ABSTRACT

Currently the hallowed halls of academia echo with eulogies of indigenous languages. In the United States, indigenous language renewal and revitalization efforts include Congressional acts, grant funding, language conferences, immersion programs, native language tables and more. To maximize the benefits of these efforts, individual effort and commitment in acquiring a language is essential lest indigenous languages disappear completely. This research is a brief overview of selected methods and exercises individuals can apply to acquire and strengthen Ojibwemowin skills.

Introduction

Ojibwemowin (the Ojibwe Language) is an endangered language. Various researchers have identified many reasons for its decline to this status. Governmental policies have been implemented to assimilate the Native population wherever European peoples have dominated (Hernandez-Chavez, 1988). Ongoing oppressive policies, albeit in different forms, felt at all levels, often focuses on the eradication of the native language (Durand, Durand, 1995). As a result, learning the language of one’s heritage in the most ideal way, as a child’s first language, is not an option today for many native people. While the findings of Doctors Thomas D. Peacock and Donald R. Day produced models for successful school and community support (2000) it is the individual efforts of language learning that are the focus of this research.

Ojibwemowin, traditionally an oral language, is passed on from speaker to speaker, generation to generation (Nichols 1995). Currently, nearly one hundred percent of would-be Ojibwe speakers must learn it as a second language. Second Language Ojibwemowin (SLO) learners strive to make use of their language legacy. For most of these people, learning Ojibwemowin as a second language is not easy. The Guinness Book of
World Records (1992) once listed Ojibwemowin as having the most verb forms of any language in the world, truly making it a daunting challenge to any second language learner. Overcoming these barriers to achieve Ojibwe language fluency does seem insurmountable to most of these learners. In addition to these factors, other issues can complicate Ojibwe language acquisition: writing systems, language applications, student profiles, dialectical differences, economic impacts, and language value, to name a few. All are effective barriers to discourage the not-so-tenacious learner from advancing past vocabulary lists to actual conversational Ojibwemowin. SLO students may also encounter many different teacher qualifications. There are teachers of Ojibwemowin not “trained” as such but are excellent speakers. There are also those who are “trained” but not fluent speakers. These teachers and all that range in-between are valuable Ojibwemowin resources for the SLO learner. What can a student do when they have the opportunity to work with a native speaker? Ojibwemowin textbook authors Judith and Thomas Vollum (1994) remind students to give asema (tobacco) to elders and speakers when asking for help as a sign of respect. It is up to the SLO learner to optimize learning situations whenever and wherever the opportunity arises.

What follows are some selected language learning applications that the SLO students can utilize to enhance his or her learning experience. The intent is to encourage Ojibwemowin learners by suggesting ways to enhance their learning process and gain a better understanding of how to improve their learning. These suggestions will compliment the SLO student’s current learning program.

Identifying and Understanding Barriers to Ojibwemowin

Ojibwemowin is fundamentally different from the Latin-based language of English. Northern Cheyenne language scholar and speaker, Dr. Richard E. Littlebear (1997), made the distinction that linguistic nature of many American Indian languages are characterized as being “polysynthetic,” meaning many elements are pulled together, usually around a verb, to produce coherent meaning. Littlebear pointed out that often the single word taught in a typical vocabulary list disappears from its originally recognizable form altogether in normal conversation. Linguist John Nichols (2000) further explained the difference between Ojibwe and English to the United States Supreme Court when testifying about the translation of treaty rights: Ojibwe word stems are not words that can be used in sentences, he states, but must be surrounded by prefixes and suffixes to identify basic grammatical Ojibwe ideas. Anton Treuer, editor of the Oshkaabewis Native Journal, states the Ojibwe language is a verb
language, with verbs comprising two thirds of Ojibwe words (1997). As a second language (with the assumption that English is the first language for Ojibwe learners) the structure and basis of Ojibwe grammar is much different than French or Spanish.

By keeping in mind the barriers combined with the basic difference in language structure the SLO student can understand why learning and retaining Ojibwemowin may require a direct focused approach. For most second language learners, the realization that Ojibwemowin is unique in this manner is helpful in understanding some difficulties of Ojibwe acquisitions. They need to keep their learning progression in perspective to prevent frustration at this challenging undertaking.

Nurturing Ojibwemowin

The research of Doctors Lynn Eubank and Maria Beck (1993) in *Generative Research on Second Language Acquisition* reviews theories of second language acquisition bringing several points to the forefront. They explained that linguistic nurture is the most basic kind of linguistic exposure—utterances of phases and clauses in context (also known as positive data). Because of the barriers discussed earlier Ojibwemowin students must actively seek this most basic language need. SLO students can receive this linguistic nurturing by attending gatherings where Ojibwemowin is integrated into function, such as ceremonies, community language tables, immersion camps or videotapes. Many other theories reviewed by Eubank and Beck such as acquisition order studies (predictions of mastery merges in a predictable order) and universal grammar (learners’ implicit knowledge or autonomous linguistic endowment) also deserves further research for application to Ojibwemowin. Further research will yield more tools and support for the task at hand Ojibwemowin learners face.

Nurturing the Learner

Not everyone learns to read or do mathematical problems well, Stephen Crain of the University of Maryland reminds us. Crain asserts that even though language learning is one of our most complicated cognitive functions, almost all people learn language and children master language communication early on. Cognitive scientist Steve Pinker (1985) asserts that with few exceptions by the time a child is four years old they have acquired all parts of the language without formal instruction. This all starts with a period of hearing. This very important process in the phenomenon of learning, according to Burt (1982) is the silent period, the initial phase of the language learning process during which the learner simply listens to the
new language and does NOT produce it. Burt pointed out the silent period has been observed in natural environments to last from one to three months and it is presumed that the learner is processing, internalizing and making sense of all that has been seen and heard in the new language during this period. (Burt, et. al., 1982, p. 22-23). This very important application of learning is often over looked in Ojibwemowin. Drs. Pimsleur and Quinn (1971) explain while it has been suggested to listen to a language only when first learning a new language to become familiar with the general sound aura of the language. Pimsleur and Quinn agree it is essential, especially with non-similar languages, but the SLO student will benefit more if listening is done with visual cues that focus attention and give direction, otherwise the learner may become frustrated with failure to comprehend. If the native language speakers are not constantly available then students need to look for solutions to assist their listening: a variety of tapes to play for the car ride or when relaxing at home. Cues can come from auditory signals or landmarks, or as a child’s picture book transposed with Ojibwemowin.

Auditory hearing goes along with vocal output. Language teacher, Veronica Carpenter, (1997) found it important to help the English speakers “unlearn” the sounds of English to produce a more native accent. Most language learners, she found, thought they were producing native sounds when in fact they were not. To remedy the errant sounds she employed strategies for learners to become aware of sounds that did not belong to the Indigenous Language, and focus on producing the sounds that did, especially consonant clusters not found in English. Application of her experience for SLO students can be done through the practice of phonological sound charts out loud and tape recording them for review to increase the correctness of Ojibwemowin pronunciation.

Other innovative ways of accessing the auditory aspects of language learning have been demonstrated by Alice Taff in her progress report Learning Ancestral Languages by Telephone: Creating situations for Language use (1997). Accessing first Language Ojibwe speakers by phone provides the novice language learners the opportunity to hear and use native languages and it also creates a situation for native speakers to use Ojibwemowin.

While the SLO learner realizes there are barriers imposed by current conditions, there are ways to reach around them and continue the task are hand. Next some individual learning concerns shall be addressed to help facilitate the SLOmowin student.
Memory: The Storage and Retrieval of Words

According to author Dr. Marilyn Nippold (1998), storage is unlimited but retrieval is fragile. Nippold explains that storage strength is how well an item is learned; while retrieval is how easily the word can be recalled or remembered. She further adds that both processes are interactive but retrieval is key in increasing both storage and retrieval strength. Memory researchers Bjork and Bjork (1992) found four key factors that retrieval capacity depends on: presence of cues, frequency the item is retrieved, competition from other items in memory and recency of learning.

To put this information to practical application according to Nippold (1998), the language learner must develop cues, either internal: possible thoughts, feelings, emotion or external, i.e., visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile sensations. The SLO can take “mawi” (he or she cries) and develop the internal cues of remembering a sad thought, recall feeling pain or sadness. Perhaps the SLO student can develop some external cues for “mawi” by visualizing a child crying “Ma, wi! Ma, wi!” Another example: “minomaaso” (it smells good cooking) might cue the SLO learner to use “minomaaso” as hearing the sizzle (auditory cue) of a delicious tasting (gustatory cue), “minnow Ma so”, feeling (tactile cue) the handle of the frying pan as you smell (olfactory cue) the aroma: “minomaaso.”

Secondly, advocates Nippold (1998), because frequent access makes retrieval easier, the word must be used every day. To keep items from becoming less recallable because of competition from other items in memory, older items must be recalled periodically. In recency of learning, Nippon states that the newly stored words are most retrievable soon after they are learned. If a word is not used it will become difficult to recall. Using a new word frequently builds it storage strength. The SLO student must use the new vocabulary or grammatical rules soon and frequently after learning them. By incorporating “Niwi-nimakade-mashkikiwaaboo” whenever the student wants his or her coffee [black medicine water], “Niwi-nimakade-mashkikiwaaboo” will gain stronger retrieval strength becoming easier to remember. As part of a breakfast routine, “Niwi-nimakade-mashkikiwaaboo” and “Giwii-makademashkikiwaaboo na?” (You want coffee, yes, no?) will be recalled on a regular basis insuring the recall strength of “makademashkikiwaaboo”.

Rehearsal, Organization and Elaboration Strategies

The 1993 research Weinstein and Mayer (1993) conducted on cognitive strategies of rehearsal, organization and elaboration are expanded
by Drs. J. Micheal O’Malley and Anna Chamot. They realize rehearsal strategies can range from simply repeating a vocabulary list to actively recreating a variety of ways to repeat the list. Ojibwemowin learners with a list of numbers from one to ten can repeat them in different speeds, vocal tones and backwards or by twos.

Organization, O’Malley and Chamot (1993), define as regrouping or arranging so it is meaningful to the user state. There are an infinite number of ways an Ojibwemowin learner could group words: according to English categories (such as birds or body parts, etc.), according to Ojibwe categories of word stems (abwe=roast, abwewin=frying pan, abwezo=sweat, abweninji: hot sweaty hand) or perhaps parts of seven person conjunction (wiishkobizi=s/he is sweet, niwiishkobizi=I am sweet, giwiskobiz=you are sweet, wiishkobiziwag=they are sweet) to name a few.

Elaboration according to O’Malley and Chamot (1993), is the connection of knowledge both old and new. New knowledge may include many other strategies such as inferencing, imagery, deduction and summarization. Specifically, learners will combine many strategies all at once. For example, a beginning reader studying Mary Siisip Genius’s Misko-baaka’aakwenh, a story found in the Oshkaabewis Native Journal (1997), an Ojibwe periodical written in the double vowel system, may use the knowledge they already know: names of the animal used in the story and previous knowledge of the story of the Little Red Hen. Linking previous knowledge to current problem at hand the reader will summarize ikido means “he or she said” even if the learner did not know the particular form of the word.

**Additional Memory Strategies**

Because memory is such an important part of language learning and can be assisted through a variety of ways additional strategies are reviewed. According to Authors Weaver & Cohen (1997) in the Strategies-Based Instruction: A Teacher-Training Manual, transfer is another important strategy. Weaver and Cohen offer some of the ideas of transfer applications: mentally visualizing or drawing pictures of a reading, lecture, or conversation to help remember it; creating flashcards or lists of key words/phrases for oral presentations or to help organize writing projects; learn grammar rules by making up rhymes or songs (“i before e . . .”). One Ojibwemowin grammar rule follows: Animate and inanimate endings in plural form: animate ends in “g” because it “goes alive” but inanimate ends in “an” because it’s “un”alive. Weaver and Cohen (1993) also offer other memory devices such as keyword mnemonics, rhyme/rhythm, and language transfer. A few examples of this application to Ojibwemowin include keyword mnemonics: baashkizigan=ba/shki/zi/gun (gun) or
gashkendam=(s/he is sad) can be remembered when associated as “gosh I’m sad”. The use of rhyme/rhythm: Boozhoo! How are you, Nanabozhoo? Or Namadibin apabiwin! (Sit down on the chair!). All of these devices can be used to help develop an expanded vocabulary.

**Ojibwemowin Grammar**

To advance with Ojibwemowin, the second language student must have an ability to expand on the basic knowledge of words lists to communication. The basis of communication is the ability of verb conjugation, to ability to change the form of a verb according grammar, syntax or meaning. For some students reading or having conjugation explained is enough to understand the functions of the forms of a word. For many other students writing the different forms in worksheet format improves conjugation ability. A further step, transposing the written sheet to tape either by himself or herself, or by a fluent speaker also proves helpful. According to Anton Treuer (1997), editor of the Oshkaabewis Native Journal, the ability to conjugate verbs is the key to advancement towards Ojibwemowin mastery (see appendix A for Treuer’s charts for the inanimate intransitive and transitive animate verbs).

**Maintaining the Learning**

O’Malley and Chamot (1997) suggest that for stronger associations the students develop images of new words, organize new words into groups, think about what he or she knows about the concept the word represents, try to use words in sentences or in meaningful conversation, and act out sentences. O’Malley and Chamot also classified metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies helpful for second language learners. They assert the metacognitive strategy is a decision-making process used for planning, monitoring and evaluating ones own learning process. This is done by determining and checking on the success of learning objectives. One can include directed and selective attentions as well as self-monitoring and evaluation. Directed attention is aimed at keeping focused to avoid distractions while selective attention focuses on key words, phrases or types of information according to O’Malley and Chamot. For the SLO learner, the practical application is to be aware to optimize learning Ojibwe, focusing on the learning process and self monitoring for enhancement after learning activities are completed: “What did I learn?” “How do I say_____?”

O’Malley and Chamot (1993) found social/affective strategies particularly effective in second language acquisition. Two areas O’Malley
and Chamot focus, cooperating in learning tasks and asking questions for clarification, can aid in the effectiveness in oral and written communication. Learning to ask specific questions or commands be it simple to Awegonen? (what?) to Daga, wiidookawishin! (please help me!), to AAndi gii-ategooyaan nimakizinan? (Where did I put my shoes?) will help the learner get feedback from other students and instructors. Maximizing continuation of Ojibwemowin interaction is the goal of questions and commands. The SLO learner will find that this maximized effort will lead to an euphoric sense of well being and balance when dialog improvement begins to approach fluency in Ojibwemowin, hence motivation for continued learning.

Motivation

Early researchers Gardner and Lambert (1972) found that not everything the learner hears is assimilated. The amount of language that is processed depends on the learner's motivation, needs, attitudes and emotional states. Affective factors act as a filter and determines how fast and how much language will be acquired by a learner. Motivation plays a factor in what students learn and acts as filter on what students retain. They defined instrumental motivation as the desire to learn a particular language for practical reasons such as getting a job, or being able to read instructions in manuals. Integrative motivation refers to the learner's desire to become proficient in a language in order to participate actively in the life of a community or to communicate with a particular person or group of people. Originally developed for English Second Language students, the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (see Chamot and O’Malley 1987,1989, 1993) student responsibility for language learning starts with a basic premise: attendance and participation (see fig a). For the Ojibwemowin learner this is a paramount premise. Unlike many second language learners the motivation to learn Ojibwemowin is not to be able to read the instruction manual, but to embrace the spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the Ojibwe culture according to LeAnn Little wolf and Thomas Zelman (1998).

How does this affect the learner of Ojibwemowin? Students can continue to examine their motivations and look for ways to keep motivation strong. Students can look for and participate in the Ojibwe community where ever and whenever possible through the language round tables, powwow and other gatherings in order to facilitate language learning. They can create the opportunity and need to use Ojibwemowin incorporating into daily life whenever possible, playing Ojibwemoo cribbage or Noojigiigoonyiweg! (Go fish!), for example, or using dinner table commands Daga, zhiiwitagan! (Please, salt!). Attendance may mean
attendance at a university class, immersion camp or visits to an aunt, grandparent or nursing home to receive opportunity for instruction. Participation can mean repeating words and writing them down, asking and answering questions about the weather or other subjects at hand or active listening without interrupting an aadizookan (legend). For the Ojibwemowin learner realizing language learning opportunities are attainable by all who wish to do so is encouraging.

Conclusions

There is an immense amount of material and research available on language learning. For the Ojibwemowin learner (and teachers) it is application of commitment, energy, dedication to Ojibwemowin. It is the time and energy individuals must dedicate with persistence and work to learn Ojibwemowin. Adopting a proactive approach to language learning will yield the best results. The euphoric sense of well-being and balance comes to all those when walking in the world of Ojibwemowin. Mii sa iiw!
Works Cited


