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# THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF SPEAKING AND WRITING

## In the Teaching of Languages in Indigenous Environments

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### The languages of instruction in Indigenous communities

Language teaching in Indigenous communities in Quebec follows two pedagogical systems: majority language instruction (L2) and Indigenous language instruction (L1). The latter system prevails in nations where language preservation is strong. This is the case for the Atikamekw, Cree and Inuit people. This teaching takes place at the primary level, with application methods that may vary locally, such as the school year until the system fully applies (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade). Attempts to implement language teaching are also beginning to be made in Atikamekw high schools. Subsequently, students move on to learning in L2 - with, possibly, maintaining a certain proportion of teaching in L1.

The other system, namely instruction in the L2 majority language only, applies to children of Indigenous tongue in communities where the use of the native language is high, particularly the Innu communities of the Basse-Côte-Nord, and to half of the Atikamekw primary school students. L2 immersion also applies to cohorts of Indigenous students once the program is completed. It seems that the well-established teaching practice of this second language as a mother tongue (Morris et al., 2007) continues to predominate (Da Silveira, 2015; Visser & Foret, 2014).

In communities where the language is still spoken, some Indigenous youth are simultaneous bilinguals, in the sense that they acquire the Indigenous language and majority language more or less simultaneously, for example, when they have studied in the city and then return to school in their community; some are even native bilinguals when they are constantly exposed to both languages from birth. But in



the requirements of speech types and evaluate the performance of their peers in the first year." P. 509.

The old dichotomy between written abstract thinking and oral concrete thinking must be challenged, because it is not the modality that determines the degree of abstraction, but rather the nature of the language task. This applies regardless of the language. Identifying important ideas from a presentation by a classmate or an audio presentation (after careful listening), rephrasing an idea more explicitly, developing a common point of view in a group discussion, discussing a solution to a difficult problem, all these situations can be mentally demanding, especially if performance objectives on the language itself are added.

School oral language is a natural part of teaching when it is part of an approach that recognizes speaking and writing as two manifestations of the same language competence, and which systematically focuses on the complementarity of these two modalities. Speaking supports writing; in return, the written language helps to refine oral comprehension and the production of complex and varied discourses.

This didactic orientation is fully aligned with a broader conception of literacy, no longer limited to reading/writing, but encompassing all language skills and their use in any personal or social circumstances that require it. This is well expressed in the definition of literacy given by the *Réseau québécois de recherche et transfert en littératie* (2016): "The ability of a person, an environment and a community to understand and communicate information through language on different media to participate actively in society in different contexts."

This statement recognizes the often-overlooked reality that literacy is also a collective ability, because as noted, the level of literacy that exists in an environment influences children's literacy learning. In addition, the notion of collective literacy takes on an even broader reach when we consider that expectations about literacy and the way we think about it varies with sociocultural contexts (UNESCO, 2006, chap. 6). Therefore, in an Indigenous environment, where the body of texts in ancestral languages is limited, school oral language can also serve to stimulate written productions, whose development can be oriented according to what communities perceive as necessary to express in their language through this means. This type of literacy does not proceed from any previous conception since it is created as it is developed.

## Second-language communication

As mentioned at the beginning, for many Indigenous young people, the majority language is a second language, a reality that schools do not consider. Following their study on performance on 601 Innu first-language children from six Innu elementary schools, Morris et al. (2007) state: « When children are asked to master a new language and, at the same time, to adapt to school and pursue literacy, they are put in a situa-

tion where the majority have no hope to succeed. Very early on, children start to experience failure [... It must] be recognized that these are non-French-speaking students who must quickly develop literacy in French. Then, it is a question of creating the conditions that will allow children to learn oral French in the first place and then to access literacy, without, however, their mother tongue being excluded from school." p. 47. In other words, the second language must be taught as a second language. What does this mean?

## Speaking in L2

Since the 1960s, a trend in L2 has developed known as pedagogy of communication, which emphasizes the systematic learning of oral communication skills through authentic learning situations. It is known that at the neurocognitive level, procedural knowledge (what one does, skills) and declarative knowledge (knowledge) is stored in separate brain areas that do not communicate directly with one another. Thus, the implicit knowledge of the language is acquired through the practice of verbal interactions in contexts of communication, without paying attention to the form of utterances. The rules that are learned in this way remain unconscious; therefore, native speakers are generally unable to explain these rules (unless they studied them in school). Knowing how to speak spontaneously does not automatically provide knowledge of grammar. Conversely, grammatical knowledge, which is consciously learned through study, does not in itself confer the ability to use it spontaneously. According to Paradis (1994, 2004), this cerebral dichotomy explains that speakers are not grammarians and that grammarians do not transform themselves into speakers.

Speaking is the most direct way to acquire the implicit knowledge of L2 and this is what teaching must begin with, regardless of the school level at which this teaching begins, with emphasis on the correction of errors. Because this is the starting point for everything that follows. «[...] at the beginning of learning to write in L2, a learner's written productions are only the reflection of his oral productions. [...] until the correct form has been frequently used spontaneously orally at first, it is unlikely that the learner will be able to use it correctly in writing. At this level, writing is only a transposition of speaking. » (Germain & Netten, 2005, pp. 1-2).

Since proficiency in L2 results from both the practice of communication and the study of grammar, and one cannot replace the other, both are needed. So, once the study of the oral language has begun, not before, Germain and Netten recommend as a didactic sequence: 1. speaking; 2. reading, and 3. writing, in this order. Then, it is necessary to «complete the picture by having pupils read the texts written by their classmates and make them talk about them so that they can reuse the language structures they have learned.» (Germain & Netten, 2012, p. 18). The complete sequence is then oral-reading-writing-reading-oral, according to a spiral



