

Giga-wanishinimin ina? Will We Be Lost? The Status of the Ojibwe Language at Lac Courte Oreilles

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project is to identify the present status of the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles. In order to properly understand the current status of the language, one must first understand the effects of the various social institutions that have affected the Ojibwe language and its people. It was obvious from the starting point of this research that the continuation of the use of the Ojibwe language is in jeopardy at Lac Courte Oreilles, but I wanted to explore why the language is in its current shape, and what is being done to strengthen the status of the language and preserve it for future generations. The topic is very personal to me, since I am from Lac Courte Oreilles, and am an avid Ojibwe language student and intermediate speaker. The difficulty in the task lied in discovering how the present language status is being ignored and how the powers that be at Lac Courte Oreilles appear to be unconcerned with the language's disparity. A scant few can speak the language or are learning it and supporting its revitalization efforts, while the majority seems unconcerned regarding the future of the language. The ultimate goal of this research is to identify the status of the language and to motivate the tribe on an individual and national basis to take action and strive to retain the very component that defines the people of Lac Courte Oreilles.

Introduction

The Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe tribe of northern Wisconsin is comprised of a diverse group of people rich in culture and heritage. Although the tribe appears to have a rather strong sense of pride and identity, there is one major component of cultural distinctiveness that is highly endangered, and that is the Ojibwe language. The use of the Ojibwe language has declined at an alarming rate for the past several decades throughout the various Ojibwe reservations, but it has seemed to decline at an even faster pace at Lac Courte Oreilles. Several social institutions have contributed to this rapid decline.

With the continuing loss of tribal elders, the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe appears to be faced with a state of emergency concerning the Ojibwe language and the fight has begun to retain, revitalize, and strengthen the most vital element of cultural identity and distinctiveness. The present status of the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles seems rather gloomy and the task of regaining and maintaining it will require the effort and dedication of the tribe as a whole. Though there are many people involved in the language's restoration efforts, there seems to be many more that ignore and are unconcerned with the language's current desperate condition.

It was estimated in 2007 that only ten fluent speakers remained at Lac Courte Oreilles, a reservation made up of approximately 3,000 tribal members (Hermes). Though this number only includes first-speakers, or those who spoke Ojibwe before learning English, at least two of those elders passed away that same year. When I administered surveys to adult students of the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles, 70% claimed to know only "0-5 fluent speakers of Ojibwe." The other 30% claimed to know "6-10." There are many adult students of the language at Lac Courte Oreilles striving to obtain fluency, but these potential speakers will have learned Ojibwe as a second language.

When a language is no longer passed from mother to child and learned only as a second language, there is a substantial loss in understanding and cultural knowledge about that language and culture. In her article, "Anishinaabemowin as a Way of Being," LeAnn Littlewolf states that, "The increased contact with other languages, in particular English, the loss of language has limited individual and communal access to cultural knowledge, creating a confusion concerning cultural identity." The English language

has gobbled up and swallowed numerous indigenous languages throughout the world, especially in North America. It is predicted that only three indigenous languages will survive through the next 50 years, Ojibwe being one of them (D. Treuer *A Language to Beautiful*). It is unclear if the dialect spoken at Lac Courte Oreilles will be included in that prediction.

When I set out to identify the status of the language at Lac Courte Oreilles, numerous factors needed exploring and several questions needed to be asked. First of all, which domains is the language still dominant in? For instance, it is common knowledge at Lac Courte Oreilles that with the exception of a few families, the language has not been spoken in the homes for three generations for many, and even four generations for some. Therefore, the home setting is a domain that the Ojibwe language is no longer dominant. During the course of this study, I attended several traditional ceremonies, including naming ceremonies, seasonal big-drum ceremonies, midewiwin, feasts, funerals, etc. In all of these ceremonies the Ojibwe language was the dominant language spoken. I would estimate that over 90% of the public speaking done in ceremony was in Ojibwe. This is a definite good sign. With the Ojibwe language being the “official” language of the ceremonial domain, it can be determined that the language itself is very much alive. Simultaneously, the language is alive and very much endangered.

Languages have continually been at war with each other and although the English language has seen its fair share of competition, it had conquered many languages prior to ever being spoken in North America. The first section of this paper describes the ongoing contest of languages as a whole, and the Ojibwe and English languages in particular.

In order to understand the struggle of the language’s survival, retention, and revitalization, we must first understand why we need our language. At Lac Courte Oreilles, there seems to be a substantial difference between those who view the Ojibwe language as some old way in which their grandparents used to talk, to those that deeply value the language and are actively combating the crisis at hand. There appears to be a need to know the language; those who have no need to speak or understand the Ojibwe language do not value it in the same sense, and therefore, do not contribute to the efforts (Nayquonabe). The second section of this paper focuses on the reasons in which we, the people of Lac Courte Oreilles, *need* our language.

Historically, several outside institutions have contributed to the demise of the Ojibwe language and traditional culture and spirituality at Lac Courte Oreilles. Particularly, the church and state have worked in harmony to oppress and coerce the use of the Ojibwe language and the children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren of the oppressed are still feeling the effects today. The United States government and missionaries implemented some of the most hideous tactics devised to weaken and eventually eliminate the “Indian problem.” Known in Ojibwe history as “The Boarding School Era,” 1870-1928 had the most devastating effects on the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles. Even after the formal boarding school policy ended, children of Lac Courte Oreilles reservation attended various day schools where the use of Ojibwe language was strictly forbidden. The third section of this paper focuses on the effects of those institutions still felt today.

One advantage the community of Lac Courte Oreilles has is its own set of educational institutions. The tribe operates a pre-school for ages 3-5, a K-12 tribal school, and a nationally accredited community college. These institutions are all faced with the same dilemma of dealing with the language crisis. The language seems to be a priority in all three school settings, yet it appears we have not yet discovered how to tackle the problem and produce fluent speakers. The fourth portion of this paper will discuss the tribal school setting and some of the problems that we are up against.

The fifth section of this paper focuses on the motivational aspect of language revitalization. Many see the language as invaluable, and therefore, do not seek to learn more or use what they already know. Several references are made in this section that explain why it is necessary for the people of Lac Courte Oreilles to act immediately in regards to language, and the consequences that the tribe as a whole are at risk of facing.

In the final section of the paper, improvements are suggested for increasing the success of our language as a whole, and not just as an institutionalized program. Immersion seems to be the only logical solution to counter the continuing loss of fluent speakers. Standardizing the written system of Ojibwe at Lac Courte Oreilles also proposes a positive impact on the language learning process. The implementation of language on a community level seems to be a key component in the revitalization process.

Having grown up at Lac Courte Oreilles and living there my entire life, I know many of those involved with the language personally. I conducted several interviews with tribal leaders, language teachers, and others affiliated with the language revitalization movement. As an avid student of the Ojibwe language, I found it to be very difficult to discover and inquire about its status in my community of Lac Courte Oreilles. I administered anonymous surveys to adult students of the language at the tribal community college asking various questions concerning the present status of the language at Lac Courte Oreilles. I had planned to survey teachers of the language in an anonymous format, but due to time constraints, I was unable to administer the surveys.

The most insightful component of this research was a field experiment I conducted at the tribal store. I loitered in front of the tribal store on a busy Friday afternoon and greeted passers-by in the Ojibwe language. I asked simple conversational questions such as, “Nice day today isn’t it?” and “How are you doing today?” I kept a tally of how many people I greeted, how many could understand and converse with me in Ojibwe, how many responded to my questions in English, and how many could not understand at all. Although many appear to want and even have the need to know the Ojibwe language, “Another challenge is how to learn it; most of us don’t have a fluent speaker in our families any longer” (Nayquonabe).

Though the status of the Ojibwe language seems rather daunting at Lac Courte Oreilles, there is one little place that offers a whole lot of hope. Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Charter Immersion School was launched in 2001 by a group of eager advocates of the language and the Hayward School District (Our Place in History). Waadookodaading is a PreK-2 school where the students are taught in the Ojibwe language. Though the school isn’t owned or controlled by the tribe, it is still undoubtedly the peoples’ greatest asset when concerned with language. In the past seven years, the school has produced more Ojibwe-proficient school-age children than any other method or approach over the course of the past two decades (Our Place in History). Visiting the school or any of its community functions has had inspiring and motivational effects for many older students of the language. It has definitely been quite some time since children of Lac Courte Oreilles were heard playing, conversing, and learning in their Ojibwe language.

It is do or die for the Ojibwe of Lac Courte Oreilles. Much more is at stake than simply the loss of an ancient language. Cultural knowledge, understanding, identity and possibly even tribal sovereignty are all at risk. The question will then be are the people at Lac Courte Oreilles justifiably Ojibwe people? Twelve years ago, Dr. Anton Treuer, professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University had this to say concerning the status of the Ojibwe language as a whole:

If we- the teachers and students of Ojibwe- sit idly over the next three decades, the language will die. If that is allowed to happen, our children will no longer be Ojibwe... Today, the resources exist to enable us to maintain and strengthen a solid foundation of Ojibwe speakers to insure the future of our language and the culture it contains.

Originally, this paper was to be titled, “Giga-Wanitoomin ina Gidinwewininaan? This literally means, “Will we lose our language?” After much extensive research, interviews and conversations with those involved in the language movement at Lac Courte Oreilles and elsewhere, it was determined that this was an inappropriate title. Our language is alive; it is right under our noses, in the trees, the earth, lakes and streams. It is the people of Lac Courte Oreilles that are at risk of being lost. The ultimate

purpose of this paper is to identify the dire state of the language at Lac Courte Oreilles specifically, and to motivate the tribe as a whole to take action on an individual and national basis.

Language Competition

History has shown that with modernization and changing times, languages have long competed against one another. The case of English in the UK can help us think about the present and future of language at Lac Courte Oreilles. Throughout England and the British Isles, the English language has been challenged and has ultimately conquered every language in its path. Shifts in power have changed the way languages are used and even wiped languages out completely. Similar to the present indigenous language crisis in North America, several languages have been tested by English, and few have survived that test.

Identical to England and the British Isles, the English language has become the language of opportunity at Lac Courte Oreilles. Many see the Ojibwe language as being associated with times of the past and the English language as the key to a better future. Such is the case for the struggle in the British Isles regarding the Celtic languages. Roland Wardhaugh writes of the language struggle in the British Isles that appears to be identical to the language crisis at Lac Courte Oreilles:

Consequently, the Celtic languages in the British Isles are often associated with older people and with rural, traditional ways of life at a time when urbanization and modernity attract the young...However, by the end of the sixteenth century English was clearly in ascendancy over Welsh in law, administration, education, and commercial activities. Only religion was left to the Welsh language...A prevalent attitude has been that the Welsh language has been a barrier to progress in Wales.

Once widely-spoken in England, the French language among several others has seen its share of decline and dominance. The rivalry of English versus French had detrimental effects on the use and continuation of the French language. Political persecution in England caused a vast amount of language loss identical to the losses of language in North America; "French had become so foreign that manuals began to appear offering instruction to those who might want to learn French but who could not easily find suitable instruction" (Wardhaugh 70). Similarly, Ojibwe language learning materials have become mandatory in learning the Ojibwe language, due to a lack of speakers and exposure to the language. Although these learning materials (cds, books, tapes, manuals) are quite plentiful and accessible, they are often too expensive for the average interested student to obtain. As of today, the Lac Courte Oreilles tribe has not produced any language learning resources for those tribal members interested in learning the distinct dialect of the Ojibwe language spoken locally.

Identical to the assimilation efforts of the missionaries and Indian agents on a local scale, historically the kings of England implemented similar tactics to abolish other languages and promote the English language. Celtic languages were often the victims of this language persecution and those Celtic peoples are still suffering from those losses in language and cultural knowledge:

In this lowland area the kings established English-speaking towns and installed English-speaking masters in the lands that had previously been dominated by Celts. The English language and English ways came to dominate life in the area in contrast to the Anglo-Norman domination of England itself. (Wardhaugh 72)

These tactics devised early on in England would serve as a model for the elimination of hundreds of indigenous languages in North America. Unfortunately, many indigenous languages have suffered extinction, and the dialect of the Ojibwe language spoken at Lac Courte Oreilles appears to be in great danger of joining those ranks. The majority of the people at Lac Courte Oreilles seem to bear a resemblance to the Scottish people and their regard to their endangered Scottish language:

There are those who readily give it up for a standard variety of English, there are those who try to promote it at every opportunity, but the vast majority of Scots are apparently unconcerned either way...Most Scots see no real need for a separate language for Scotland. Indeed most seem to find the present political arrangement with England quite acceptable...language issues seem to have little more than a sentimental appeal and only to a very small minority. (Wardhaugh 74)

This attitude is evident at Lac Courte Oreilles as many seem quite comfortable with the modernization and ongoing cultural diffusion that is being experienced. Several individuals have expressed that the Ojibwe language is too hard, or that they are too old to learn the language. By providing these excuses and believing in their validity, these individuals are in fact contributing to the problem and downfall of the Ojibwe language and culture.

Why Do We Need Our Language?

Several individuals at Lac Courte Oreilles view the Ojibwe language as a thing of the past and never had the value of language engrained in them throughout their upbringing. It is these individuals that have a hard time understanding the need to retain the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles. Those who were fluent chose to speak English to their children to spare them of the oppression that they experienced in their lives. Those experiences will be further elaborated upon later in this paper. The effects of that oppression are still felt today, which is why many ask the question of why do we need our language?

Spirituality is the most common answer given when asked this question, although identity and the continuation of our people as a distinct culture and community are both factors contributing to the fight for our language's retention and survival. Many of the language speakers, teachers, students, and advocates will concur that the language is the basis of our existence as Ojibwe people, and without the language, our people will cease to exist as Ojibwe. All of the things that link our identity to our existence as Ojibwe people are connected by the language, which serves as an "umbilical cord to the land, creation, and the creator" (Flocken).

To many tribal members at Lac Courte Oreilles, this perspective is hard to understand, and even creates debate over who in fact is justifiably *Ojibwe* or legitimately *Indian*. Many that don't hold the language in high regard argue that it is the blood that runs through their veins that constitutes them as being an Ojibwe person. Many would argue that this simply defines them as descendants of the people who were Ojibwe. Dennis Jones, a professor of Ojibwe at the University of Minnesota had this to say about the relationship between the language and identity:

Language is the essence of who we are. Language is the basis of the culture; the spirituality...Language is the key to identity, to who we are. If you don't speak Ojibwe, there is nothing else distinct about you from other people. A lot of people need to be taught these concepts. They need to be taught the importance of the language. A lot of people don't hold the language as a priority. (qtd. in Littlewolf 49)

Most of the Ojibwe language's advocates at Lac Courte Oreilles are members or participants of some form of traditional religion and ceremonies. Since language is the basis of these ceremonies, those individuals strive to learn and incorporate the language in their daily lives. The need to know the language is evident and, "individuals who are not ceremonial may not have a reason to learn the language" (Nayquonabe).

A very large portion of the population at Lac Courte Oreilles is made up of Catholic or some other form of Christian peoples. Many are firm believers in their non-traditional religion and rightfully so, there appears to be a definite need to include them in the language's retention and revitalization.

After all, the Ojibwe language belongs to all of us, and we all have the right to know, speak and understand the language that defines our people. A major challenge that the people of Lac Courte Oreilles face in regards to language, is putting aside differences in religion and spirituality to unite to combat the current language crisis. All too often, traditional people have the tendency to display a sort of superiority towards non-traditional people in regards to language and their level of *Indianness*. This creates a defensive approach towards traditional people and spirituality and ultimately language. If the people of Lac Courte Oreilles are going to continue to identify themselves as Ojibwe people, these differences in religion must be put aside in order for the language to have a chance at surviving.

Institutional Effects on Language Retention

Foreign institutions have been the massive contributor to the decline in the use of the Ojibwe language and the mother-tongue transfer. These institutions have had a devastating effect on the enculturation process at Lac Courte Oreilles and the tribe has reached a state of emergency regarding the Ojibwe language. It is common knowledge that the government of the United States of America, combined with the efforts of missionaries has historically hindered the use of the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles.

In the earlier years, missionaries had limited success at converting the Ojibwe to Christian faiths. The efforts of the church made little impact in Ojibwe society until the late 1800's. Federal policies were restricting Indians to controlled areas and during the presidency of Ulysses Grant, missionaries were placed in charge of reservation areas (Littlewolf 41). Shortly thereafter, the federal boarding schools were born:

The intent of the boarding schools was to educate the American Indians by forcing them to become something they were not by a process of assimilation and acculturation into mainstream American society. The destructive effects of this experience on language loss are far reaching, still affecting people today. (Littlewolf 41-42)

Such is the case at Lac Courte Oreilles. The impact of church and state was so severe, it has been four and even five generations for some families since the mother tongue transfer of the Ojibwe language was standard practice. The grandparents and great-grandparents of my generation were taken away at an early age. Before the local day schools were established, children could be away from home for up to six years. The Ojibwe language that those children saw the world and expressed their thoughts through was the cause of unspeakable mistreatment, causing traumatizing losses in cultural knowledge and language.

The mission of the United States government was to assimilate the Indians into the mainstream culture by abolishing the elements that united them as a people. The most crucial element being language:

Federal policy makers have known the political significance of Native American languages for ages and, consequently, made eradication of native languages a political and social priority in the boarding schools of yesteryear. As a result, today in the overwhelming majority of Native American communities a scant few individuals under the age of thirty can speak the native tongue of their ancestors. Furthermore, history teaches that when a language is no longer heard, cultural distinctiveness soon fades from view. (Fairbanks 21)

The efforts of boarding schools and the assimilation process of the United States government have had a devastating effect on the language spoken by the people of Lac Courte Oreilles. The boarding schools connected Ojibwe language with shame and disgrace and that has carried over to today's generation. Many seemed unconcerned with the status of the language and even embarrassed when it is spoken to them. For them, the sound of the language has become the signifier of the concept of language shame. Others seemed extremely interested in learning the language, or at least express that interest.

Only a scant few actually work towards learning the language and contribute to the efforts of retaining and revitalizing it. Thelma Nayquonabe, an instructor at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Community College and lifetime advocate for the Ojibwe language had this to say when asked about the influence of the church on the Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles:

I have met several people in my lifetime who have wanted to have Ojibwe names but were told that they had to choose between being traditional and being Catholic. Some people manage to combine both ways. I don't know how this works. It would appear to put a strain on the importance of language.

Although the whole institutional influence has created a sort of confusion surrounding religion, the Ojibwe language, and being an Ojibwe person as a whole, many Catholic people at Lac Courte Oreilles do in fact have Ojibwe names. Many of our grandparents and great-grandparents stressed the importance of knowing our Ojibwe names, regardless of where or how they prayed. Deep inside the minds and hearts of those elders is the value of our Ojibwe language and the knowledge it contains. There were many elders that experienced the persecution of the boarding schools that still retained their Ojibwe language. Many even have expressed how they had to relearn it upon returning to the reservation. "Despite all the attempts, whether government policies, missionary efforts, or pressure from dominant culture, the traditions, culture, and language of the Ojibwe people have survived" (Littlewolf 42). Though the language and culture has survived at Lac Courte Oreilles it is necessary that the tribe take the appropriate measures to ensure that survival for future generations. The responsibility of language survival and retention is not only the tribe's as a whole, but individuals need to make the language a personal priority as well. Dennis White, administrator of the K-12 tribal school at Lac Courte Oreilles had this to say when asked about the challenges facing the language's survival at Lac Courte Oreilles:

We need to stop just giving lip service to the preservation of our language. Many people say how important it is, but do not show this as what they are doing...For many, it is now their grandparents, or great-grandparents who first tried to hide their Ojibwe in small voices in the night at the boarding schools. Deep inside of people is a desire to listen and understand the language, but there is something that is in the way.

Since there are so few fluent speakers remaining and so few domains in which the language is dominant, we reached the moment in time where it is absolutely necessary that we commit ourselves to learning our language and passing on as much as we can to our children. If our children are raised with a visible value regarding our language, we can begin to reverse the institutional effects of the church and state and keep the retention of our language a top priority. Many of us have grown up without the language being present in our everyday lives. Some of us have only heard our language spoken in ceremonies. Others who have not been exposed to our language through ceremony are at an even greater disadvantage concerning the understanding of our language and our bona fide continuation as Ojibwe people. Although the majority of activity in economic domains happens in English, one of the privileges of tribal autonomy is that it is possible for tribal governance to mandate a gradual increase in the use of the language in official tribal business and in the media. For instance, the tribal government can encourage the tribal radio station to increase language programming and expand the domains in which the language is used.

Most of the advocates of the Ojibwe language are students, writers, scholars, and other people of "an intense intellectual curiosity" (Erdrich). The English language has replaced our traditional view of the world and we continue to suffer from the consequences of that replacement. "It is, [English] after all, the language stuffed into our ancestors' mouths. English is the reason our parents didn't speak their Native language, and the reason so many of us can barely limp along in our own" (Erdrich). The saddest

result of the institutional influence is that many of the people at Lac Courte Oreilles and elsewhere is, “We are still accepting the idea that English is a superior language” (Littlebear).

Tribal School Language Setting

The Lac Courte Oreilles tribe operates its own set of educational institutions consisting of a preschool for ages 3-5, a K-12 tribal school, and a nationally accredited tribal community college. The educational system at Lac Courte Oreilles appears to be the tribe’s strongest component and most beneficial asset concerning the language. The language is a priority in all of these school settings, yet it would appear that each school needs to improve, increase, and enhance their language programming.

Tribal schools in general have previously faced much scrutiny concerning language classes. Every tribal school holds language in high regard, but many seem to be struggling with producing fluent speakers. That is the case at the Lac Courte Oreilles tribal K-12 school. Students that attend LCO Schools for the full 13 years are exposed to the language in every grade. The school struggles with managing curriculum and time allotments and Dennis White, the school’s administrator recognizes these hurdles in the overall success of the language at LCO Schools:

For K-5, Ojibwe classes are held twice a week for 45 minutes. We need to devote more time at the elementary level to Ojibwe. If we were teaching our student(s) to swim or ride a bike, and only allowed two minutes at a time, it would be a difficult task to learn to swim or ride a bike. For grades 6-8, classes are 45 minutes daily. This is more in line of time needed, but we have no standard curriculum to follow. High school students are required to take 4 credits of Ojibwe to graduate. We, however, need to better define our entire K-12 system, especially if we are to expect our four credits in HS Ojibwe to provide for some kind of advanced placement for students attending college and taking more Ojibwe.

A survey administered in the 1990’s at the best Ojibwe schools in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ontario showed the challenges that tribal school language programs face. These schools average three language instructors/staff for the entire K-12 school system. The children are exposed to Ojibwe for roughly one-half-hour per day, and sadly, these are the best schools (Flocken 14). It is no wonder that we are not getting the results that we all desire.

The issue of curriculum design is a topic that is worthy of elaborating on. Currently, LCO Schools is in the process of redesigning its curriculum for the entire school system (Joyce Miller, personal communication). Language learning appears to be a bigger challenge than originally anticipated. With the tremendous complexity of the Ojibwe language grammatical structure, teaching and learning Ojibwe has been a challenge for all Ojibwe schools, not just at Lac Courte Oreilles. Henry Flocken, a former principal of the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig K-12 Ojibwe School in Cass Lake, Minnesota elaborated on the problems facing the Ojibwe language programs in the tribal school setting:

Some schools report language classes with students coloring pictures while the instructors are beading things for personal sale outside of the school. Spot checks have found many classes not engaged in language manipulation most of the time. Mid-year and end-year reports will say their students have accomplished the objectives of their grants; but the reality is that the students have accomplished little. Programs do not want to lose next year’s funding so they report that everything is fine. Grant sources continue to pour money into stagnant programs.

Flocken continues by discussing the problems in curriculum design and the typical language approach in the tribal school setting:

Curriculum is often poorly developed and very simplistic. Typical examples are the “color crayon” and “noun vocabulary” approaches to language acquisition. These approaches consist of recitation of animals, numbers, furniture, food, and some memorized phrases. In the field of second language acquisition, these are archaic and do not teach how to use a language.

The teachers of Ojibwe language at Lac Courte Oreilles are all extremely knowledgeable in the language and culture. Many are the children of first-speakers, and grew up with a daily exposure to the language in their households. Although many of the teachers are quite versed in the language, it is unclear how many have been trained in the second language acquisition field. I know from my personal experiences of having Ojibwe classes in the K-12 setting, many of my teachers were speakers of the language without much formal training in teaching language. Formally trained speakers of the language are few and far between and there is no “pool,” so-to-speak for school personnel to draw from.

Another challenge for the Ojibwe language in the tribal school setting is dealing with the fact that the language and culture are taught separately from the rest of the subjects, and consequently have been institutionalized (Hermes). The irony in it all is how we teach culture at LCO Schools in the English language. “Students now view culture and language as something that isn’t valued as much as English and the typical American education” (Hermes 2). Although language is a priority at the tribal school, the importance of the language learning process appears to have been put on the shelf. The school is faced with the challenge of not only producing students that are prepared to enter the real world outside of the reservation’s boundaries, but by also producing students with sense of pride and culture, and ultimately a spoken proficiency of language.

The teachers at Lac Courte Oreilles Schools are faced with an ongoing debate regarding the writing systems being used. Formerly, elders and first speakers of the Ojibwe language favored the phonetic writing system, or simply “spelling it how it sounds.” The phonetic system is not favored by scholars or adult education instructors due to the inconsistencies in spelling and pronunciation, and its lack of standardization. The double-vowel system is used and endorsed by the community college at Lac Courte Oreilles, and by just about every other higher education institution that offers Ojibwe language classes. “Standardizing the Ojibwe language curriculum through consistent use of the double-vowel writing system would strengthen the revival movement throughout the Ojibwe nations” (Laslett 31). According to Dr. Anton Treuer of Bemidji State University, the orthography has been standardized and the standardized format is the double-vowel system. “Syllabic and phonetic systems, although not without merit, have not enjoyed widespread success” (A. Treuer *New Directions...*).

The teachers at LCO Schools need to adapt and adjust to the standardization of written Ojibwe in order to keep up with, and prepare our students for advancement at higher education institutions. Confusion of the students is the biggest set-back for those teaching and learning the language:

The debate about orthography has been a great stumbling block to our progress in teaching Ojibwe... We have had phonetic spelling advocates write in double-vowel and in phonetics, in the same sentence. Even our marquee in front of the school is a mixture of two orthographies. Our students are confused when they see many different spellings. (White)

The debate over the standardization of orthography at the tribal school is further hindering the progress of the program as a whole. There appears to be no valid argument as to why the LCO School shouldn’t support and utilize the double-vowel system. If the mission of the teachers is to build a solid foundation of language skills for the future, then why not teach them in the system that is standardized at almost every other educational institution?

Many parents and tribal members at Lac Courte Oreilles appreciate any bit of language that their children acquire. If they can count to ten and recite the names of different animals, they are satisfied and therefore they do not question why the students don't seem to progress with speaking skills after years of exposure to the language in an organized classroom setting. This is typical in tribal schools and similar to the situation on the Wind River reservation in Wyoming:

Sadly, no one seemed to concern themselves with trying to understand why the language was failing in the classroom. As a result, many had resigned themselves to believe that the language belonged in the home and not in the classroom. The problem with this outlook was that in many homes the language had been lost three generations back, and in a vast majority of homes, no one could speak the language. (Greymorning)

Similar suggestions have been made at Lac Courte Oreilles regarding the language failing in the classroom. In a recent faculty meeting at the school, one prominent member of the school staff suggested "doing away with the language programs at the school," since they had yet to "produce one fluent speaker." The value of the language or lack thereof in this case is apparent. This attitude is appalling to those individuals involved with the language and as a member of the school faculty; one has to question why individuals who don't understand the value and meaning of the language would even want to associate themselves with tribal education. This attitude is also common among tribal school settings. "Every school board or parent advisory committee has negative people that will fight the language; but they are obstacles, not road blocks" (Flocken 3).

Motivating the Unmotivated

For many at Lac Courte Oreilles, the Ojibwe language is not important and is not held in the same regard as it is for others. Religion appears to be the main contributing force of confusion and lack of motivation. Many tribal members are so assimilated into main stream society that they don't understand the importance of retaining the language. It is obvious that some see the only significance of Ojibwe language to be spiritual. Many do not understand the political significance of our language and what it means to us as a tribe:

Other than cultural nostalgia, why is the Ojibwe language important? It is important because it provides political distinctiveness and permits identification of the Anishinaabe as a distinct people...In other words, for a people to exist they must be distinguishable in some significant way. The important point here is that there is no "sovereignty," if there is no "people." (Fairbanks 22)

During election time at Lac Courte Oreilles, various areas are discussed and promoted in the campaigning process. These include casino per-capita payments, health care, law enforcement, business opportunities for the tribe, and tribal sovereignty. Seldom is there a real concern expressed regarding language. If we understand what our language means to our tribe as a sovereign nation, we can begin to understand why it is necessary for us to take immediate action on an individual and national basis:

We are always talking about sovereignty and rightfully so, because when we were dealing with the U.S. Government during the treaty era, our people were treated as nations equal in stature to the U.S. Government. It was a government to government relationship. We have all those attributes that comprise sovereign nations: a governance structure, law and order, jurisprudence, literature, a land base, spiritual and sacred practices, and that one attribute that holds all of these other attributes together: our languages. So once our languages disappear, each one of those attributes begins to fall apart until they are all gone. (Littlebear 10)

In the 1950's and 60's, Congress implemented the "Termination Policy." Specific tribes were targeted and ultimately terminated (Termination Policy). The majority of these terminated tribes were completely assimilated tribes that had lost their ways and their languages entirely. The U.S. Government saw that these tribes were no longer legitimately "Indian," and therefore didn't need to be recognized as a separate political entity. Essentially, these people had either been completely assimilated into mainstream American society and had lost the key ingredients that once made them a distinct cultural group, or were viewed as no longer needing the assistance of the federal government due to promising tribal business and economic stature.

It is obvious that Lac Courte Oreilles needs to act quickly in regards to language retention and from every individual that I've had contact with over the course of this study; everybody seems to understand and support the importance of language. Though we all agree that something has to be done, it is unclear if those who are uninvolved are willing to join in the fight for the language's survival. "We should not say language and culture is important if we are not willing to learn more ourselves" (White).

Improvement/Immersion

Many suggestions have been made throughout the course of this study pertaining to different ideas, concepts, and strategies that could possibly strengthen the status of our language at Lac Courte Oreilles. If the language was, is, or will be a priority for the people of Lac Courte Oreilles, immediate action should be taken on its behalf. "This means that efforts should be taken to have the language seen and heard in as many places as possible, like on street signs, the radio, computers, videos, and books" (Greymorning). The Lac Courte Oreilles tribe operates WOJB 88.9FM, its own public radio station, currently with very minimal language programming. Listeners can catch a few words on the Tuesday evening broadcast of the "Drum Song" program, but other than that, the language goes unheard over the airwaves.

Several individuals have made many brilliant suggestions regarding language retention upon learning about my study on the language's status at Lac Courte Oreilles. There is a definite desire to retain our language, but the task seems so daunting, and many do not know where to begin. With the topic of language being raised more and more recently, new ideas, theories, and concepts are being presented to combat the current crisis:

We must teach each other. We must accept each other's individual differences. We must show love, kindness, and forgiveness to each other and to ourselves...Specific things we can do are to hold community gatherings with language as the focus, perhaps in the various community centers. We can hold more community wide events with some of the many people who work on language as presenters, teaching small sessions on language. We can start to hold classes at our worksites with words, phrases, and expressions for all to learn. We can offer incentives to workers, individuals, or families who are making solid progress in regaining our language. We can include language learning in yearly contracts between tribal entities and employees. We can pay respect to those who are learning our wonderful, beautiful language. (White)

Often times, those who have a solid foundation of language speaking ability are all too critical of those learning or just starting out. This attitude has created a fear to use the language at Lac Courte Oreilles. People don't want to say things wrong, or be faced with the possibility of personal humiliation. This is common for many of our tribal languages across North America and is a barrier we must get passed and overcome:

We must sensitize our elders and fluent speakers to the needs of potential speakers of our languages. In many of our tribes, the elders are teachers and bearers of wisdom. As a result, when they criticize or make fun of a person trying to speak one of our languages they are taken very seriously, and some people will not even try to speak the language once they have been criticized by a respected elder of that tribe...Do not be so over-corrective about pronunciation. We all make mistakes...As long as we can understand each other, we are doing all right. Understanding each other in our languages is the main criterion, not our errors in pronunciation and grammar. Later on we can work on correct pronunciation, but first let us get people talking our languages and this latter aspect is going to take time. (Littlebear)

With the entire reservation educational system in the tribe's control, retaining the language is a reality, but only if it is the tribe's priority. Waadookodaading language immersion school is proof that the language is teachable and learnable. It has the potential to serve as a model for the entire educational system at Lac Courte Oreilles.

As a direction for teaching culture in schools, immersion education has much to offer. It is a strategy that could be implemented 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. (Hermes)

Indigenous-immersion, originally implemented in this country by the Hawaiians, Blackfeet, Navajos, and Mohawks is now regarded to be one of the more worthy methods for re-establishing Native languages, in addition to improving overall academic performance for Native students (Hermes). Waadookodaading has not only added hope for the language at Lac Courte Oreilles, but it has in a sense, stabilized the language on the reservation. "The status of the language has been raised; no longer is it "dying" but something people are engaged in everyday" (Hermes).

With that being said, I reflect on an experience that I had during this study. After visiting and conversing with many people in my community, both involved and uninvolved with the language, I became very discouraged and disheartened by some of my conversations. The feeling that came over me was hopelessness, and a desire to give up my mission of learning this language. I stopped in the tribal college to visit with the Ojibwe language instructor, a good friend of mine. Upon arriving at the college I noticed several small children assembled in the auditorium with a few adults that I recognized to be teachers from the Waadookodaading School.

I entered the room and was immediately taken back by what was occurring. It was February, and the children were engaged in their annual winter trapping camp. They were working on various projects throughout the auditorium, and in the center of everything was an elderly lady surrounded by children. As I approached the table they were surrounding, I noticed the elderly lady was skinning a beaver. She was explaining the process to the children (in Ojibwe), who were giving her their undivided attention. One of the teachers stood close by listening to the lady and jotted down the almost archaic terms for the various guts and organs of the beaver. The children asked questions, blurted out answers, and conversed with each other all in the Ojibwe language. Never in twenty-nine years on this reservation had I ever felt the language so strong in one place. The experience was rejuvenating, and added to my determination to improve my own speaking skills.

Immersion seems to be the only logical method for producing fluent speakers. "As we look back, around, and ahead, we have seen frustration, success and struggle. And though language immersion is not easy work, if our languages are to survive then it is a necessary work" (Greymorning).

It is necessary that the educators on all levels on our reservation rise to the challenge of using and teaching our language on a daily basis. The challenge is indeed a great one, but if we are to continue as Ojibwe people, it is mandatory. Individuals in general are responsible for taking care of our language and

the knowledge it contains. If you do not contribute to the efforts, you are in-fact contributing to the problem.

We need to re-evaluate all of our previous approaches to language teaching and learning. All too often we go to language class, copy our new words down from the chalkboard, memorize them, and write them down again on paper for our test. Many sessions of class can pass without anybody speaking or hearing the language being studied. We need to get back to our mission of producing speakers, by any means necessary. I had the opportunity to interview Keller Paap, one of the founders and teachers at the Waadookodaading Immersion School. I asked him why he dedicated his work to the revival of the language and what made him want to start a school like Waadookodaading. Paap, who wasn't raised speaking or hearing Ojibwe has developed into one of the finer speakers at Lac Courte Oreilles and is a well-respected educator throughout the Ojibwe north woods. Paap had this to say about his motivation:

The more time I spent thinking about Ojibwe language, meeting and visiting people, going hunting, fishing, picking plants and doing things that have been connected with the language for centuries, I began to realize, like many others, that we needed to be very concerned about our ability to use our language fluently, regularly, and perpetually—not just in brief greeting exchanges that within fifteen seconds return to full communication in English, nor in a classroom, or only in the invocation of a ceremony...I thought that we should be able to speak together all the time in all settings about all things to the very best of our abilities, and to continue learning, sharing, and expanding our knowledge. Language is used in all facets of life—through happiness, joy, sadness, tragedy, depression, anger, hatred, catastrophe, success, triumph, and on and on. The more I thought about this, the more I began to realize that the most effective way to carry on our language is to use it, and teach it to others, to create many “homes” for the language, sort of like rich beds of soil that would allow it to flourish, thrive, and recharge itself. This is when I began to look at many different program designs for teaching language. Through this process, I found a few things. Language immersion education, or content-based language immersion education (teaching academic content exclusively and entirely through the medium of another language) seemed to be the most effective as it involved some of the most concentrated language exposure for young children to learn not only academic content but another language simultaneously. Furthermore, raising children in another language in the home would enhance their language skills as well. Based on the intent to begin an Indigenous immersion education program, Waadookodaading was started, not only to be a school, but as a component of a complex and detailed, community-wide, intergenerational language restoration movement to create, implement, and maintain an impetus for positive change and well-being for Ojibwe people.

Language-based community events are very scarce, although many have suggested their possible positive impact. The success of these possible events will remain a mystery until implemented by the appropriate agencies, and supported by the tribal government. Language learning resources such as cds, books, videos, etc. are all available for purchase, but all of these are developed by speakers and students from other tribes, with different dialects. So far, Lac Courte Oreilles has produced no video, audio, or manuals for speaking the local dialect, and furthermore, shows no signs of developing any in the near future. I attempted to interview two members of the tribal council, but when presented with my questions, neither was willing to respond.

That is where the status of the language is today at Lac Courte Oreilles. There is a small group of people who are actively combating the crisis, a larger group of people who verbally express their support for the language but don't act, and an ever larger group of people who seem unconcerned either way.

Conclusion

It is necessary that we engrain the concept of living in two worlds to our children, so that they understand the importance of our culture and language and make succeeding in both worlds a feasible reality. We must hold our language in high regard and make the value of our language as visible as possible for our young people. The people of Lac Courte Oreilles need to understand that the language is in a current dire state, and immediate action is required. “Tribal peoples on a national front must insist that their reservation governments provide the resources for effective language programs” (Fairbanks 23).

We need to motivate more of young people graduating from high school and our tribal college to pursue careers in language education in addition to further study of the Ojibwe language itself. Our children and many of the parents of our children need to be taught that it is our language that constitutes and defines our existence as Ojibwe people. We need to be aware of the possible consequences that we face if our language ceases to be spoken.

Throughout the course of this study, more than one person has expressed their views and outlook on the status of the language at Lac Courte Oreilles. Many have said that our language is gone; it will never return to the way it was once spoken. It is to these people that I dedicate this article. I urge them to re-evaluate their outlook on our Ojibwe language and our existence as Ojibwe people. Our language is alive and in some places, it is flourishing. It is our people that are at risk of being lost. Giga-wanishinimin ina? Will we be lost? Apegiish wii-wanishinziwang. I sure hope not.

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