

Student Perspectives on Mi'gmaq Language-Learning through Multi-Modal Teaching: A Community-Linguistics Partnership

SUMMARY

This presentation shares the experiences of heritage Mi'gmaq learners in a partnership with linguists, as they all participated in and contributed to a multi-modal language class. It describes the successful aspects of the teaching method and atmosphere, the linguistic contributions made, and advises on implementation of such a method.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to share the experiences of heritage Mi'gmaq language learners who engaged in a summer Mi'gmaq-as-a-second-language class. Also participating in the class were linguists collaborating with the teachers to document and expand the multi-modal teaching method to a digital platform. In this method, teachers Mary Ann Metallic and Janice Vicaire fostered an atmosphere of equality between themselves and the students. The students were encouraged to learn horizontally from each other, as well as from the speakers around them in their day-to-day life.

The method combines pictures, speaking, and minimal text in an optimally-challenging environment. The pictures encourage students to leave English outside the classroom and reduce the amount of word-to-word translation, thereby diminishing English's status as the default communicative language. There was no strict syllabus and the teachings catered to the students, focusing on material they wanted to learn. The absence of grading relieves the habitual school-related pressure to perform; students are self-motivated. This method could be extended to other Algonquian languages because of its effectiveness in simplifying polysyntheticity (see e.g. Baker 1996), and because it reflects the primarily oral status of the language in the community.

The linguists made the following contributions to the program: (i) documentation of the program and adaptation into a digital platform; (ii) connecting intuitive speaker knowledge to meta-linguistic information about formal grammatical patterns; and (iii) documentation of the language for linguistic research and community interests. Linguistic research informed the data structure of the complementary digital program, developed to both complement the in-class instruction, as well as to increase accessibility for students living outside of the community.

In our presentation, we introduce the method, its strengths and weaknesses as experienced by students, and provide suggestions for the implementation of such a program in your own community.

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