but within Indigenous traditions culture and language are often spoken of in the same breath.

I reject the notion of “objectivity” in research and opt instead to reveal some of my own positionality, or perspective really, so you may understand the lens through which I will view this work. In many ways I am both an “insider” and an “outsider” to the Native communities I in which I work and reside (Fine, 1994; Foley, Levinson, & Hurting, 2000; Hermes, 1998; Narayan, 1993). As a person of mixed Native heritage, an adoptee and researcher, I am drawn to culture-based schooling and language to learn for personal reasons as well to learn “what I can learn.” In some ways, I am an “insider” to the communities I work in; I have multi-layer relationships with many of the people. For example, I have relations, friends, former students, children of former students, and many other community connections with the teachers, students, and parents I write about, as well as a common identity and heritage. However, in other ways I am, and will always be, an “outsider.” I am not an enrolled tribal member here, nor do I have the

longstanding family-tribal connections to this place that many of the tribal members and lastly, I am an academic, which at times can put even insiders on the outside (Cleary & Peacock, 1997; Narayan, 1993; Smith, 1999). My experience as someone raised in an urban environment, by a White family, is a different experience than those of the Native people who were born and raised here. I work at a university 90 miles north of the Indigenous community I live in. This is neither bad nor good, but hopefully does, in part, help to give context to the position I am writing from. Clearly, it is an oversimplification to say either “insider” or “outsider,” as so many of the people in the community are many shades in between.

In my research, I am influenced by principles of activist research (Gitlin, 1994), Native American methods (Haig-Brown & Arichibald, 1996; Hermes, 1998) and feminist (Fine, 1994; Lather, 1991) research methodologies. These methods concur in saying that research priorities come from the needs of communities, and in this way research can be reciprocal rather than exploitative. Reciprocal research provides information back to the community that serves a need and leverages the power of the university to focus on these needs. As a American Indian academic, I feel a responsibility to work across the borders of the university and put energy back into the Native community (Ibanez-Carrasco & Meiners, 2004). This type of research often challenges existing priorities and discourses in academia (Grande, 2005; Smith, 1999) bringing multiple perspectives as well as multiple agendas to bear on the nature of the research project.

Summary of Research Findings: A Friendly Critique

Over the past 10 years, I have closely observed and participated in a variety of Ojibwe tribal schools, and I have asked: What kinds of meanings do people make out of the notion of culture-based curriculum? We have assumed all along that we know what is meant by culture, while at the same time we have struggled with defining and implementing culture-based education (Hermes, 1995; 2005a). Informed by critical cultural anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Eisenhart, 2001; Gonzalez, 2004; Levinson & Holland, 1996) theoretical shifts in my thinking about culture have helped me to understand culture as more of a process than a product. This shift in understanding became a powerful lens for interpreting the teaching of language and culture in culture-based programs.

In late 1995, I completed a long-term research project in which I engaged on many levels with the problems of developing culture-based curriculum for the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Schools (Hermes, 1995). Through this research, I saw how powerful culture-based curriculum could be to motivate and create self-esteem for students. Evidence from other sites also suggests that Native culture and traditions are assets to student success (Deyhle, 1992; Ledlow, 1992) and that culture-based schooling is in many ways a successful approach for American Indian/Alaska Native students (see, for example, Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lipka, 1991; Lipka, Mohatt, & The Ciulistet Group, 1998; McCarty, 2002; Watahomigie

& McCarty, 1994). Although I support these findings, I also identified a challenge for culture-based curriculum: Culture was not usually integrated into academic disciplines, but rather taught as a separate and isolated subject. Culture and language classes taught traditional seasonal subsistence skills, outfit making, stories, teachings, and cooking skills, for example. These areas of knowledge and tradition were isolated from the majority of classes offered at the school. Informants were telling me that culture was constrained by the structure of schooling. My original research question about meaning became more pointed: How could Ojibwe culture be present in schools in a way that did not artificially constrain the creative power of culture? Tom Peacock summed it up when he said, "We've institutionalized culture, where is the meaning? The greatest error in Indian education is that we've institutionalized that stuff. Culture is just what we do" (personal communication, June 2003).

Students interpreted the split in curriculum (i.e., culture based curriculum versus academically or disciplined based curriculum) as an identity choice or *dichotomy*. Reaffirming a fear three generations old, stemming from boarding school days, students read the choice as: Be academically successful or be an Ojibwe (Adams, 1988; Hermes, 1995). This disintegration of culture-based schooling presents a false dualism between academic success and cultural success. This finding resonates with Deyhle's findings in the Navajo Nation (Deyhle, 1992) and African American community as well (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However, not all students felt torn by this split, they just felt underserved. One fifth-grade student, already confident in her identity, just wanted academic rigor: "Indian! I don't need anybody to teach me how to be an Indian, that's what I am. I want them to show me how to be a doctor" (as cited in Hermes, 1995, p. 122).

Constrained by the dominant structures of schooling, what part of culture can be taught in a classroom? And how can it be more deeply integrated into all aspects, all disciplines of school? Inserting culture into an institution is problematic. It is messy and complicated, and needs rigorous, long-term attention in order to produce curriculum that is based in the culture and is developed deeply enough to encompass and satiate the Western academic standards of American public schools (see Hawaiian and Alaskan examples of cultural standards). Communities need the freedom, and the power, to change the institution deeply (Lipka & McCarty, 1994) if they are to change the base of a school. Because of these challenges, and due to (influenced by) the responses from my informants, I began to see teaching through an Indigenous language as a partial solution, or at least a powerful strategy, in the evolution of culture-based schools (Hermes, 2005a; 2005b). In looking for more complex explanations of school failure as well as deeper iterations of culture-based curriculum, I began to hear what the elders were saying about "teach the language."

Respondents answered clearly that culture and language were the important parts of what the tribal school should teach. However, it was difficult for anyone to say exactly what they meant by culture, or specifically what or how the school should teach. The one exception to this was Ojibwe language. Ojibwe language

can be taught and immediately implemented in schools. The desire for Ojibwe language to be taught in schools was iterated over and over, at nearly every interview, by every elder. Teach the language. This is one tangible piece of Native culture that we can grab onto and insert into schools, and eventually the language will change the culture of the school.

Language Revitalization and Indigenous-Language Immersion Schools

The importance of revitalizing Native languages is recognized among linguists and community members alike. It is at once a direction for research, action, and documentation (Cantoni, 1996; Hinton & Ahlers, 2000; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Krauss, 1998; Leap, 1988; Lipka et al., 1998; McCarty, 1993; Reyhner, 1997). Pioneered in the United States by the Hawaiians, Blackfeet, Navajos, and Mohawks, the Indigenous-immersion method is quickly being recognized as one of the most effective tools for restoring Indigenous language while simultaneously teaching for Native student academic success (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007, pp. 11-37; DeJong, 1998; Greymorning, 1997; Kipp, 2000; McCarty, 2002; Wilson & Kawai'ae'a, 2007, pp. 38-55).

Language immersion is not only a powerful tool for revitalizing Indigenous languages, but research from other immersion schools shows there are meta-cognitive benefits as well (see Demmert, 1994; Pease-Pretty On Top, 2003). Increased overall language abilities, and gains in other academic areas, have been documented in students who have high levels of proficiency in both their first and second languages (Baker, 2001). For this reason, using an Indigenous language as the medium of instruction in a school resolves the (sometimes) perceived dilemma between academic and cultural success. Seeing through an Ojibwe lens, experiencing the world through the Ojibwe language, students will not fear acculturation due to academic success. Administrators can meet content standards, while teaching through the Ojibwe language.

Starting up Waadookodaading

At another tribal school site I visited, the Elder's Council had already made the decision to teach culture only through the language (Hermes, 2005a). This directive spoke volumes to me. I had been involved in conversations with a friend, Emma, about starting a charter school in Hayward, Wisconsin (near the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation). Emma and her partner, Jaaj,¹ are Ojibwe language activists and wanted to start an immersion school. I was teaching at Carleton College and was considering a move back to the Hayward area to be more involved in the Ojibwe culture. I was familiar with charter schools from my work in Minnesota with an American Indian arts education group that started a school. Although often thought of as a move to privatize public education, charter schools also represent an opportunity for marginalized groups to re-invent schooling with the financial support of the state. Emma and Jaaj asked if I could help start an immersion school. We met that spring and decided we would share ideas and combine talents to start a school. I had a background in building curriculum for American Indian charter

schools, and I was anxious to learn about immersion. They had language proficiency and a great desire to do something about language shift in the community. In hindsight, I can say we really didn't know how much work starting an immersion school for an endangered Indigenous language would be. Starting a school means creating structure and curriculum, along with community support, facilities, and funding. In our case, we were creating the curriculum with nothing but a dictionary, a few grammar books, and a few elders. That is, the entire curriculum needed to be newly created. This alone doubled the workload for teachers, but we did not have double the staff to meet this need.

In the pilot year, we operated a kindergarten program, partially through an Administration for Native Americans language grant held by the Lac Courte Oreilles Community College. We borrowed a conference room from the principal at the tribal school and worked with four Elders and two non-certified teachers. We had six students for a half day of classes. My language colleagues had visited Darrell Kipp at the Piegan Institute in Montana, and had taken his advice to heart. When asked how to start an immersion program, he told them, "Just do it," and that is exactly how we started (Kipp, 2000). While operating the kindergarten program, we organized and planned for the charter immersion school. In May 2001, we were granted a charter by the Hayward Community School Board to operate a K-12 Ojibwe-immersion school. As of May 2005, the school is completing its fifth year of operation. Currently, the school has grown to a preK-4 program for 25 students housed within the Hayward Public School building.

The mission of the school is to create fluent speakers, intergenerational relationships, and environmental awareness. That is, in addition to being intensely focused on revitalizing the Ojibwe language and producing speakers, we believe our students can and will choose many divergent career paths. We want them to love learning and be capable of finding solutions for our rapidly changing planet. In short, we are "thinking globally while acting locally." Here we share the goal with the culture-based movement, we hope to ground our children in their identity as Ojibwe, and we see the world through this identity and language.

In many ways the school's start up has been heralded as a success. It has grown from just a few families to many; students are learning Ojibwe and generally keeping up with tests and standard curriculum; the operating budget is healthy. Staff has grown from three volunteers to over seven full-time paid positions. The status of the language has been raised; no longer is it "dying" but something people are engaged in every day. Language-curriculum development has been immense. Students, nearly all of them new to the Ojibwe language, are immersed in the language, not submerged. Teachers are mindful of content appropriate for grade level while at the same time attempting to scaffold language learning into lessons. Since Jaaj, Emma, and I started, many people have stepped forward to help in whatever ways they can. Some are working on their language skills, some got involved in governance and others simply came to every event they were invited to. Through the efforts of many different people in the community, the dream of an immersion school is a reality.

Although we do not have hard data to show our success as of yet, we feel our success can be measured in at least three other ways: start up, parent participation, and student motivation. The actual start up of an Indigenous-immersion school, with only one year of planning time, is a success story we would like to share. More planning time would have resulted in better preparedness, but on the other hand we were not completely unprepared. During the last five years (one year as a pilot and four as a charter) of operation, we have begun to create curriculum and literacy materials in the Ojibwe language. This means we are creating a literate tradition for an oral language.

Also during these years, the participation of our parents has been between 90% and 100%, compared to other Native education programs in the public schools that have average participation in the range from 40%-70% (M. Cox, Superintendent of Hayward Schools, personal communication, 2003). When enrolling in Waadookodaading, parents are asked to agree to volunteer at the school eight hours per month. This was an idea directly borrowed from the Hawaiian immersion school movement. Hoping to bolster our small staff with parent volunteers, there are many opportunities for parents to help. They may assist with curriculum, field trips, administration, cleanup or organizing events. Parents who enroll their children in this program want them to learn Ojibwe and are generally willing to participate in order for that goal to be met. Due to our students' learning experiences, parents, extended families, and friends are now interested in learning the language. Attendance at our language retreats doubles every year.

The most important way we count our success is by our students. They are motivated to learn the Ojibwe language beyond our dreams. They are hungry for it. They are not intimidated and never say, "This is too hard." They are inspiring us all to learn; they are inspiring a generation of learners. We have tapped into a deep desire to learn, and this desire spills over into every other academic area. We are creating a love of learning.

Meeting the Challenges of an Endangered Language

The greatest challenge in building an Indigenous-immersion school is the reality that the language is endangered. This leads to a sense of urgency and makes for a fast-paced, never-ending work environment. A shortage of language resources, both curriculum and teachers, and the need to quickly build a parent network are challenges that add to this sense of urgency. The other theme of this story is that the idea of an Ojibwe-language immersion school is a radical break with tradition. For the past 150 years, schools have been the place where English-language skills are acquired, refined, and practiced (McCarty, 2002). In a small rural community, an immersion school in an Indigenous language is a radical break with this recent tradition of school as a means to learn English. This community paradigm shift requires a tremendous amount of change in a small amount of time. It requires community building on many fronts. People cannot be forced into change; trust, relationship building, and a shared commitment are all qualities that require time

and patience. We remind ourselves at meetings and retreats that this work is hard on our relationships and takes time.

Language Resources: Curriculum and Teachers

Perhaps one of the most unique challenges an endangered-language school faces is the lack of language resources. We have two fluent teachers—one proficient teacher and one fluent elder—who work at the school on a regular basis. When we started, we had a few printed materials. We started with only Ojibwe-language dictionaries, some good phrase books, and lots of photocopies of a college Ojibwe-language course. Science, math, art, music, reading, and writing would be offered in Ojibwe, and yet we had no curriculum materials to speak of. Our only option was to produce them as we went along, and this was a big demand on the teachers and elders.

We have also had to look beyond the immediate reservation community. The Ojibwe people are divided into 18 sovereign nations in the United States and many more communities in Canada. Although they are united by language, ceremonies, and clans, numerous treaties recognize each reservation as its own sovereign entity. This means that each small community of about 2,000 to 3,000 people has its own government, enrollment procedure, and identity. This can create some barriers to working together. The language revitalization movement is spread out; activists and speakers from each community are trying to work together. Speakers from other Ojibwe reservations, from Canada, and from Minneapolis-St. Paul have all aided us in our mission. Trapping and storytelling retreats, curriculum breaks, summer camps, ceremonies, and conferences all provide opportunities for us to converge and meet speakers who are willing to help. This convergence is a positive thing for a nation that has been historically divided by colonialism. It is also a challenge for small bands that operate independently as sovereign nations.

Teachers need to be skilled in both language and pedagogy in order to teach in an immersion setting. Immersion teaching requires a very high level of language proficiency. Situated near a reservation of about 3,000 enrolled members, there are approximately 10 fluent speakers remaining. The few elders who do speak Ojibwe as a first language in this area are in their 60s and are not likely to be the main teacher for an elementary classroom. Some of these elders have been instrumental resources in starting the school; they come every day to assist in the classrooms. There are only a handful of other highly proficient second-language speakers in this area, and few of these are certified teachers. Since Ojibwe reservations are anywhere from 100 to 1,000 miles apart, the geographic distance between communities (some who have speakers, and some who do not) is also a challenge. Within this context, finding teachers continues to be one of the greatest challenges of the new immersion school. To date, five teachers have relocated to the Hayward area to be a part of this immersion school.

Parents and Community

The task of establishing any school is monumental. Establishing a school in an endangered Indigenous language that is spoken locally by only a few people is even harder. The amount of work and the pressure of urgency are ongoing. And yet, we cannot rush to produce teachers who are speakers, when we know that at this point it takes anywhere from five to seven years to attain proficiency. We are slowly getting more and more people involved, and slowly developing a governing structure that is fair and inclusive. In the past two years, more parents have become centrally involved, taking on tasks such as becoming board members and directors. Community members committed to the language have also taken on some of the work and responsibilities of running the school. Between the administrative structural work, the labor-intensive curriculum development, and the ever-demanding teaching pressures, we are always busy. These pressures are stressful and antithetical to the deeper, important goal of community building: We have to remind ourselves to stop and have fun with each other.

I believe for the parents this work has great rewards, but great demands as well (Hermes, 2004). Pila Wilson warned us that for the first parents of the first immersion students, the work is “gut-wrenching” (Hermes, 2004). Many parents in our community are not sure what to think of immersion. (Can you imagine not understanding the homework your children bring home?) Every year we struggle with finding teachers, funding, and facilities. The school’s future is never guaranteed. I believe this is what Pila meant by “gut-wrenching.” We are at the same time trying to do something good for our children, as well as for the community and the language. We are always trusting that it is not at the expense of our children’s education. This is the challenge of being an immersion parent.

We know it may take longer than four to five years of immersion for the language to “stick” (Hinton & Hale, 2001; Pease-pretty On Top, 2003). And we also know that using a language in school does not ensure revitalization; it is only a start. That is, if our children are in immersion from kindergarten through grade four, and thereafter are in seven years of “English immersion,” we are hoping they will retain the fluency in Ojibwe they have gained through our program. To ensure this, and for the overall revitalization of the language, we are working on using Ojibwe in our homes and community. For example, Waadookodaading sponsored a parent language class for four hours a week, informal dinners and events that use Ojibwe are happening more often, and, as always, the language continues to be used in ceremony. We visit each other’s homes and use Ojibwe—because this is really at the heart of revitalization.

Reflection on Teaching at Waadookodaading, 2003-2004

During the first three years, I was involved as a behind-the-scenes person (parent, director, proposal writer, board member, and curriculum designer). In the fourth year, I took time away from my university position to be a full-time co-classroom teacher for a combined class of grade 2-3-4 students. Later in this paper, I will

reflect more specifically on some of the teaching issues that we faced during that year. These issues are relevant to teaching Indigenous languages and the development of effective methods, an issue that I believe lies at the center of successful language-revitalization efforts.

I worked as a co-teacher in the multiple-grade (2-3-4) classroom alongside a non-certified teacher, Jaaj, who has a high degree of proficiency in Ojibwe. My language skills were only at a high-beginning level at the start of the school year. Part of my job was to teach English, while Jaaj taught math through Ojibwe. This allowed us to split the students into developmental levels for both math and English. I also worked on curriculum planning for the three grades we were teaching. This involved the “big-picture” work—making sure standards were met, keeping up with the public school curriculum, preparing for testing—as well as the immediate curriculum creation of themes, units, and lessons. This work was exciting to me as it was an opportunity to research the best progressive, constructivist, student-centered curriculum available, and to think about what would work in an Ojibwe-immersion environment.

In the end, we implemented a hands-on, environmental, and thematic-based curriculum, which we were creating one step ahead of our teaching. All academic and traditional subjects were taught through the Ojibwe language except for English. Culture and cultural teachings were infused throughout the day, which was appropriate and easy to do with the environmental themes.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the K-4 program was delivered 80%-90% in the medium of the target language. Students were encouraged, but not forced, to respond in Ojibwe. At the start of the school year, the students in the grades 2-3-4 class were using about 12% Ojibwe in their classroom talk. Even though the majority of them had had two or more years of immersion, they were still mostly responding to us in English. Due to a number of factors, by the end of the year, the usage went up to 50% or more. Chris Jones, an intern from Marlborough College, devised a behavior analysis program to measure the amount of Ojibwe spoken by students and to increase this amount (Jones, 2005.) In collaboration with the teachers, he devised a system of extrinsic rewards and reminders to raise the target-language speech levels of students. Students received individual tickets when they were “caught” speaking Ojibwe, and Chris measured the overall amount of Ojibwe he heard spoken in class, three times a day (at random times.) This worked to motivate students individually as well as to work toward this goal as a group. For example, students worked together to earn special days, like a cooking day, Game Boy day, and other special days that they had brainstormed and voted on. They also individually received tickets for speaking Ojibwe, which could be exchanged for books on Friday afternoon. Although the costs and benefits of extrinsic motivation are beyond the limitations of this article (see, for example, Kohn, 1996) this particular reward program was of immediate benefit in raising the students’ attempts to speak Ojibwe. Attempting to speak Ojibwe in an environment where mistakes can be made and corrected is an essential part of learning the language (Supahan & Supahan, 2001). For an

endangered language, this opportunity is rare and precious. I would argue that creating an artificial and immediate motivation for students to practice speaking their heritage language was a successful and much-needed strategy for enhancing student oral proficiency. This was one strategy that was successful, though many more questions concerning teaching strategies remain.

Teaching Method Questions

How Can Adults Both Help the Program and Learn the Language?

We have found a resource in people who want to learn the language. Many people have some language skills but have not had a chance to hear or practice the language. The school provides this opportunity, and yet we are currently mostly a resource for preK-4 children. The question, which we debate, is: Is this a place where adults can also learn the language? Adult learners, like all learners, will make mistakes when learning to speak Ojibwe. If they are perceived as teachers, students may copy their mistakes and risk fossilization. However, the school provides a rich environment for hearing and practicing conversational Ojibwe, one that intermediate learners are desperately in need of. Nearly all of the students who enter the school have had very limited exposure to the Ojibwe language. Only one student entered the school with oral proficiency in the language; others rarely hear Ojibwe spoken. In order for the school to move beyond the problems caused by the constant shortage of teachers and speakers, we must somehow create adult speakers. A critical mass of teachers is needed to teach at the school, create curriculum, and support parent learning. Clearly, we need a teacher education program that would create fluent speakers who are also trained teachers (Pease-pretty On Top, 2003). A lack of fluent speakers with teaching degrees is currently an obstacle.

Should We Teach English?

In the first few years we were idealistic. We did not want to deliberately teach English in our Ojibwe-immersion program. Our children are surrounded by English and, for the most part, only heard Ojibwe when they were at school. We wanted to be like the Hawaiian and the Maori language immersion programs and not add English classes until Grade four (Wilson & Kamana, 2001). However, the first language of our students is English, and most students do not hear Ojibwe spoken on a regular basis, if at all. We are, in some concrete ways, teaching them a foreign language or a heritage language. Research in reading suggests that students need to learn to read and write in their first language first, before we try to teach them literacy in a second language (International Reading Association, 2001). Furthermore, we were overwhelmed with creating curriculum in Ojibwe. Because it is traditionally an oral language, Ojibwe literacy teaching materials are nonexistent. The task of creating a reading program in Ojibwe is also a task of creating a children's literature tradition in Ojibwe.

All through the program we have supported English by teaching reading to our youngest students, supported with 30 minutes of silent sustained reading.

Our kindergarten and first-grade teachers have taught phonics, whole language, spelling, and other skills offered through English. The goal has been to have students reading in English by the end of first grade. During the 2003-2004 year, we formally added a 1-hour-a-day class for the older students as well. This is an entire language arts program, with reading, writing, multimedia skills, and spelling. I found that the English program can also shore up areas where our curriculum resources in Ojibwe are lacking. For instance, we have yet to develop a complete social studies curriculum, so in the English class our content was often social studies in nature.

Computer skills, such as Internet research, PowerPoint, and word processing, were also folded into the English program. Chris Jones was able to develop a multimedia unit for the program as well. His knowledge of computers and multimedia and his skills working with groups of children helped to provide much-needed assistance. During the last two months of school, he helped plan and teach a movie-making unit. With the third and fourth grade, we created short movies that were completely in Ojibwe. Students learned co-operative working skills, rotating specific roles such as: actor, producer, camera person. Once they successfully worked in a group in all of these roles, they were free to write and design their own short skit. Multimedia is a powerful means to get the Ojibwe language back into the homes of the students and parents (Kroskrity & Reynolds, 2001). Also within this additional English program, we were able to tap into volunteer reading tutors, which has been a tremendous help to some of our struggling readers. In these ways we were able to creatively use the first language of students to support their learning of the second language.

Constructivist or Direct Instruction?

Being a progressive educator, I brought a philosophy of education informed by constructivism into the school. Learning centers, Investigations in Data, Number and Space, and FOSS2 science kits were all curriculums I thought would provide for student-centered curriculum. This belief was tempered by the reality that students' only exposure to the Ojibwe language was through their teacher; naturally, this could suggest a more teacher-centered approach. A student-led lesson where they were exploring magnetism, for example, without any direct language instruction first, would result in that science period immersed in English. This describes the tension between a constructivist approach and the need to be teacher centered. These two ideas hung in constant balance, sometimes being pulled one way, sometimes the other. There were no clear-cut answers. There were, however, ways to find compromise. For example, in science, more advanced speakers were partnered with beginning students. After a vocabulary lesson by the teacher, the vocabulary was then applied and used during the experiment phase of the lesson. Most units ended in students discussing their findings and/or writing them up in their science journals. Often the teacher would give an Ojibwe prompt or even a model sentence to aid in the construction of their responses. However, their discussion certainly was limited by their ability to

communicate in Ojibwe. When the preschool started in January 2004, the staff members were trained in Montessori methods. This philosophy results in methods that also tend to be student centered. Preschool staff also wondered if they should be speaking more Ojibwe to students and be more directive and teacher centered.

The literature tells us that many Native children learned through oral traditions (Archibald, 1990; Sheridan, 1991). In this tradition, the onus for learning is on the learner. The learner must find the question, identify and approach the appropriate person for an answer, and accept some responsibility for the answer he or she gets. In this tradition, not only are students actively involved, they are responsible for initiating the entire process and motivated by survival. This is in sharp contrast to current school settings, where students are generally directed through every step of the day. Oral tradition may suggest that correct pedagogy is in the student-centered approaches. Questions for further research are: What methods and pedagogy does the Ojibwe language itself suggest? Are there approaches to teaching that are inherent in the language?

What is Indigenous Immersion?

This is the most pointed question of the language revitalization movement: What exactly are Indigenous-immersion methods (Hinton, 2001, 2002; Supahan & Supahan, 2001)? Beyond using the language as the medium of instruction, what specifically are the most effective methods or teaching strategies for an endangered, Indigenous language? How is this immersion method different from other language-immersion methods? These questions present opportunity for ongoing research into practice. Kipp (2000) provides a starting point when he describes total physical response (TPR). Students are introduced to simple commands through actions. They comprehend and respond at the same time. Quickly, they also learn to use the command. Similarly, in their discussion of communication-based instruction, Supahan and Supahan, (2001) outline five steps for setting up immersion lessons: Setting the stage, comprehensible input, guided practice, independent practice, and assessment. In many ways, variations of both of these processes were used in our daily teaching.

Delivering school content without students understanding at least some specific vocabulary first tends to be a wasted lesson. Our approach in the 2-3-4 room was to introduce a unit by first introducing essential or new vocabulary (comprehensible input). For example, the water unit started with a traditional oral teaching by our classroom elder. Next we would create a key vocabulary list of new words or concepts. Usually, there was a core process that we would introduce to the students involving those words. For example, in the creek study of the water unit, we measured the health of a nearby creek by having students sweep the bottom with nets and count the various types of creatures found. The process for sweeping was turned into a five-step song: Sweep the creek, put the creature in the container, listen for the whistle, come and show us whom you have caught.³ This provided a starting place for students to understand the actual lesson, a place to scaffold for meaning, and then to practice language creation (guided practice

and independent practice). Although comprehension assessment was ongoing, often the science units would have a more cumulative, formal assessment. In this particular unit the advance students, in partners, created a chart and presented their data interpretation. This gave students another opportunity to orally synthesize and create in the target language.

Just speaking to the children in the language is not enough (sink-or-swim method.) There is a time when the direct teaching of grammatical concepts to students can provide much-needed keys to their construction of complete thoughts in the target language (Hadley, 1993). Jaaj recognized this, and in response we added a class called “*Inwewin*” (Ojibwe-language practice and grammar) for this purpose. Without the pressure of academic subject content, we used everyday language to teach, demonstrate, and practice language constructions. Movement and manipulatives added to the fun and created a much-needed break from sitting at desks. I often used the first language to explain grammatical concepts in this class—concepts that were applied and enacted many times throughout the day in other classes.

Conclusion

There is much research to do in support of Indigenous immersion (Hinton & Hale, 2001). As a direction for teaching culture in schools, immersion education has much to offer. It is a strategy that could be implemented in tribally controlled schools immediately, even if one speaker and one teacher are available. It could be tested in one or more classrooms, at least during the cultural activities and classes. If language becomes a central piece of culture-based curriculum, a central materials development center would quickly be necessary (D. LaSuiet, personal communication, 2000). Ojibwe language has the potential to shift the paradigm of culture-based education from teaching about Ojibwe culture in and through English, to teaching through Ojibwe language. In this case, any content could be taught, and the way of understanding would still be culturally based. The focus of culturally based shifts from *content* to the *medium of instruction*. Although this may seem like a subtle shift, this would represent a paradigm shift. Indeed, the move from thinking about culture as curriculum content, to thinking through and creating in the Indigenous language would represent an entirely new focus for many Indigenous nations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹Emma and Jaaj (George in English) are pseudonyms for these two teachers.
- ²Investigations in Data, Number and Space, Cambridge, MA, <http://investigations.terc.edu/> and Full Option Science System, University of California, Berkeley, <http://lhsfoss.org/index.html>.
- ³*Gwaaba asabiins, ashi makakoonsing, aandotan! Andotan! Awiiya? Awiiya? Awenen getedebimian?* English translation: Sweep with the net, put it in the bag, listen for the whistle. Anyone? Anyone? Who did you catch?

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