Aboriginal Language Education in British Columbia, Canada: Some Issues on Endangered Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper illustrates mainly three areas of dilemmas that aboriginal language education faces, especially where their languages are severely endangered having few speakers left in the local communities. The areas of dilemmas are namely purpose/framework, goal, and assessment of language learning. These issues are discussed comparing aboriginal language education with second and foreign language education, and the difficulties in aboriginal language education are argued to be caused by its unique position in language education.

While the exact number of aboriginal languages spoken in Canada is hard to be determined, 60-plus languages are reported in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2015), and more than half of them are spoken in British Columbia (BC) alone. Compared with other provinces which have fewer but more thriving languages, most of the local languages in BC face severe endangerment.

Some communities have aboriginal language immersion schools for children. It is very effective to learn their language, though it requires the parents' commitments of their language use at home as well. The Líl'wat Nation,[1] for example, in Mount Currie, BC, started their own band school including an immersion program in the early 1970s. The number of fluent speakers in the community of 2000+ residents (Líl'wat Nation, 2016) is currently estimated in the range of 15 to 20 by community members.

They offer an immersion program to five- to eight-year-old children for four years, and they learn their own language in language courses through high school. Although language learning requires a life-long achievement, it is hard to maintain and/or improve their learning after they graduate from high school in many cases. Using the scale of thirteen levels in 'intergenerational disruption' by Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig, 2017), the first level being an international language such as English and the thirteenth level being extinct, the Líl'wat language would fit into the eleventh level where 'the only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language,' though Ethnologue reports it is in the ninth level.

This paper deals with current situations in aboriginal language education in BC, describing dilemmas in three areas: aboriginal language not as second or foreign language; goal of language learning; and assessment of language learners. The aim is to establish a distinctive position of aboriginal language in language education and to contribute insightful views to non-aboriginal language educators. Some primary data are from interviews conducted in the community of Líl'wat during 2015 and 2016.

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[1] It is also referred to as "Lillooet" in English.

Language Learning

Motivation of Language Learning

One of the key elements to the success of language learning is motivation including necessity and benefit of language use. The more widely a language is spoken, the more learners are attracted and likely to be successful in mastering the language. In the case of aboriginal language learning, motivation is distinctive. Students learn the language because it is their ancestral language. In that sense, it is reported at First Nations Language Conference in Vancouver, BC, in 2017 that some local communities use the term 'mother language' to refer to their language even though many people in those communities do not speak it as the mother tongue.

Based on the interviews conducted in a BC local community during 2015-6, all participants stress the importance of their language revitalization because their language represents who they are. When asked why it is important to teach the language and maintain the language, one interviewee, who is a retired high school language teacher, answered:

> Because it's the backbone of who we are. It's the backbone of the culture. If we lose language, we've lost the culture, and who we are as people. So that's why it's important.

Another interviewee, who is also a language teacher, said, 'You won't know who you are unless you know the language.' People have indigenous belief that their language and culture and land are all connected deeply, and their identity depends on them. That being so, another interviewee states:

> We need to continue sharing the language with little kids, children, so that they will hear it and speak it, and they will carry on because language, once my mom told me that, language is our land, because everywhere we go there is a name in our language, or a place name or community…. That's another really strong point that we want to keep our land and…we need to speak our language.

The motivation is not merely the outcome of language learning. It is reclaimant of their identity for many people, who are still suffering from decolonization process, as well as the acquisition of their self-respect. A drawback from their motivation is that, for the people who did not grow up speaking their language as the first language, the language use is barely more than that of a foreign language. Since most 30-plus languages are spoken in such small communities in BC, opportunities to use the language is next to none in the society outside of their shared language communities. Besides, having few speakers left in many communities, the language use outside of school is also limited. On the other hand, this clear motivation keeps educators and learners going and the growth of semi-/partial-speakers and learners is remarkable in the last several years (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014).

While the use of the language is less than one would be able to use a foreign language spoken elsewhere, their motivation is to revive the language so that they and/or their

children/grandchildren will be speaking it as their first language. The gap between their current status and goal is very challenging to fill in.

Language Education Guideline

In any language education, there are short- and long-term goals set in different levels of students' learning as well as general objectives in overall language learning. For example, Japan has federal goals in learning its national language and a foreign language. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2009, 2010) sets overall objectives upon implementation of Japanese as a national language and English as a foreign language (EFL) in the curriculum guidelines for primary and secondary education. In elementary schools, while these objectives for foreign language education aim mainly to develop children's communication abilities in English, the goal is also intended to make them accustomed to the pronunciations by giving an early exposure in English. MEXT (2010) further describes objectives and contents of the instruction for four skills, speaking, listening, writing, and reading, emphasizing on communication with non-Japanese speakers, namely English speakers, and encouragement of intercultural understanding. These contents of instruction become more about language ability in the curriculum guidelines for junior high schools, and more about communication ability for high schools. As described, Japan has federal curriculum guidelines for both national language and foreign language education, and English is treated as the only foreign language. Thus, it is easier to narrow down the objectives and act together toward the goals.

On the other hand, some countries do not have one, and Canada is one of them, instead, having provincial curriculum framework for aboriginal language and culture programs (Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education, 2007; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth School Programs Division, 2007; Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000). One of the main differences in non-national language environment between Canada and Japan is that aboriginal languages are the first language for some people and the second language for others in Canada. This situation is reflected in curriculum frameworks; for instance, Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (2000) lays out both First Language outcomes and Second Language outcomes. When aboriginal people are in the environment to speak their language as the first language, the language is more likely to be recognized and fully supported in the education system. Thus, this paper limits the issue of language treatment as second or foreign language.

If the definition of 'second language' and 'foreign language' as in ESL and EFL are applied to aboriginal language education, the use of the language greatly differs according to the language status of the province or the area of residence. The language status is also influenced by the number of speakers and learners since it would not be feasible to implement aboriginal language as a second language if a language has only few speakers left. Thus, none of the ideas of 'second language,' 'foreign language,' or even 'additional language' fits in the case of aboriginal language education. As well, 'heritage language' is not really appropriate here, since heritage languages are not necessarily threatened to be extinct.

With this rigorous condition, the curriculum framework is extremely trying for many local communities in BC, particularly where resources are scarcely available; however, the ultimate goal of language learning remains, which is to increase language speakers, especially fluent speakers.

Fluency

The definition of fluency has been a research topic for many researchers (Chambers, 1997; Fillmore, 1979; Kormos & Dénes, 2004; Pawley & Syder, 1983). Fillmore's (1979) four concepts of fluency consist of temporal, semantic, pragmatic, creative ability in language use. One is considered to be fluent if s/he: speaks for a long period of time without difficulty; produces coherent sentences; says or responds appropriately according to the situation; and makes innovative use of language when encountering something new.

Fluency is subjective, and there is no definite measurement of fluency in any languages. First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) defines that fluent speaker is someone who 'self-identifies or is identified by fellow community members as having the ability to converse and understand the language with no use of English' (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014, p. 11). Having the history of residential school, FPCC also introduces the term 'latent speaker' (p. 12), meaning someone who understands the language but does not speak it due to her/his traumatic experiences. It is plausible that this type of speaker has the language knowledge equivalent to fluent speakers; in other words, s/he has linguistic competence but lacks language proficiency.

In BC local communities, fluent speakers do not only have language proficiency but also have knowledge of their land and culture. They are typically the elders in the community, and the opportunity to speak their own language is very little. As a consequence, even fluent speakers struggle to remember words or need time before telling a story, especially since many of them do not read or write the language.

Generally, in language education, fluency is not concerned only in speaking and listening, but extends to the other skills, reading and writing. The curriculum frameworks for aboriginal language and culture (Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education, 2007; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth School Programs Division, 2007; Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000) also designate learning outcomes of reading and writing abilities in different levels. Practicing them in the communities with little resources is nevertheless non-viable.

Significance of Fluent Speaker in Aboriginal Communities

When endangered language is in discussion, the number of fluent speakers is what makes a language endangered as well as the language use. Even though there are a sufficient number of semi-/partial-speakers or learners, it does not make it less endangered. It only means that the language has more possibility to be spoken for longer years to come. Communities respect and value elders for their knowledge of language and culture, who are usually older than late 70s.

The use of aboriginal language is described as similar to foreign language above; yet, this comparison is probably not appropriate, seeing that the kind of foreign language targeted by learners is generally used as the main language in daily life in the local community as well as at local schools and workplaces, and there would not be concerns of difficulty in finding the target language speakers in certain places. In addition to the number of fluent speakers, the domains and functions of language use are considered in language endangerment. UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) classifies six degrees of endangerment based on language use. The worst degree means the language is extinct, and the languages in the second worst degree are 'used only in a very restricted domains and for a

very few functions' (p. 10). Functions such as rituals or traditional ceremonies are used to be conducted by fluent speakers with special training. Nowadays, those speakers are not necessarily fluent, but are trained by fluent speakers, if there are any, and learn to be, for example, longhouse speakers.

As mentioned earlier, most fluent speakers of aboriginal languages are in late 70s or older, who went through residential school. It is frequently the case that they are fluent in a dominant language, namely English, which is the main language used at home within their family, and are hesitant to speak their language due to awful experiences at residential school which executed 'aggressive assimilation' (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005, p. 43; Thomason, 2015, p. 20) as government policy as well as to the fact that they see few fluent speakers to talk to.

Fluent speakers were normally raised in oral culture. Many communities started to adapt alphabet writing system in the 1970s; therefore, it is expected that, even if they speak their language fluently, they do not read or write unless they learned the writing system as adults. For learners of endangered languages, those fluent speakers are the ultimate goal of their language learning.

Fluency in Language Education

The term 'fluency' in second/foreign language education and in aboriginal language education works in slightly different ways. It might be too demanding to posit fluency in all skills as a goal at local schools in BC. While the curriculum frameworks for aboriginal language and culture (Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education, 2007; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth School Programs Division, 2007; Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000) set out learning outcomes of four skills, those are based on a pre-existed curriculum of other languages; in this case, English language arts programs (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000, p. 65).

It is true that there is a necessity to learn reading and writing. People in post-residential school generation did not grow up in oral culture. Such learners learn better with materials in hand, and they can also contribute to archive materials if they can write. However, where the achievement of all four skills is impracticable, oral fluency is their priority.

Another reason why the term 'fluency' is different in aboriginal language education is that many learners wish to use their language in the same manner as their elders do. In that sense, fluency in speaking and listening is what matters the most, and it would be very ambitious to try achieving fluency in all skills. In addition, it might sound disrespectful to elders if they mention becoming a fluent speaker is not sufficient for their language education, when many elders do not read or write their language.

Most of the aboriginal communities adapted their writing system from alphabet, or some created their own writing system. Many linguists worked with the communities to establish practical orthography based on International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is modified to deal with some phonetic and phonemic distinction and sounds that are not in English.

The fluent speakers who learned the writing system are generally called native linguists. Some are trained at university, and others are self-taught using the dictionary. What makes the matter more complicated is that even one language may have different writing systems by dialects. For example, Halkomelem, one of the Salish languages spoken in the

lower mainland in BC along the Fraser River and in the Vancouver Island, identifies three dialects, and their practical orthographies are similar but not identical. In fact, the downriver dialect adapted the North American Phonetic Alphabet, which is a slightly modified version of IPA (Musqueam Indian Band, 2011), and the practical orthographies in the other two dialects differ in a few letters (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2018). In some cases, even the fluent speakers have to check the spelling in the dictionary because the writing system is not fully intuitive; rather, it is arbitrary as in any other languages. On the other side, there is not really a gap between oral and written language. In that sense, special writing courses are not necessary whereas languages such as English require more hours for academic writing.

As much as some people hesitate to teach grammar to younger children from the emphasis of oral culture, systematic learning and teaching are often effective when the learners are beyond critical age and adults. One presenter at First Nations Language Conference in 2017 demonstrated a communicative approach to teach adults without using English as a medium of instruction (Maracle, 2017). His presentation showed the effectiveness of morphological drills. Many other presentations focused on early childhood language education; hence, total physical response and tools to build vocabulary and phrases are the mainstream of teaching methods.

As explained above, it is their priority to raise fluent speakers in the communities; yet, there is a need for more native linguists even if they are not fluent. In many communities where fluent speakers are in late 70s or older, the urgency of recording and documenting the language is without a doubt impeccable. It used to be the linguists who worked on language documentation and archive, and there were some conflicts between linguists and communities (Kiyosawa, 2015). Now that fairly a lot of linguistic work has been done in many languages, and more language documentation and practical materials are needed in the communities, no one is better to do the community-based research than the community members. Such native linguists do not have to be language teachers; however, they need some linguistic knowledge and skills for documenting and archiving language, so that future generations can work on corpus study in case the language loses fluent speakers.

Native linguists can be adult learners of the language or high school students who learned the language since their early age. Even if they are not fluent speakers, they will be a great asset to keep the language alive with some skills and grammatical knowledge.

Assessment

Many languages have established assessment tests or systems to examine language ability/proficiency, focusing mainly on measuring comprehension, vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and communication skills. Second language (SL) learning, especially, evaluates these language abilities and skills which Hammerly (1991) defines as 'knowledge about, and ability to use, an SL in terms of three components, namely, linguistic, communicative, and cultural competence' (p. 41). Most English tests for ESL/EFL learners measure language competence.

On the other hand, when aboriginal languages are in school curriculum, they are to be assessed in both language competence as well as performance, which is 'the linguistic, communicative and/or cultural behavior itself' (Hammerly, 1991, p. 41). As many communities have oral proficiency as the main aboriginal language learning goal, some tests were developed to assess oral skills, such as the Hualapai Oral Language Test; the Window Rock Oral Language Test; and the Alchini Bizaad Comprehension Test or ABC Test (See

references within Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2008, pp. 177-79). As those tests are mostly used to evaluate oral performance, they failed to measure the language competence in some cases. Whether the tests measure language competence or performance, the learners would perceive that the result is the assessment of their language ability; in other words, it defines them as aboriginal people.

One teacher shared his experience including observations of students' participation and efforts in grading at high school:

> Uh, well, I sometimes just grade them on things that I've taught them, [for example,] how they can speak back. And we do writing and reading, too, of the language, so they have to do quizzes and tests, and stuff like that. And just how well they participate and their effort and their attitude about learning.

When aboriginal languages are taught at school as courses, the learners are not necessarily assessed and graded on their language ability alone, but cannot avoid being labeled according to their grades. It might be discouraging for some people if they take it for being less as their own people.

A different type of language assessment tool has been developed (McIvor & Jacobs, 2016), which is intended for adult learners to see and track their level of learning. This is based on self-assessment of how well the learners think they can do in each activity in speaking and understanding the language, and they place their own proficiency by five scales of beginner or intermediate level. It is effective to see one's position and progress of language learning by themselves, and reflection of own learning advancement need not be compared with other people's. They learn their own language for their identity and self-respect, and their journey cannot be labeled by language ability.

Assessment at school should be, in the same way, encouraging and inspiring without pressure. It should be the praise of one's accomplishment rather than the appraisal. Only the problem is that aboriginal language learning would not function as a part of school curriculum without any form of objective assessment schema. In that sense, language teachers are placed in contradictorily difficult position.

Conclusion

The dilemmas in the purpose, goal, and assessment of language learning described in this paper yield the necessity of distinctive area of language learning for aboriginal language. They want their language to be the main means of communication in their community as it used to be a long time ago. When I interviewed a couple, a wife and a husband, who were both involved in starting their own community school more than 40 years ago, the wife stated their initial hope back then:

> I think for us to really get back what we really thought [or] envisioned was to have our own language and to have our cultural background and our own stories. That was what we wanted. ...we wanted to be Líl'wat.

The husband had more desire for school to play a role for the sake of the community, and noted that learning their language and history should be community norms:

> I think that the whole community should be on the Líl'wat education to learn the language, learn the history, write our own books, and design the system that is good for Líl'wat. It doesn't matter if you want to go outside of Lillooet, then you have that option to do that…

Their language is meant to be used inside of the community by community members since the language is not merely a communication tool for them. It is strongly tied to their land and spirituality. Although this idea does not exclude the language use outside of the community or by non-members of the community, their aim is more focused on the language use within the community. In that sense, aboriginal language learning has a special purpose to serve as community language or territory language, which was born in their land, is inherited from their ancestors, and has been struggling to thrive.

Acknowledgement

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