

An Inquiry into Two Aboriginal Language Immersion Programs

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Abstract

This paper details the findings of research into the ways that one Mi'kmaw and one Wolastoqi community implemented and cultivated successful language immersion programs. It shows the promising outcomes that can happen when Indigenous youth learn in their ancestral language. When students' cultural and linguistic identity is affirmed it increases their chances of greater academic success; their future careers, lifelong learning and their contributions to their communities will be enhanced. The authors conducted research from 2010 to 2011 to document and create awareness about the benefits of Indigenous language immersion programs in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and to share knowledge about implementation and development of these programs. The impact of Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqi language immersion programs appears significant, and is examined in three key areas: students' fluency in the Aboriginal language, student identities as Mi'kmaw or Wolastoqi, and academic achievement in other subjects.

Résumé

Cet article détaille les résultats des recherches sur les façons dont une communauté mi'kmaw et une communauté wolastoqi ont implémenté des programmes d'immersion réussis. Il montre que des résultats prometteurs peuvent se produire lorsque les jeunes autochtones apprennent en langue maternelle. Quand l'identité linguistique et culturelle des étudiants est affirmée, cela augmente la probabilité de leur réussite; leurs carrières éventuelles, leur formation continue et leurs contributions à leurs communautés seront améliorées. Les auteurs ont mené des recherches de 2010 à 2011 pour documenter et pour sensibiliser sur les avantages des programmes d'immersion de langues autochtones en Nouvelle-Écosse et au Nouveau-Brunswick, et pour partager leur expérience sur comment implémenter et développer ces programmes. L'impact des programmes d'immersion en langue mi'kmaw et en langue wolastoqi apparaît significatif, et on l'examine à partir de trois domaines clés: la maîtrise de langue autochtone chez les étudiants, les identités des étudiants en tant que Mi'kmaw ou Wolastoqi et l'accomplissement académique dans d'autres sujets.

Purpose of the Study

This paper reports on a research study conducted from 2010 to 2011 to document and create awareness about the benefits of a Mi'kmaw⁴⁸ and a Wolastoqi (or Maliseet) language immersion program in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and to share knowledge about implementation and development of these programs.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The reader will notice variations in use of Mi'kmaw/Mi'kmaq in this paper. Starr Sock and Elizabeth Paul (Eskasoni) have advised the research team as to the usage of the q/w in this report.

⁴⁹ Funding for this study was provided by the Atlantic Aboriginal Economic Development Integrated Research Program (AAEDIRP), part of the Atlantic Policy Congress of

This project had seven objectives but only the first two will be discussed in this paper. These are to document and share the successes and challenges of the Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqi language immersion programs; and to explore the impact of these language immersion programs on students' fluency, academic achievement, and identities. The other five goals are addressed in the full report to the Atlantic Aboriginal Economic Development Integrated Research Program, AAEDIRP (Murray Orr & Tompkins, 2011).

Review of the literature

Indigenous languages are more than vehicles of interpersonal communication. As Battiste (2000) states,

First Nations Chiefs Secretariat.

“Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understanding of the world” (p.199).

Indigenous languages matter to Indigenous people. They matter spiritually, culturally, socially and economically. McDonald (2011a) noted that First Nations language and culture education and literacy have positive effects for the child’s personal, social and economic future. Indeed Indigenous language can improve life chances for Aboriginal students.

With increased globalization, up to 90-95% of spoken languages are seriously endangered. Worldwide and in Canada Indigenous languages are more likely to be endangered than other languages (Francis & Reyhner, 2002; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Sakar & Metallic, 2009; Skutnaab-Kangaas & McCarty, 2008). Reflective of this state of affairs are comments by Tim Nicholas, a resident of the Wolastoqi community of Tobique, New Brunswick, who worries about the fact that only 10% of the community’s 1600 residents are fluent in Wolastoqi. He states that it is difficult to find people with whom he can speak in his mother tongue. “I go around my community speaking my language and people don't understand me," he says. "It's like I'm speaking Chinese. Now that's sad" (cited in Pritchett, 2010).

Indigenous Language Immersion programs

A key way to reverse language loss is to begin by introducing and/or reintroducing the language to the young people because, as Greymorning (1997) states “the future of any language lies in its ability to be passed on to successive generations” (p. 22). By design immersion programs “incorporate linguistic and cultural knowledge into curriculum in ways that democratize schooling for Indigenous students and support the retention of their languages and culture” (McCarty et al., 1997, p. 88). This ‘intergenerational transmission’ (Fishman, 2001) in which adults pass language on to young speakers is essential for language continuity.

A key feature of language immersion programs is that all subjects are taught in that language, so students are immersed in the language all day in their classrooms. Immersion programs have been successfully used across a variety of contexts (Dick et al, 1994; Holm & Holm, 1995; McCarty & Dick, 1996; Murray-Orr, Orr & Tompkins, 2006; Paul-Gould, 2012; Russell & Glynn, 1998; Slaughter, 1997; Sock, 2012; Stiles, 1997; Taylor & Wright, 2003, Osborne, Peck, Smith, & Taylor, 2011). The Kahnawake Mohawk Immersion program was the first Aboriginal language immersion program in Canada established under the leadership of Dorothy Lazore (Freeman, 1995). Dorothy Lazore was instrumental in providing teacher training for both the Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaw language immersion programs. Encouragingly, McDonald (2011b) found that there is

an increasing number of Aboriginal language immersion programs offered in many parts of Canada.

Fluency

A major intended outcome of Indigenous language immersion programs is to develop fluent speakers of the ancestral language. Not surprisingly, when children are exposed to language in meaningful contexts for extended periods of time and when they are able to use that language for a variety of communicative and cognitive functions, they become fluent speakers. Nicholas (cited in Pritchett, 2010) noted that “the children seem to innately have the ability to learn it easily...perfecting the Wolastoqi Latuwewakon accent early in their training. ‘It's like their language skills were dormant and they were woken up,’ he says” (p. 1). Studies from diverse Indigenous communities demonstrate that immersion programs create and/or sustain fluency in the learners’ ancestral language (Dick, Estell, & McCarty, 1994; Greymorning, 1997; Holm & Holm, 1995; Paul-Gould, 2012; Sock, 2012; Stiles, 1997; Taylor & Wright, 2003, Osborne et al., 2011). Osborne *et al.* (2011) compared fluency of students in the core Mi’kmaw language program (similar to core French programs, with language classes offered approximately one to two hours a week) at one school with that of students in the Mi’kmaw language immersion program at the same school. The study showed that students in the immersion program were significantly more fluent than students in the core language program. Research conducted in the Kativik School board in Nunavik, Quebec found that Inuit children who were fluent in their ancestral language of Inuttitut and had completed grade two in an Inuttitut immersion program developed a level of language skill that allowed them to use the Inuttitut language to solve complex mental problems. However, children from the same communities who were taking schooling in English or French “while retaining their ability to carry on simple conversations, are falling behind in their ability to function at the highest levels in Inuttitut (Taylor & Wright, 2003, p. 15). This reflects the significance of fluency in ancestral language.

Identity

Francis and Reyhner (2002) speak of the cultural and ethnic self-affirmation that occurs as a result of Indigenous language education. “[By] consciously taking on the task of learning and perfecting one’s indigenous language, young people resist the *externally imposed conditions for integration* into the broader society” (p. 13). Andrea Bear Nicholas (2001) claims that communities who engage mother tongue [or Aboriginal] language instruction are engaging in perhaps the single most important act of self-determination possible, since language, culture and identity are inextricably interwoven. Wright & Taylor (1995) found early ancestral language education did have a positive effect on the personal and collective self-esteem of Inuit students. Knowing an ancestral language strongly impacts identity; Ball and Simpkins

(2004) suggest that such self-knowledge and pride can even counter the effects of racism. “If children really know who they are, then they can go into white society. We teach them to be proud. The racism is not going to faze them. Instead of shaming, they’re going to hold their heads high” (p. 480).

Academic achievement

A review of the literature suggests that when languages are spoken, celebrated, and used for meaningful purposes they flourish. There is ample research to suggest that Aboriginal, Metis and Inuit students in language immersion programs attain high academic achievement and become proficient in English (Dick *et al.*, 1994; Holm & Holm, 1995; McCarty & Dick, 1996; Murray-Orr, Orr & Tompkins, 2006; Paul-Gould, 2012; Russell & Glynn, 1998; Slaughter, 1997; Sock, 2012; Stiles, 1997; Taylor & Wright, 2003, Osborne, Peck, Smith, & Taylor, 2011). As early as 1976 Rosier and Farella, working with Navajo students at Rough Rock, showed that these students performed better on standardized achievement tests by the end of Grade 6, after having targeted immersion instruction in Navajo until the middle of Grade 2. Genesse and Lambert (1986) were able to demonstrate that the English skills of Mohawk immersion students did not suffer in the long run, thus allaying fears about the detrimental effects of Mohawk immersion on English language skills. McAlpine and Herodier (1994) reported on the benefits teachers noticed among Cree immersion students in Quebec. “The teachers of these children [when they enter school] report that the children who have taken a pre-school program in Cree have fewer difficulties with math concepts than children who have not done pre-kindergarten in Cree; these teachers suggest that language contains thought processes and that use of the language has enhanced the cognitive development of the children” (p. 132). Aguilera (2007) examined the history and implementation of language instruction for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian children and found that in all three case studies Native-speaking students performed well on achievement tests given in English, even as they were taught through Native medium instruction. Osborne *et al.*'s (2011) study comparing students in Mi'kmaw immersion and core programs found that when tested in English language proficiency, the students in the immersion program scored higher in this domain than those in core programs.

Research Design and Methods

The two research sites for this study, schools in Eskasoni and Tobique, were chosen because they are the sites where immersion programs in Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqi languages exist. At the time of the study, the immersion program in Eskasoni was ten years old and extended from Kindergarten to Grade 3. The program in Tobique was in its third year and was offered to Kindergarten 4 and Kindergarten 5 classes. Each site is unique in its context. Acknowledging that the two

immersion programs are at different stages of development, this study did not compare the two sites. Instead analysis focused on inquiring deeply into each program. Researchers spent at least ten days in classrooms in each site, taking photos, observing lessons, writing field notes, interviewing teachers, and gathering documents. From the data on the teaching and learning practices gathered in the language immersion classrooms, two substantial documents have been developed, *L'nui'sultinej: Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Immersion Program Description*, and *Tobique Wolastoqi Latuwewakon Immersion Program Description*. These are described in the Findings section.

Studying the impacts of immersion on former immersion students involved quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. To address academic achievement, data was collected on reading scores of Grade 7 students in Eskasoni and analyzed to determine performance levels of students who had completed the K to Grade 3 Mi'kmaw immersion program as compared to students who had been in the English program. This quantitative data analysis provides an important indication of academic achievement. Teachers, Elders, parents and former immersion students were interviewed in both communities, Eskasoni and Tobique, for their perspectives on the impact of the Mi'kmaw immersion program in terms of language fluency and identity, as well as academic achievement. In Eskasoni, 12 teachers were interviewed, along with four students in Grade 8 who had completed the Mi'kmaw immersion program, four parents, and four Elders. In Tobique, four teachers, four parents, four students in Grade 1 who had completed the Wolastoqi immersion program, and four Elders were interviewed. These interviews provided rich data from a variety of viewpoints. In the Findings section, this paper provides a close look at our analysis of these data.

A vital aspect of this project was to address the link between Indigenous youth having a solid grasp of their language and having a strong identity, educational success, future career opportunities, lifelong learning, and making contributions to their community. Using the interview data, we looked for themes that illustrate the critical relationships between language, identity, and students' future employment and other career goals (and those of their parents and teachers), as well as themes that support the Immersion program as a successful model in creating lifelong learners.

A Closer Look at Two Language Immersion Programs: Findings

The findings regarding the impacts of Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqi language immersion programs on former immersion students showed clear benefits to those participating in the programs, even to students who were up to five years out of the program (Grade 8 students who completed the Mi'kmaw Language immersion program in Grade 3). The benefits can be seen in the areas of academic achievement, identity and language fluency. Significantly the English reading abilities of

former immersion students appeared to be higher overall than those of their non-immersion peers. In the following sections, details of the study are reported.

Immersion program descriptions: Promising practices

The first goal of the study was to document the practices of two successful Indigenous language programs in the Maritimes, the Kindergarten to Grade 3 Mi'kmaw immersion program at Eskasoni, which had been in place for ten years at the time of the study, and the newer Kindergarten-4 (K4) and Kindergarten-5 (K5) Wolastoqi immersion program at Tobique, which had been running for two years at the time of the study. The strengths and best practices of the immersion programs at the two research sites are detailed in two booklets developed to showcase the kinds of curriculum happening each day in the classrooms. The covers of each booklet are shown in Figure 1. The booklets are organized by grade level, and in each grade the strategies used to teach the students are described in detail, accompanied by photographs of the strategies in action. At the bottom of each page of the Eskasoni document is a list of the general curriculum outcomes (GCOs) from the Foundation document for Mi'kmaw Language curriculum (Province of Nova Scotia, 2003) that are addressed by each strategy. This feature was not included in the program description from Tobique as there is no comparable curriculum document in that province. The rich teaching and learning activities, the use of culture and everyday teaching moments and relational ways of interacting provide solid evidence of the sound pedagogy that is developing in these programs.

Listening to Students, Parents, Elders, and Teachers

Teachers, Elders, parents in both communities, and former immersion students, were interviewed for their perspectives on the impact of the Mi'kmaw immersion program in terms of language fluency and identity, as well as academic achievement.

Impacts on Student Identity, Leadership, and Confidence

In the interviews conducted with teachers, Elders, parents, and former immersion students, it became apparent that language and identity are inextricably intertwined. An Elder named Jennie⁵⁰ said it best when she said, "Speaking Mi'kmaw is important to our culture and how we are. Like how we are and how we act as Mi'kmaw. If our language is gone, then our culture is gone..." (Elder interview, Jennie, April 29, 2010). Elders spoke about the sacredness of the language and their moral obligation to pass it on to the next generation as an integral part of their Mi'kmaw identity. Teachers spoke of how they observed strong

confidence, leadership qualities and other identity traits in their former immersion students. "They have the pride and the ability to be potential leaders in our community, not just within our school" (Teacher, Eskasoni, March 11 2010). Parents echoed these observations and students articulated their pride in their knowledge of the language and culture.

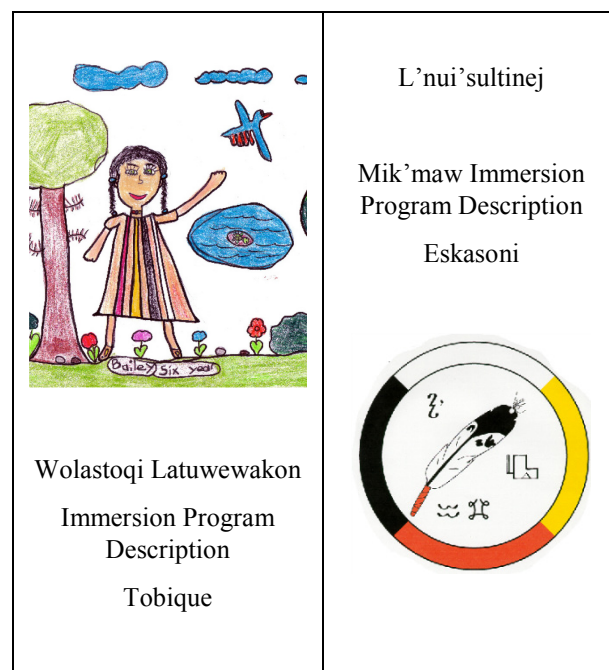


Figure 1. Cover pages of Wolastoqi Latuwewakon and Mik'maw Immersion Program Descriptions

Impacts on Student Fluency: Communicative Ability, Authentic Language Usage

Elders provided a stark awareness of the serious decline in fluency in their communities. Marie painted a clear picture of the dismal state of the language situation. "I will tell you one thing, in 1980, as I walked through the school in Eskasoni, there was not one kid that I heard speaking Mi'klish or one word in English. Today, they are only speaking English. I walk around today, and I don't hear L'nuk and that is our school" (Elder interview, Marie, May 5, 2010). Teachers, parents and students provided a look at how the immersion programs have impacted students' fluency in Mi'kmaw or Wolastoqi after they completed the last year of the program, Grade 3 for students in Eskasoni or Kindergarten-5 in Tobique. All interviews confirmed satisfaction with the level of communicative ability of students upon completion of the programs. However, while there is general acceptance that most students have more fluency in the Mi'kmaw or Wolastoqi language than if they had not been in immersion, there is less agreement on the degree of fluency they retain. The desire for the immersion program to be expanded into upper grade is unanimous among teachers, parents and students.

Justine is a Grade 7 teacher of students who have completed the immersion program in Eskasoni. These students are, after Grade 3 and the completion of the immersion program, mixed in with students who did not

⁵⁰ All names of research participants are pseudonyms, to provide confidentiality for those interviewed.

attend the immersion program. Justine stated, “I think that if I was able to speak Mi’kmaw fluently and as beautifully as some of them, I don’t think that I would speak a word again of English” (Teacher interviews, Justine, March 11, 2010). Justine reflected that although she does not consider herself a strong speaker, she finds it important to try to speak as much Mi’kmaw as she can in her classroom. “I always have to be mindful of the fact that even though I don’t speak Mi’kmaw well, I am able to speak it. I find that when I do remind myself of that and speak Mi’kmaw in the classroom, it’s like fireworks going off” (Teacher interviews, Justine, March 11, 2010). Students reacted very positively to Justine when she spoke to them in Mi’kmaw, reminding her of the need to speak the language as much as possible.

Communicative ability in the language is an important factor for families and communities, as the language lives only when it is used in daily communication. Kyle, a Wolastoqi speaker and parent of a child in immersion in Tobique, speaks to the level of conversation he can have with his son. “Jonah picks up the language just like that you know and it’s because I speak to him all the time when he is here with me on the weekends. I speak to him in the language. And I’m really proud of you guys [the teachers and school] because you are taking the initiative to pick up the language because we are going to lose it” (Parent interview, Kyle, May 13, 2010).

In summary, the Elders spoke of the urgency of saving the language and most teachers found that immersion students had a higher level of fluency even after several years out of the program, and were hopeful that they would maintain their fluency.

Open your heart: Elders, Parents, teachers and students reflect on academic achievement⁵¹

Marie, one of the Elders interviewed, noted that “if one can speak the Mi’kmaw language, it is easier to attain any other languages. If you speak your language, then you open up your heart. Once you open your heart, the more knowledge you are able to absorb. You are able to express yourself better rather than it being lost in translation” (Elder interview, Marie, May 5, 2010). The interviews with teachers strongly support this concept that learning in one’s Aboriginal language is good for students, as teachers observed consistent strengths in academic areas amongst former Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqi immersion students. A study of Grade 7 students’ reading levels (both former immersion and non-immersion) in Eskasoni, described below, provided useful evidence addressing this issue.

The results from assessments undertaken by Paul-Gould (2012), one of the researchers who is also a teacher in Eskasoni, showed that all former Mi’kmaw immersion

⁵¹ This section focuses mainly on data on former immersion students in Eskasoni, as the children in Tobique were still very young and it was not feasible to measure their academic achievement reliably.

program students were reading and comprehending at higher levels of the Benchmark Assessment Kit 2 (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) than the rest of the student population in grade 7 (see Figure 2). These results show that of the 81 students in Grade 7 in September 2008, only the 16 former immersion students and 9 others were reading at the upper levels (X, Y, & Z) of the reading assessment. This indicates that all the former immersion students were among the top-achieving students in Grade 7 reading, which is quite persuasive evidence of their strengths in English literacy.

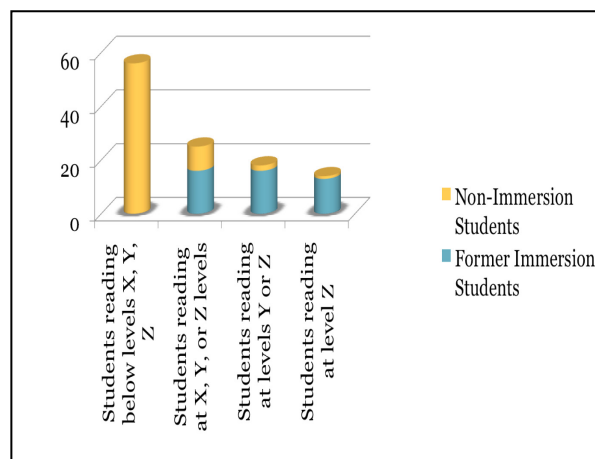


Figure 2. Grade 7 Reading Levels of Grade 7 students at Eskasoni Elementary and Middle School, Sept. 2008

Most teachers observed strong academic achievement in other subject areas by former immersion students in Eskasoni. Sandra, a Grade 8 science and math teacher, explained, “I would probably have to say that 90% of the students that went to the Mi’kmaw immersion program don’t seem to have any difficulty with the content that we have covered in class.” (Teacher, Eskasoni, March 11, 2010).

In Tobique, Theresa, a parent, found promising signs of academic aptitude in her young daughter’s experience: “Not only that but she is excelling in other areas. She is reading at a level that is well beyond her age group... They are picking up on things, a lot easier from the English language. And math skills and science skills” (Parent, Tobique, May 24, 2010). Parents and most teachers in both communities were clear that the academic achievement of the children who had completed immersion programs was enhanced by this opportunity to learn in their Mi’kmaw or Wolastoqi language.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, the impact of the Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqi language immersion programs upon students’ language fluency, academic achievement and sense of cultural identity have been noted. Looking across these three strands, one can see several themes emerging. The strengths of the academic achievements of former immersion students are well supported by the interview data and the data from the reading assessments of the Grade 7 students. Certainly more

research is needed in this area, but current findings point to the general trend toward greater academic success for students who complete the immersion program. Findings in the identity section state that former immersion students seem to possess leadership qualities as well as other positive personal characteristics that will enable them to take on central roles in the community and in the workforce. In regards to fluency, the first group of Mi'kmaw immersion students maintained at least some fluency in the language five years after they completed the program. As Elders reminded the research team, maintaining the language is of vital importance to the community's well-being. For a young person to be fluent in Mi'kmaw or Wolastoqi means he or she can contribute to the community's cultural renewal and can bring strong language and cultural assets to the workforce of that community. "Ultimately it is through language that we not only preserve what we have but create and re-create that which is to come. And if we can ignite the fire of everyday life back into the language, we will no longer be racing against the clock, but instead trying to outrun the sun: the former quest is finite, the latter eternal" (Fillerup, 2000, p. 33).

The programs at Eskasoni and Tobique demonstrate the capacity of schools, which have for too long been vehicles of assimilation and cultural loss, to become places where Aboriginal identities and languages can flourish. The results of this study support the claim that Indigenous immersion programs are an obvious choice for communities wishing to stabilize and revitalize the Indigenous languages. In the following quote, Josephine, an Elder in Tobique, rather humorously affirmed the language immersion program, and noted the need to take a long term view of its worth.

Well, I was lying down and I thought about [it]. I don't know why children can't pick up the language if they talk Indian to them, right? Because we even talked Indian to our dogs and cats and they understood. Even the pig. The pig understands the language, ah? My father used to call him 'pork chop.' Nit tehc sakiyat [And so the pig would come to him] ...and the other thing that they used to do in school, teaching us Latin. And we picked it up. So whatever [language] somebody is teaching you, you can pick it up, ah? ... So when a kid can hear the language, they can pick it up. They might not talk at the time in Maliseet, but later in time... it comes out (Elder interviews, Josephine, May 10, 2010).

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