Siawinnu'gina'masultinej:
A Language Revitalization Initiative for Mi'gmaq in Listuguj, Canada

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Abstract

Indigenous languages in Canada and worldwide are threatened with extinction in the coming decades if younger speakers do not acquire them and pass them on to future generations. In Listuguj, a Mi'gmaq community in eastern Canada where the proportion of fluent speakers of the Indigenous language is less than 20% and dropping, local instructors, using native speaker insights, have created a new visual-oral teaching method for adult learners. Outside university researchers were invited to be part of the team. Since 2006 we have participated in intensive grant-writing and other consultative work, using a Participatory Action Research orientation, with Listuguj community members taking the lead role. Our expanded research team is now undertaking a new Early Years Mi'gmaq Immersion research project in Listuguj, and also plans to work with Listuguj community-based researcher-instructors to develop a teacher education program for adult learner-speakers of an Indigenous language who wish to start learning circles in their own communities. A third element will consist of a participatory evaluation component for the adult language classes, for which we hope to help generate new community-based assessment practices. In this paper we address researchers interested in working closely with communities about the development of our collaborative community-university relationship.

Résumé

Les langues autochtones au Canada et dans le monde sont menacées d'extinction dans les prochaines décennies si les plus jeunes locuteurs et locutrices ne les acquièrent ni ne les transmettent aux générations futures. À Listuguj, une communauté mi'gmaq dans l'est du Canada où la proportion, en baisse, de personnes parlant couramment la langue autochtone est inférieure à 20%, le corps enseignant local, en utilisant un aperçu de langue maternelle, a créé une nouvelle méthode d'enseignement visuelle-orale pour les apprenants adultes. Des chercheurs universitaires extérieurs ont été invités à faire partie de l'équipe. Depuis 2006, nous avons participé à la rédaction de subvention et d'autres travaux de consultation intensive, utilisant une orientation de la recherche particip-action, où les membres de la communauté de Listuguj prennent le rôle principal. Notre équipe de recherche élargie débute maintenant un nouveau projet de recherche sur l'immersion précoce en langue mi'gmaq, et prévoit également de travailler avec chercheurs-enseignants communautaires de Listuguj pour développer un programme de formation d'enseignants pour les adultes qui souhaitent débuter des cercles d'apprentissage dans leurs propres communautés. Un troisième élément consiste en une composante d'évaluation participative pour les cours de langue pour adultes, pour lesquels nous espérons aider à engender de nouvelles pratiques d'évaluation communautaire. Dans cet article, nous nous adressons aux chercheurs intéressés à travailler en étroite collaboration avec les communautés sur le développement de partenariats collaboratifs communauté-université.

Introduction

Indigenous languages in Canada and worldwide are threatened with extinction in the coming decades if younger speakers do not acquire them and pass them on to future generations. The loss of older, monolingual native-speaking Elders as principal knowledge keepers for language has meant that younger bilingual speakers are now taking over this role. Bilingual approaches and new methods for teaching Indigenous languages as second languages across the lifespan, from young children through to adult learners, are urgently needed. Where such approaches exist, research on their strengths and weaknesses and on ways to propagate community-based, participant-owned research and evaluation techniques must be fostered. In Listuguj, a Mi'gmaq community in eastern Canada (pop. 3360), the proportion of fluent speakers of the Indigenous language is less than 20%, most aged over 65. Concerned with the high rate of Indigenous language attrition in the community, nearly seven years ago the Listuguj Education Directorate (LED) undertook an innovative language revitalization initiative. Local instructors, using native speaker insights, were encouraged to create a new visual-oral teaching method for adult learners. Researchers from McGill University in Montreal were invited to be part of the team. Since 2006 we have participated in intensive grant-writing and other consultative work. This has generated substantive resources to help support the project and has resulted in a parallel research program which has included gathering ethnographic field data and disseminating the work of the community through presenting and publishing around the project. The basic research orientation has been Participatory Action Research, with Listuguj community members taking the lead role. Our

expanded research team is now undertaking a new Early Years Immersion research project in Listuguj, which we hope will add to existing knowledge about the development of early bilingualism in an Indigenous and a majority language in environments where both languages are strongly supported. We also plan to work with Listuguj community-based researcher-instructors to develop a teacher education program for adult learner-speakers of an Indigenous language who wish to start learning circles in their own communities. A third element, community-based assessment, will consist of a Participatory Evaluation component for the very popular adult language classes, which until now have not incorporated any systematic second language assessment procedures. The current strong motivation in the community to expand the immersion program for very young learners, to extend the visually-based method to other communities via expanded teacher training through more systematic workshops, and to reflect on the achievements of the past seven years through participatory language assessment and program evaluation, makes this a strategic moment to start a new phase of the research. After six continuous years of federal agency funding through an Aboriginal-focused program, we are now moving to a new funding model, in effect since a recent revision of agency guidelines and programs. We have been successful in obtaining substantive new funding, but along with the funds come new challenges, imposed on us by agency constraints, in the way the university-based researchers and the Indigenous educators will be working together. It is no longer possible, under the new funding structure, for the Indigenous educators and educational administrators to have direct control of the grant funds, a development with possible repercussions for the work. In this paper we address researchers interested in working closely with communities, about the development of our collaborative community-university relationship.

Goals of the Work

Many stakeholders agree that injecting time and energy into better ways to revitalize Canada's Indigenous languages is a matter of extreme urgency — Aboriginal communities themselves (Hinton & Hale, 2001; Jacobs, 1998; Richards & Maracle, 2002;) as well as university-based Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars (Battiste, 1998; Burnaby, 1997; McCarty, 2008; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007; Noori, 2009; Smith, 2001) and government (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005). The grassroots-generated, community-based research collaboration now under way between our university team and the Listuguj instructor-researchers and learners is studying ways to revitalize Mi'gmaq across the lifespan. Ideally this process would start in the earliest years of school. It could extend through the years of compulsory schooling into the young adult years, through adult classes designed to take non-speaking adults and teach them their ancestral Mi'gmaq language in a fashion that will enable them to take charge of their own learning and go on to become

language instructors themselves. We hope to provide support for this step through teacher education workshops. At community level, a Master-Apprentice program is now being planned that would bring Elders into the cycle. The final essential element in this program of research is a participatory, community-based language assessment component, based not in traditional Western-style testing methods, but in community-generated techniques that our team hopes to help generate.

For many Aboriginal scholars (Battiste 1998, Littlebear 1999, Smith 1999) being a speaker of one's Indigenous language is an important part of the traditional Aboriginal heritage and an element of belonging and identity that is sacrificed at great cost. The Mi'gmaq language revitalization initiative is a local manifestation of a worldwide movement among Indigenous peoples to reclaim aspects of their "ways of knowing, being and doing" (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Martin, 2003) brought under threat by centuries of colonization.

The ultimate goal of the community-driven language revitalization initiative at Listuguj, which we are now extending into a new phase, is to create younger second-language speakers of Mi'gmaq in Listuguj who will be able to take up the challenge of passing on the language to future generations, as teachers, parents or both. The research paradigm we are using is participatory in the fullest sense. Listuguj community members have themselves devised research objectives, set up research questions, and worked out approaches to community consultation around those questions. Listuguj language instructors have acquired experience in research methods, materials development, community-based second language pedagogy and assessment, teacher training, conference presentation, and report writing. One Listuguj doctoral student (and a co-author of the current paper, J. Metallic) is developing into a seasoned Indigenous second language researcher (J. Metallic, 2009, 2011, 2012). Through working with community-based researchers on the project, university researchers and students alike are learning about Indigenous research paradigms and helping to devise research questions, use qualitative and ethnographic methods to gather data, analyze and write up data, and address both general and specialized public audiences about the community research being conducted at Listuguj.

Connections with Existing Work

Collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers on Indigenous language revitalization initiatives

As Bishop (2001) has pointed out, the cycle of oppression under which Indigenous peoples struggle cannot be broken through the efforts of Indigenous peoples alone; non-Indigenous allies must educate themselves about the conditions of oppression and work from within the oppressive structures themselves to break them down. This is as relevant in the area of

Indigenous language endangerment as it is in other areas (such as education—see the large literature on surviving residential schools, e.g., Milloy, 1999). Linguists such as Eira (2007) and Rice (2006), working in the widely separated contexts of Australia and Canada have mapped out ways in which the techniques and tools of traditional linguistic fieldwork can be used by Western-trained linguists in collaboration with Indigenous language activists to bolster Indigenously generated language revitalization initiatives (see also Cyr & Sévigny, 2004, for an example of linguistic work that happened at Listuguj itself over two decades ago). The definitive compilation by Hinton & Hale (2001) reinforces the older, non-indigenous-specific "Reversing Language Shift" work by Fishman (1991; 2001) with a wealth of narratives and techniques that illustrate how this may be done. Ongoing work by our research collaborator Jessica Coon of McGill's Department of Linguistics, who has been conducting (as yet unpublished) work on linguistic analysis and possible applications through new technologies with Mi'gmaq speakers in Listuguj since the fall of 2011, demonstrates how a foundation for this collaborative work can be laid at local level. Our own published work in this area (e.g., Sarkar & Metallic, 2009; Sarkar, J. Metallic, M.A. Metallic & Vicaire, 2011) comes out of over six years of intensive collaborative work. While publication is important, the bulk of the work is done on the ground at the community and is reflected in strong community-researcher relationships and better conditions for Indigenous language learning in the community itself.

Multiliteracies pedagogy

In 1994, a group of scholars in England known as the New London Group began a dialogue that has transformed the way pedagogy is viewed, developing the concept "multiliteracies pedagogy" to acknowledge the societal changes needed if schools are to form skilled students who can participate and acquire more interconnected ways of communicating (Cazden et al., 1996). This began a movement in several subfields of applied linguistics and education to expand and redefine the term "literacy" using a plural form, multiliteracies. Multiliteracies pedagogy offers the opportunity to supplement pedagogy with a multitude of new technologies, languages, cultures and subjective realities, for the benefit of all students. We are particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of multiliteracies pedagogy in the preschool immersion context at Listuguj. This idea will build on work currently under way in other indigenous communities in Quebec (Lavoie et al., 2012, in press).

Alternative language assessment practices

Language assessment has historically been rooted in the psychometric tradition of educational measurement (McNamara & Roever, 2006). In this tradition, assessment is accomplished primarily through the imposition of standardized tests by outside specialists, who also decide on the goals for assessment. Language assessment researchers and practitioners, however, have recently acknowledged and begun to adopt the same social constructionist preoccupation as in other areas of the social sciences (McNamara, 2001, 2005; Lynch, 2001; Shohamy, 2001). As all learning situations are by nature local, so must be the assessment of the success of the learning situation. Therefore, language assessment has the growing potential to become democratized, critical and self-reflexive. A critical approach to language assessment (Shohamy, 2001) acknowledges the need to consider the social and political environment of testing. Professionals in language assessment are increasingly acknowledging the western bias in their field, as well as the responsibility to give over their traditional position of power and instead play a role in cultivating "language assessment literacy" (Taylor, 2009) among all stakeholders involved in and affected by language assessments. This means working on ways to include stakeholders in the development and administration of appropriate language assessments for their particular local context.

Theoretical Framework

Second language pedagogy

Over the past four decades the field of second language teaching has undergone at least two paradigm shifts. First, the rote-based grammar-driven audiolingual method of the 1960s-1970s, then Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its aversion to overt grammar or correction (Lightbown 2000), leaving the field currently somewhere in the middle (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Neither a purely grammar-driven nor a purely communication-centered approach to teaching a second language has proved to be successful on its own at producing fluent and accurate speakers (Ortega, 2009). Teachers now more readily accept elements of language structure in their lessons (the Listuguj syllabus is structural and relies heavily on the underlying grammatical categories of Mi'gmaq and other Algonquian languages — Sarkar & Metallic, 2009) but there is a healthy focus on natural interaction and learner-centred curriculum, features that also characterize the "Listuguj method" (Sarkar et al, 2011). The field is poised for yet another paradigm shift (Watson-Gegeo, 2004) which will go even further, emphasizing sociocultural factors and the role of context in language learning. The new research foci that we are forefronting fit well with this emerging perspective.

Multiliteracies pedagogy and Indigenous knowledges and practices

Our pilot observations of the first four-year-old immersion classroom at Listuguj in 2011-2012 and our work with the core group of instructors (which included collective, grassroots-generated development of an original evaluation component at short notice) have convinced us that multiliteracies pedagogy as developed by the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) is the best of many models of preschool education we could draw on in this bi/multilingual Indigenous context.

Consciously adopting multiliteracies pedagogy in Indigenous contexts from preschool level on (Lavoie et al., 2012, in press) can help educators bring Indigenous practices of transmitting and renewing knowledge back into classrooms, fostering links with mainstream educators. Aspects of the approaches and materials that have been developed for multiliteracies pedagogy could be used in Indigenous classrooms in a way that is completely congruent with Indigenous pedagogies.

Democratic assessment principles

Shohamy (2001) calls for the introduction of democratic assessment principles through CLT (Critical Language Testing). These democratic principles include the following needs:

- applying CLT to monitor uses of tests;

- collaboration between tester and test-taker;

- testers taking responsibility for their tests and their uses;

- inclusion of the knowledge of different groups in designing tests; and

- protection of the rights of test-takers.

The project will include a program evaluation (PE) component that will respect the norms established for participatory evaluation (PE) (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Jordan et al, 2009). PE establishes, over the long term, collaborative processes, practices, and mechanisms that encourage the application of Indigenous knowledge and experience to local issues and problems. By reclaiming and refocusing Indigenous ways of knowing in the service of local issues, Indigenous social capital is thereby created, which then becomes a source of Indigenous self-determination (Smith, 1999). As with other successful research projects investigating aspects of Indigenous culture (Smith, 1999; Wilson 2004), we consider it essential that the main research directions be defined by community members themselves. The research will be with and by the community, not on or for the community. Listuguj community members are the main stakeholders.

Research Questions

1. How can intermediate-level adult learners of Mi'gmaq as a second language take on language teaching roles in their community, especially with peers and younger learners? What special supports, training, additional language study and follow-up would have to be put in place?

2. How can the theory and practice of multiliteracies pedagogy at preschool level be developed in an Indigenous context to support local instructors who are grandmothers without formal teacher training and help them establish a solid base in early years immersion pedagogy at Listuguj?

3. What forms of participatory, alternative language assessment and program evaluation would best serve the needs of Listuguj language instructors and learners?

Methodology

These research questions will draw on some quite different research methods from the first phases of this program of research, although remaining centred in an Indigenous research paradigm (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; Weber-Pillwax, 2001).

The core group of language instructors/community-based researchers at the Listuguj Education Directorate is made up of older native-speaking grandmothers. These dedicated women, unhampered by their lack of conventional teacher training or of teaching experience before 2006, have played a key role in helping to train potential immersion teachers who began learning the language as young adults. They bring to this project many years of community involvement in Mi'gmaq language teaching in Listuguj and extensive networking experience with other educators and researchers in both the Mi'gmaq districts and outside. They have helped set up several Mi'gmaq language-oriented programs within the community, and have also been active in other community social services organizations, giving them a wide base of community contacts over four generations.

The teaching method that Listuguj Mi'gmaq community-based researchers / language instructors have developed for use through high-beginner/low-intermediate levels has its base in oral ways of passing on knowledge, more appropriate for the Indigenous context than conventional classroom methods with their emphasis on early literacy. The image sequences and other teaching tools used have been developed locally for the needs of Listuguj learners. All the morphosyntactic analysis and lexical research (currently being studied by our research collaborator Jessica Coon of McGill Linguistics and her research team) underlying the teaching at Listuguj is locally generated and does not refer to any Anglo-American or European-derived linguistic systems. The Indigenously-based pedagogical approach is learner-centred, low-pressure and able to adapt flexibly to learners' needs.

The first goal of our proposed third phase is to help the community-based teacher-researchers to develop workshops for intermediate speakers who are themselves potential second language teachers in the community. A Mi'gmaq language teaching program designed to produce, not merely new speakers, but new speakers with the confidence needed to move into a teaching role, will require additional resources and paradigms drawn from teacher education (Strong-Wilson et al, 2012).

The decision at Listuguj in 2011 to start a Mi'gmaq early years immersion program for four-year-olds opened up research possibilities with children in this age group that we will pursue as our second goal for this next phase of the research, drawing on our experience

with multiliteracies pedadogy in Innu communities (Lavoie et al., 2012, in press). A holistic approach to teaching Mi'gmaq across the lifespan is the overarching goal motivating the Listuguj program.

Third and finally, after more than six years of intensive language revitalization efforts at the LED, all stakeholders recognize the need for a evaluation component to be put in place, both for the program, and for individual learners as regards the assessment of language proficiency. However, it is important that the community maintain complete control over assessment and evaluation and that techniques be developed which will be in harmony with Indigenous epistemologies and research methodologies.

Emergent research design

Based on discussions with Listuguj members, we propose the following heuristic to inform a methodology that combines Indigenous and Western "ways of knowing, being and doing" (Martin, 2003).
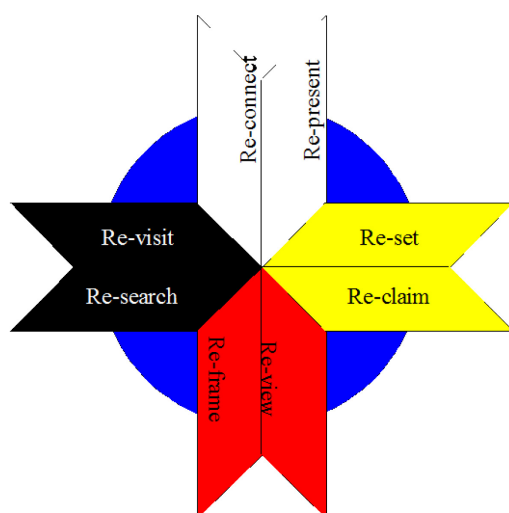
The traditional Mi'gmaq eight-pointed star design is used in this framework to delineate eight different directions for investigation and action, in ways that parallel the Kaupapa Maori discussions in Smith (1999). All eight will constantly re-cycle in community / participant discussions about appropriate directions for the new phase of the project at appropriate times. Indigenous research paradigms incorporate awareness of the importance of the natural life cycle. In our framework, infancy/early childhood is represented by the East direction; youth by the South direction; adults by the West direction; and Elders by the North direction. Our new foci for research will expand our work out from adults, both downward through very young children and upward through Elders and other potential language teachers, thus moving toward a holistic approach that includes all life stages. Our approach is thus based on the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (CCL, 2007), which uses the metaphor of the living tree to represent cycles of learning and the interconnectedness of all life. This image is appropriate, given our focus on Indigenous language learning across the lifespan, in a community-wide, deeply rooted and

contextualized fashion that extends far beyond the classroom.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methodology

The methodology we find most appropriate is participatory action research (PAR) (Jordan, 2007). This project fits the seven criteria for participatory research outlined by Hall (1981), namely: (1) the definition of the problem and instigation for change originate within the community itself; (2) the research goal is to improve the lives of those involved through structural transformation; (3) the community controls the entire research process; (4) the focus is on oppressed groups; here, addressing the suppression of language through colonization; (5) the research strengthens people's awareness of their own capabilities; (6) the people themselves are researchers, along with specialized outsiders; (7) and the outside specialists are committed to working for change. The 2013-2014 funding year will be used to set up revised community protocols around the new emphases for research, to raise levels of community awareness, and to build working groups of interested community members across generations.

During 2013-2014, community meetings and work with Listuguj instructor-researchers will help determine details of the course of the project, but the broad outlines as currently planned will be as follows:

Preschool component
Before the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, parents/guardians of three- and four-year-olds going into the Early Years "Nursery Immersion" program will be interviewed by the instructor-researchers, aided by team members and student RAs, about their home language practices and the outcomes they hope the immersion project will yield. Permission will be sought and obtained to follow the children in this cohort through Grade Three, the end of the funding period and a key point in the development of early literacy in bi/multilingual populations (Cummins, 2000). The pilot cohorts from 2011-12 and 2012-13 will also be tracked through interviews and proficiency assessment. Parent interviews will be scheduled to coincide with the parent-teacher meetings mandated by the LED at report card time (in November, February and June); thus four interviews will take place per cohort per year over the five funding years, yielding substantial ethnographic data to complement classroom-based observations by the research team and biannual assessments of language proficiency by the team, working with the instructor-researchers in a community-based, alternative assessment model. Where possible, parents will also be followed as Mi'gmaq students themselves in concurrent adult classes.

Teacher education component
A series of biannual workshops for teachers of Mi'gmaq and related Algonquian languages will commence in 2015-2016; the two preparatory years will be needed to

develop materials and curriculum, build a network of potentially interested Algonquian educators and put the infrastructure for running the workshops in place. Depending on the demand and the logistics, these workshops may be hosted at Listuguj (for example, as an annual summer institute running from 2015 through at least 2018), at other Mi'gmaq-speaking First Nations communities in the Atlantic provinces, and/or at other Algonquian-speaking communities in Quebec, Ontario and the Eastern United States. The Listuguj instructor-researchers have already acquired valuable experience planning and conducting workshops for Algonquian language educators and revitalization activists. A total of four to six such workshops are projected, each for 10-20 teachers over 2-3 weeks.

Evaluation component

The participatory evaluation model (PE), like the participatory action research (PAR) model from which it follows, is recognized as being the most appropriate for Indigenous research (Edwards et al., 2008; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; Jordan et al., 2009; Wilson, 2001), as tests cannot be effectively created and validated outside of the environment where they will be used, and stakeholders must be involved in the process. Our team has used this model successfully since the inception of the project. Decisions around how many classes are needed, what optimal enrolments are, and how learning should be paced, have originated at the LED with community-based researchers and stem from local understandings of the meaning and importance of language learning (viewed as intrinsically linked to culture learning and Indigenous identity). We will continue to rely on the PE model and on the expertise of the Listuguj members of the team. Participant permissions will be locally sought and obtained; all relevant documentation will continue to be housed at the LED.

Concluding Statement

As our team embarks on an exciting new stage in this research program, we build upon a foundation of trust and collaborative work extending back seven years. The new funding now in place enables us to extend our community-university collaboration at least five years into the future. Revitalizing an endangered language requires long-term commitment by all concerned; creating new speakers takes time. We have been fortunate in obtaining the financial as well as the community support needed to help this work move forward, and we are grateful for this opportunity.

Our next challenge will be to overcome the inherent drawbacks built into the new funding model (which make it more difficult than it was for us previously to give equal control to community-based and university-based researchers). The overriding goal of helping to create new speakers of Mi'gmaq in Listuguj is so important to so many people involved that we are confident that the necessary goodwill can be generated to do this. We look forward to the next five years of working together. At the end of that time, we hope it will be possible to report that substantial numbers of new speakers of Mi'gmaq are carrying the language forward to community language status in Listuguj.

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