Native Languages at Trent University

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History
In 1969, Trent University gave birth to a new discipline called Indian and Eskimo Studies which was an offshoot from Anthropology Studies. The name did not stay for long and it was changed to Native Studies shortly after. As the discipline grew and developed the new studies became an exciting one because it was during the time of native movement for change. The topic was native issues in the news media. It was the time that the government came out with the idea do away reserves and that native people should be like everybody else in the mainstream society. It was called the white paper by the native people. It was a document made by the Department of Indian Affairs to assimilate the native people. As you all know the Department of Indian Affairs was set aside to manage the affairs of the first nations people. There was a backlash from the natives as they were not prepared to let go the responsibility of the treaties they made with the federal government. This gave the native people a need to try to change things and they needed more education in this field. Therefore, native studies education become very important discipline to the first nations.

As the need evolved, the courses and the discipline grew as native students demanded new courses at Trent Native Studies Department. Some of these courses were the native languages: Ojibway Oral Language and the Advanced Ojibway Language course. These two courses were seen as the cultural courses as the language is where the culture is. It is the principal means by which the culture is gathered, shared and this is how it is passed down from generation to the other. However, they were never written. There was no need to because the First Nations come from the oral culture. In 1974, Trent University became the first university to introduce native language courses and paved the way for the other institutions that followed after, mainly Lakehead University and Laurentian University.
Problems

Before they started, they had to look for a fluent speaker to teach the course at the university level. The first problem occurred when no one came forward who had qualifications to teach it. Those who had academic qualifications were not fluent speakers and those who had fluency were not considered academically qualified. However, traditionally, they were the most qualified because they knew the language. The next step was to get an elder to teach it. Luckily they found someone who had qualifications in it's own right because he had a good knowledge of the culture and was a fluent speaker, the late Fred Wheatley. This is how the languages got started at the university.

The first language that was taught was not a written language, it began orally. One of the problems that students had was that they were used to writing. The language was always handed down orally from generation to generation. Thus, the students had difficulty as they were use to writing. Because there was a need by the students, the first instructor did the best he could, by writing phonetically on the blackboard. Most of the time, he ran out of space because some of the words were so long. He did much research on the language. He went to the elders in the native communities to consulted them about the future written language. At the time he was told that the language should not be written as native people came from the oral culture and that they were afraid to loose this oral culture. However, the languages were dying fast and the only way for the language to be preserved was to record it.

As time went on many of the native language teachers were finding the same problem. There was alot of dilemma among the elders in the native communities whether the writing of the Ojibwa language should be introduced. Some said that it should be oral, others said that it was important to write it as the languages were not being spoken as often as it use to be. One way to record it was to develop a writing system.

Thus, there were many meetings in the communities as to what should be done with no solutions. Many recommended the writings of the Jesuits who recorded some of the languages when they were converting the native people. The Jesuits used phonetics from the English language to write it. Many could read it as it broken down in sylables in the hymn books and in the bibles. But at times it was difficult to read and write it when there was no standardization of the writings. Many historians and linguist also tried to record it by using the English phonetic system. Those who were recorders paved the way to others who were researching the language. On one of the meetings it was said that the elders encouraged to go ahead and write it as long as it was your own
dialect system. In the meantime, Trent university started their courses. This is how they started.

The oral Ojibway Language is for the first-year students, especially those who had little or no knowledge of the language. It is a conversational course for those who are interested and willing to improve fluency in Ojibwa. The course focuses also on the culture aspects of the language. That is, for example, the word *strawberry* not only means 'strawberry' but it has added significance. The *berry* means 'the heart berry'. It is the first berry that comes out in the spring. It represent life of all life. It is a symbol of the heart that is in side of the human being. The little girls when they become woman they fast for this berry, in the honour of the gift of life. The juice from this berry is a symbol of the blood that nourishes the body throughout one's life. In the traditional education they teach the girls how to respect life and in this way the individual also learns how to respect her womanhood. In this way the culture is included in the language beyond the words. Another example is the utensil word *knife*. The native people had tools that had sharp edges for cutting. Later, as the trading took place, many native people traded for better tools to use. One of these tools was the knife. It is called *gchi-mokomon*, meaning 'long knife' or 'a lance'. When the Americans came and when they were relocating the natives in the United States, they named them 'long knives'. There the name became attached to the American peoples. This word becomes animate however; if one is using the word *knife* to cut something it becomes an inanimate word. These are very important to include in the study of the language courses so that the language doesn't become only inanimate language.

In any case, the course emphasizes the use and understanding of the language. It includes writing, speaking, listening and reading skills by using the new writing system which Chuck Fiero developed at Lakehead University.

The students come to class three times a week with one hour of instruction and one hour of laboratory work. Some of the tapes that are used are by Isadore Toulouse, called Kidwenan, tapes by Basil Johnston, Ojibway Cultural Foundation, and tapes that were made by Fred Wheatly (which are not for sale). The late Fred Wheatly did a good deal of research of the language in the surrounding area and did not publish his work.

The texts that are used are: *Eastern Ojibwa–Chippewa–Ottawa Dictionary* by Richard Rhodes, *Nishnaabemdaa Pane*, by the Ojibway Cultural Foundation, and *An Ojibwe Word Resource Book* by John Nichols and Earl Nyholm. The last book is used as the resource book only for those who are from the western dialect area. Each of the these are used as a guide if they are from that area. These books are put on the reserve library but the only book that they have to have is the *Nishnaabemdaa Pane*. 
Some of the problems encountered by the students is that of the different writing systems some that were written by the missionaries and others who came after. There is still a good deal of work to be done in developing written materials for students to use.

In the beginning of the course it tries to point out the development of the different stages of the writing system. That is, students are prepared as much as possible to educate them of the problems in the writing system.

Another problem is that the students need to know what animate or inanimate words are and what words the language uses to make it flow. Example: *Manda desnaagan* ‘This is a plate’. However, *manda* is also used sometimes by Ojibwas and Odawas for ‘here’ especially in the Manitoulin dialect. Another example, *Maaba kik* ‘This is a pail or a pot’. It has same significance because natives did not use pails in the olden days. This is animate possibly because the pot moves and contains some kind of cast iron. In teaching, the language, I came across also the word for locatives (denotes the place or thing) but it also identifies the likeness of something. It not only tells you where it is but it looks like, for example, *Kwe inining zhinaagwase* ‘The woman looks likes a man’.

In the second term, the course begins to develop sentences. The students begin to learn how to tie the words together. It looks at the basic root word and how it changes by putting suffixes and prefixes by adding the root word.

The advanced language looks at more grammatical structure of the language. The students who take the course are usually those who want to study the language, fluent speakers, students who have take another language course for the teacher training or from those from Anthroplogy in the linguistic study. Some times those who study modern languages such as French or English also take the course. Thus, there are variety of the students who come in the language courses.

In the beginning of the course enrolments in the university the languages courses were not seen in an academic sense. There was a lack of legitimacy in taking the native language courses. However, as time went on they were accepted by the department as efforts to be recognized.

These courses give the students, native or non-native, the basics to learn the language but it doesn’t give them the fluency it deserves. First, there are only two courses offered. There is no third year course offered to support and to advance the students. In the advanced level there is low enrollment. It looks like there is lack of interest to do further study, or it may be that this is all they want for now. However, those who take the advanced language are always inquiring when there will be another language added on to this. With the cutbacks and shortages of staff within the university it would
be not be highly recommended in the higher administration. What every university looks at are statistics in the courses so that it comes economical.

But what the courses give to the students is pride. The culture in the language has a rich heritage and it is an opportunity for the native students to learn the language. It gives non-native students the inside picture of the culture. They are usually very proud and begin to appreciate the native culture. It gives them an understanding more of the native peoples. In this way, it is an important step in the process of reclaiming and revitalizing the language at a university and this is one of the Trent Native Studies' uniqueness.

With the languages being taught in kindergarten right up to high schools, the universities should be preparing higher learnings of the native languages at university levels in the near future to meet the needs of the first nations. Researchers should be concentrating more on developing the language material for schools to use. Granted, there are very few fluent speakers returning to school to study their own languages, there is a need to have program in institutions at a B.A. level for languages. Indeed, there are no Masters programs for First nations people to go to further their education in this area. There are no native language programs anywhere in Canada, indirectly there are but they are under anthropology or in education area but no specific courses in native studies area.

APPENDIX

Dr. Don McCaskill. Former chair of the Native Studies, Trent University, Native Studies Meeting, Peterborough, Ontario.


Marene Castellano. Professor, Native Studies Department, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario.

Fred Wheatley. Native Studies Course, N.S. 380, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario.

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