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*Reducing anxiety, increasing core competence: a practical minimalism for beginner adult heritage learners of  
Eastern Algonquian languages*

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## 1. Adult heritage learners: options and concerns

- Recurrent problems in language revitalization (classes) for adults:
  - (a) No one shows up.
  - (b) Everyone gives up.

Mostly because they either already think the language is too hard (a), or find in the classes that it is, for them (b).

- Most people would like to learn, but they find it *overwhelming*.
  
- Our goal: making the language actually easy to learn---and getting the word out that it is.

- Three main ways of reclaiming language:

- (a) immersion

- (b) Master-Apprentice

- (c) linguistese

- (a) rarely an option for full-time working adults; (b) limited by number of masters available for apprentices. *(+ both are "deep but slow": good, but an immediate turnoff to many)*

- (c) is inaccessible, ineffective, and off-putting: but still one of the main ways language-learning is offered, especially through academic institutions.

- (a-c) work well for many, but still leave a big chunk of people un(der)served.

- Here: a new option. Something that draws insight from linguistic understandings, but offers them only via a practical, accessible, immediately usable "un-schooling" form---with a minimal, non-overwhelming presentation: something busy adults can actually keep up with.

- Not meant to replace (a-b): just a way to optimize getting beginners off to a good start.

- New approach now being successfully applied to Penobscot, Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, and Mi'kmaw.

design (+now): *Penobscot*

Carol Dana, Gabriel Paul, James Francis

*Penobscot Nation Dept. of Cultural & Historic Preservation*

first implementation: *Maliseet*

Andrea Bear Nicholas, Darryl Nicholas, Victor Atwin +  
A. Brooks, T. Brooks, A. Lyons, K. Nash-Solomon, J. Paul

*St. Mary's Maliseet First Nation/STU*

developing now: *Mi'kmaw*

Stephanie Googoo, Alwyn Jeddore, Jane Meader

*Membertou/Ekasoni/CBU*

## 2. Key points in the overall curriculum design (preview)

- Core principle: seriously acknowledge adult-learner linguistic performance anxiety, via an ongoing group/collective approach.
- Teach ending-based patterns (= *the most frequently-used forms*) via simple MODEL-forms, that show new patterns simply as extensions of already familiar ones. (vs. *abstract-parts-and-rules*)
- Avoid the norm of teaching "whole charts" exhaustively before introducing new ones, through extreme pattern minimalism = teaching just the **YOU** and **ME** forms, then moving on to the next.
- Introduce all the essential patterns as soon as possible (= *follows from the above*).
- Instead of going from simple to complex, work from the simplest version of the most complex, and then backtrack. (*We will see this with the GIVE verb....*)
- Radical minimalism---lesson-targets of one to two lines only---allows us to keep the lessons entirely oral: freely sharable through "coffeeshop learning".

**Core principle: seriously acknowledge adult-learner linguistic performance anxiety.**

- Not just at the start with a quick appeal to "just relax and have fun, don't be afraid to make mistakes", but continually and thoroughly as a group, making it clear that this experience does not indicate individual failure/inability, but is a deeply natural one, felt by everyone in the group.
- Fear of making mistakes in front of peers is by far the major concern of learners in the communities I have worked with. So developing group-based recognition and support for this anxiety is absolutely essential for learners to keep moving forward.

*(You are not making mistakes, we are...together.)*

- Lesson material itself must be "anti-intimidating": minimal in target content, and having obvious immediate practical use in daily life.

*(Almost no lists: numbers, colors, and animals---no plurals, even. Just whittling down to what few language patterns give beginners the most immediate communicative oomph. If we teachers---AND LEARNERS---can't say exactly how a lesson (part) does this, then it's not right for a beginner lesson. Goal: sending people home with nothing but what they can use immediately---since you don't forget what you never stop using.)*

**Teach ending-based patterns (= the most frequently-used forms) via simple MODEL-forms, that show new patterns simply as extensions of already familiar ones.**

- We should teach the most commonly-used words/phrases.
- The most commonly-used words/phrases in many Native languages are actually endings.
- No need to teach "endings"; model-words do it for us. No need for technical names or abstracted components: good for monolingual immersion, and accessible for non-linguist native speakers.

(Assume *mili* 'give me (it)' has been learned.)

"Remember *mili*?"

- "Yes, *mili* is 'give me'."

"That's why we say *wičohkemi* for 'help me'. *mili* = 'give me', so *wičohkemi* = 'help me'."

- Creates a small but tight network of mutually reinforcing core forms and uses. Which allows pattern-explanations to simply be, "It's like [THAT FORM YOU ALREADY KNOW]".
- So: *not rules, but relations*.



**Avoid the norm of teaching "the full chart" exhaustively before introducing new ones, through extreme pattern minimalism.**

- For each pattern, teach just the **YOU** and **ME** forms. (Then move on to the next.)
- With this, beginners can hold a minimal but real conversation, about **YOU** and **ME**.
- ... and can focus first and foremost on the meaning/use of a pattern without overloading on/being distracted by its full set of possible forms.
- Since they need only learn two forms from each, they also get to learn a richer range of patterns (ideally: all the foundational ones) as early as possible.

*(Having mastered the two starter-forms, learners will likely then actively ask for the rest of the pattern, rather than having it be dumped on them by the teacher.)*

**Introduce all the essential patterns as soon as possible (= follows from the above).**

**New approach:** teach the Algonquian independent- and dependent-clause forms simultaneously.

**Old approach:** learners must master the whole independent first, before moving on to the whole dependent.

But: in actual use, dependent-clause forms (a) are equally common, and (b) allow learners to produce complex sentences from the start. *(b) = a major motivation for adult learners*

- The minimalist approach (YOU+ME only) makes this doable: only four forms (YOU+ME x Idp+Dep) introduce an entire working corner of the system.

**Instead of going from simple to complex, work from the simplest version of the most complex, and then backtrack.**

- Penobscot GIVE forms (like *YOU-GIVE-HER-IT*) use all the core patterns found in simpler relations like *YOU-HELP-HER* and *YOU-HELP-IT*.

- So if GIVE can be mastered first, then the other two patterns are just subsets of the GIVE pattern, which is already established, through its small set of model-words.

*(Contrast the standard approach: first teach "simple" YOU-WALK, then build up to "complex" YOU-HELP-HER and YOU-GIVE-HER-IT. Each step is increasingly intimidating: we keep finding that the language is even more complicated than we thought. Compare this to discovering that thanks to learning YOU-GIVE-HER-IT, we already know all the essential patterns.)*

**Radical minimalism---lesson-targets of one to two lines only---allows us to keep the lessons entirely oral.**

- Avoids writing-system wars, and difficulties adjusting to non-English uses of familiar letters.
- "I have to write it down to remember it" defused by having so little to learn per lessonlet.
- Writing is solidly no longer a requirement for being a learner or a teacher of the language.
- Facilitates "coffeeshop learning": course material is 100% orally-portable, available for any snippet of free time together.

*(And a learner who's mastered a one-line lesson can now teach it to anyone else---motivating learners beyond individual success/failure, reducing bottlenecks of limited teachers and time, and shifting the program's foundation from teacher/school-centered to learner/community-centered.)*

- Keeps the focus entirely on the actual performance of spoken language, rather than the far-too-often distracting separate (and secondary) skill of literacy.

## Overall design:

- Brief oral lessons...
- ...that introduce at most 2-3 sentences of new information
- ...selected as model-words/phrases that
  - (a) individually realize a key step within a clear progression of essential language patterns
  - (b) have immediate everyday communicative use.

*(An optimal path of this kind can only be found through rigorous attention to the entire ecosystem of core vocabulary, word-patterns, phrasal constructions, conversation cultural norms, etc. So it's not just a question of picking some simple topics and starting from there: that "easy" approach can be very costly, since it does not give beginners the strongly motivating immediate-communication skills that are the only thing that will keep them coming back.)*

*(Key: being respectful of the fact that every new word/phrase comes at a cost (of attention & memory) for an adult learner.)*

### 3. The curriculum itself

- The list below looks like the content of one lesson; it's actually almost the complete initial course.
- Each (full two-column) line is the target content of one complete 5-minute lesson.

awen na? - \_\_\_ na.

kəya na kikawəss?

kolitəhəsi?

ahta kolitəhəsiw?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-wəlitəhəsian?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahta- wəlitəhəsiwan?

mili ni.

kəmilin ni?

kəmilələn ni.

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-milian ni?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahta -miliwan ni?

kek<sup>w</sup> ni? - \_\_\_ ni.

- aha, nəya na nikawəss.

- aha, nolitəhəsi.

- ahta nolitəhəsiw.

- \_\_\_, ni weči-wəlitəhəsia.

- \_\_\_, ni weči- ahta -wəlitəhəsiwa.

mile ni.

kəmilən ni?

kəmiləkon ni.

- \_\_\_, ni weči-miləla ni.

- \_\_\_, ni weči- ahta -miləlowa ni.

awen na?

- \_\_\_ na.

'Who is that?'

'That's \_\_\_\_.'

kek<sup>w</sup> ni?

- \_\_\_ ni.

'What is that?'

'That's \_\_\_\_.'

- From day 1, learners can learn the language using the language; can pick up words for people/ things on their own, by asking.

- Introduces NA (for people/animals) vs. NI (for most things) in its simplest form.

*(And later we can just call each kind "NA-words" and "NI-words", instead of the misleading academic terms "animate" and "inanimate".)*

kəya na kikawəss?

'Is that your mother?'

- αhα, nəya na nikawəss.

'Yes, that is my mother.'

- Introduces non-English pattern of YOU/ME-by-endings and not separate words: *k-* 'YOU', *n-* 'ME').
- Limiting to just [YOU and ME] for basic minimal conversation, w/o "chart overload".
- Important daily-life function: identifying people, talking about kinship (based on previous *na*).



kolitəhəsi?

- αηα, nolitəhəsi.

'Are you happy?'

'Yes, I am happy.'

- Continues *k-* 'YOU', *n-* 'ME' pattern (from *kikawəss*, *nikawəss*), now for events, too: 'be happy'.
- Everyday check-in conversation, good for use with children (= common revitalization priority).
- MODEL form easily extends by simple comparison, which learners can do on their own:

kolamalsi?

- αηα, nolamalsi.

[FEEL GOOD]

kəməčehla?

- αηα, nəməčehla.

[LEAVE]

kkatohipi?

- αηα, nəkatohipi.

[HUNGRY]

Course priority, however, just is mastering the single model form above. So the key to these later extensions is simply, "Say it like that one phrase you already know cold." (Swap vocab IN/OUT...)

ahta kolitəhəsiw?

- ahta nolitəhəsiw.

'Are you not happy?'

'I'm not happy.'

- Reinforces the last lesson.
- Introduces matching "NOT" with (-w) before English-based learners can develop a habit of not using it.
- *Pre-empting common mistakes before there's much time to make them = core principle, behind next lesson, too....*

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-wəlitəħasian?

- \_\_\_\_, ni weči-wəlitəħasia.

'Why are you happy?'

- \_\_\_\_, that's why I'm happy.

- The other set of key endings for YOU (-an) and ME (-a) is introduced ASAP, before learners can start overapplying *k-/n-* to everything.
- Provides fundamental conversational tool of asking and explaining WHY.
- Ties back to first-lesson material: kek<sup>w</sup> 'what?' and ni 'that (thing)'.  
• Simple Q&A parallelism: [kek<sup>w</sup> weči-] 'from what...?' = 'why?' → [ni weči-] 'that's why...'

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahtα- wəlitəhəsiwan?

- \_\_\_\_, ni weči- ahtα -wəlitəhəsiwa.

'Why are you not happy?'

- \_\_\_\_, that's why I'm not happy.

- Reinforces two previous patterns at once: "NOT"-matching -w-, and WHY construction.

*(This really illustrates the loopback/everything-new-is-based-on-the-old, model-word approach.)*

- Adds more conversational usefulness---esp. as a common expression of concern/sympathy.

mili ni.

'Give me that.'

mile ni.

'Give h/her that.'

- Very useful everyday language: pass-me-the-salt dinnertime use, general requests.

- With two simple "Givee" forms,

[give-ME \_\_\_\_], [give-H/HER \_\_\_\_]

lays the foundations for the entire system for marking relationships in actions (*YOU-give-ME-IT*, etc.)....

kəmilin ni?

'You give me that?'

kəmilən ni?

'You give h/her that?'

- Builds off of previous *mili* and *mile*, adding only two things:

k(ə)- 'YOU'

-n 'N [here: tracks thing-Given]'

...of which *k-* is already established in model-words; so only the "N" is truly new.

- These two model-words hold the complete core set used to show relationships in actions: all the markers of the *Givee*, thing *Given*, and *Giver*.

kəmilələn ni.

'I give you that.'

kəmiləkən ni.

'She gives you that.'

- Introduced simply as just "flipping" the previous models, i.e. reversing Giver and Givee roles:

kəmil[i]n → FLIP → kəmil[əl]ən

kəmil[α]n → FLIP → kəmil[əko]n

*YOU-give-ME-it → I-give-YOU-it*

*YOU-give-HER-it → SHE-gives-YOU-it*

- Attention can focus just on the [Givee] part, since everything else stays the same (± ə) as before.

*= learning through model-to-model contrast, without any complex parsing out of all the bits and pieces*

- With just these four model-words mastered, learners know the entire core set of elements used to show relationships within actions:

kəmilin	'you give me it'	kəmilən	'you give h/her it'
kəmilələn	'I give you it'	kəmiləkon	's/he gives you it'

- Other forms are just simple extensions, at most 1-2 steps from one of these four models.

kəmilin	'you give me it'	
kəmilin <u>əl</u> (wəwan <u>əl</u> )?	'You're giving me <u>them</u> (the eggs)?'	[NIpl]

kəmilin	'you give me it'	
kəmilin <u>ən</u> a ni?	'You're giving <u>us</u> that?'	[ME>US]

- The next-semester curriculum sequence explores those extensions. Key here is that in just this brief intro course, we've already set learners up for that, using only four model-words.



- They also now know all the core patterns for simpler relations (YOU-help-ME), since each type uses only a smaller part of the GIVE pattern:

<u>kə</u> mil <u>ən</u>	'you give h/her it'	=	<i>full GIVE model</i>
<u>kə</u> wičohk <u>emə</u>	'you help h/her'	=	<i>just omit Given-marking N</i>
<u>kə</u> wičohketam <u>ən</u>	'you help it'	=	<i>just use one fixed new form [wičohketam]; but keep N = tracking 'it'</i>

- So by doing the "hardest" form (GIVE) first---but in an absolutely minimal way: just those four model-words---learners are already set up to have LESS to learn as they go forward, i.e. just subsets/small adjustments to the already familiar.

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-milian ni?

'Why do you give me that?'

- \_\_\_\_, ni weči-miləla ni.

'\_\_\_\_, that's why I give you that.'

- Reinforcing several patterns at once: WHY-construction, its special *-an/-a* endings for YOU/ME, plus the new Givee-marking elements. (*= more looping it back, new-and-old-reinforcing-each-other*)
- Again, useful everyday speech functions.

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahtα -miliwan ni?

'Why don't you give me that?'

- \_\_\_\_, ni weči- ahtα -miləlowa ni.

' \_\_\_\_, that's why I don't give you that.'

- Reinforcing all the previous patterns, adding "NOT"-matching -w- back in.

- Practical-life useful: allows a learner to begin to make negotiations.

- These model-words also feed back into "everything else is LESS than the hardest pattern"; from *you-GIVE-me-it*, learners now easily grasp *you-HELP-me* forms: *(again, just swapping in)*

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahtα -wičohkemiwan?

'Why don't you help me?'

- \_\_\_\_, ni weči- ahtα -wičohkeməlowa ni.

' \_\_\_\_, that's why I don't help you.'

- So this again is the full set of actual lesson-target models, split over eleven 5-minute lessons.

awen na? - \_\_\_ na.

kəya na kikawəss?

kolitəhəsi?

ahtə kolitəhəsiw?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-wəlitəhəsian?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahtə- wəlitəhəsiwan?

mili ni.

kəmilin ni?

kəmilələn ni.

kek<sup>w</sup> weči-milian ni?

kek<sup>w</sup> weči- ahtə -miliwan ni?

kek<sup>w</sup> ni? - \_\_\_ ni.

- αhα, nəya na nikawəss.

- αhα, nolitəhəsi.

- ahtə nolitəhəsiw.

- \_\_\_, ni weči-wəlitəhəsia.

- \_\_\_, ni weči- ahtə -wəlitəhəsiwa.

mile ni.

kəmilən ni?

kəmiləkon ni.

- \_\_\_, ni weči-miləla ni.

- \_\_\_, ni weči- ahtə -miləlowa ni.

- Omitted: one final lesson introducing a conversation-management particle (*so..., as for..., they say...*)

#### 4. Conclusion: some key points

- Working directly and persistently with adult-learner performance anxiety = cultivating a healthy, resilient state of mind for learners/new speakers. Where they're not just *told* to laugh and shake mistakes off, but actually can---and help each other in this. Some comments from Alwyn Jeddore:

*...and there's a lot of laughter, we're all comfortable around each other and we love to laugh. Almost always the students tell me how they love how we can all laugh together at things but yet we can stay serious and focused. I guess too it's important that the teacher/instructor builds a good relationship with each student and the group as whole too...and also lots of encouragement.*

*They're interacting with speakers more outside of classes, taking opportunities to be corrected by elders and the odd time they might get a speaker laugh at them but [they] shrug it off and just remind them that "Hey, I'm learning too."*

*They're becoming more comfortable too; and that fear of "I'm scared to make a mistake", "If I say something wrong, they'll laugh at me"---that fear seems to be going away, and now they're becoming more brave to even go out into the speaking community and try out their new words and take the opportunity to be corrected.*

- Learners focus on just a very small set of words/phrases, which can be models for a great range of expressions (all strictly daily-life useful). And also as a reference point for later teaching: say this new thing like you said that old thing, that phrase you already know. With radical minimalism, the language for beginners

- is not overwhelming

- gets constant reinforcement

- can be carried in yourself, can be shared easily, as brief touchstone/model expressions

- Non-linguist native speakers can easily participate: all-oral, no jargon; special categories like NA and NI are named in/after the language itself. And the entire course content is easily memorized.

- Not a complete replacement for other approaches: immersion and/or Master-Apprentice (etc.) are what have the depth that will take learners to fluency. What this is is just a way to give them a solid start---helping them not give up early, by making only minimal demands on would-be learners, giving them maximal immediate return on that effort, and so cultivating a real sense that they *can* learn and use this language.

- "Coffeeshop learning" = undoing teacher bottleneck, unschooling the reclamation.
- Hence "portable" lessons: all oral, all hyper-brief: shareable over a cup of coffee.
- Learners are given not just the lesson content, but the means of sharing it forward: they're expected to understand why each lesson is what it is---what it's based on, where it's going, how each is useful to everyday speech, and how to share that with the next learner.
- Every learner empowered (and motivated) as a teacher themselves = foundations for not just another class you take, but a real community-driven movement of language reclamation.