

Making the Links:

Language Acquisition and Literacy Development
in the Inuit Language

Workshop Proceedings

Written for the
Nunavut Literacy Council

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Executive Summary

In February 2009, the Nunavut Literacy Council (NLC) brought together researchers, policy makers and community groups representing Inuit language issues from Nunavut, the Northwest Territories (NWT), Nunavik (Northern Quebec) and Labrador in Yellowknife. The roundtable discussions focussed on Inuit language acquisition and literacy development.

The objectives of the day and a half were:

- To share the results of research undertaken by the Nunavut Literacy Council;
- To allow others to share relevant Inuit language acquisition and literacy research from the other Inuit regions of Canada
- To discuss the policy and program implications of the research for all Inuit regions
- To share how others have addressed similar issues and work together towards solutions

The research presentations provided the participants with evidence supporting the importance of early acquisition of the Inuit language on literacy development. Roundtable discussions followed each of the presentations.

Research undertaken by the Nunavut Literacy Council with the guidance of Dr. Shelley Tulloch demonstrated the importance of early childhood and family literacy programs for children and their families. The NWT Literacy Council presented a different framework for understanding literacy. The traditional definition of literacy follows a Western (English) approach that tends to be static, print based and oriented to the individual, whereas Inuit see literacy as a social practice that takes into account culture and local context and is constantly changing. The last of the research presentations was a study by Dr Donald Taylor with Inuit children in Northern Quebec that clearly demonstrated a direct, cause and effect relationship between good indigenous language skills and good progress with second dominant languages of the community.

The acceptance of a Western definition of literacy dictates policy and program implementation. Roundtable participants agreed that context is important to the development of language policy, programming and practice. Policies and programs must be reviewed and adapted to meet the needs of Inuit communities in order to be successful.

The key messages are:

- The Inuit language must be favoured in policy and program development for bilingualism to thrive;
- Language development must be approached holistically as skills in one area support and reinforce skills in another;
- Learning takes place along a continuum, is ongoing and can be both formal and informal. It is supported through interaction between parents and children; elders and youth; peers and through other community interactions
- The acquisition of oral language skills in the mother tongue lays the foundation for all other language and literacy skills development;
- On-going support is needed for parents and children in order to help parents help their children develop strong language skills
- New tools and creative approaches using the latest technologies are needed to promote language acquisition with children and youth;
- Despite the evidence from the research, a gap still exists between research findings and policy and programs; and
- The exchange of information and knowledge among all the stakeholders is valuable and the ongoing dialogue must be supported.

This roundtable provided an opportunity for representatives from community organizations, government and researchers to share information and experiences. This will lay the foundation for future collaboration and partnerships, leading to policy and programs that better support bilingual language and literacy skill development.

MAKING THE LINKS

Language Acquisition and Literacy Development in the Inuit Language

Background

Literacy levels in Nunavut remain the lowest in Canada. Community based, non-formal programmes that are inclusive of families and individuals with the lowest literacy rates have gained a wide level of support within Nunavut however programs struggle due to a lack of funding. There is some indication that these programs are able to engage students who are not comfortable in more formal literacy programs. Family literacy programs can help break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy. Many grass roots organizations and local communities have become interested in learning more about the links between literacy and first language acquisition in the context of community - based family literacy. While there is some research on language acquisition and literacy, little is in an Inuit context.

In response to the lack of Inuit and Aboriginal specific research, the Nunavut Literacy Council carried out a two year research project into the links between Inuit language acquisition and literacy development. The research included an extensive literature review and interviews with language role models in Whale Cove, Cambridge Bay, Rankin Inlet and Talojoak to find out about effective program models. Current government and non-governmental policy plans for Inuit languages in homes and communities and language of instruction in the schools were also investigated. The research objective was to gain knowledge about the links between language acquisition and literacy development in the Inuit language. The second objective of the project was to share the findings from the research with individuals working in the area of policy and programming and with other groups delivering community - based literacy programs and services to Inuit communities.

Roundtable objectives

The Nunavut Literacy Council received funding from the Canadian Council on Learning to convene a roundtable that would bring together practitioners and policy makers to explore the implications of the research while sharing their experiences. Invitations to attend a day and a half roundtable were extended to government officials within territorial and federal governments and non-governmental organizations. Invitations were extended within Nunavut, the NWT, Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. The workshop was an opportunity to bring all these groups together for the first time to discuss Inuit language acquisition.

The workshop had the following objectives:

1. To share the results of research undertaken by the Nunavut Literacy Council;
2. To allow others to share relevant Inuit language acquisition and literacy research from the other Inuit regions of Canada
3. To discuss the policy and program implications of the research for all Inuit regions
4. To share how others have addressed similar issues and work together towards solutions

What does the research tell us?

While there is a good deal of research on the subject of indigenous language acquisition in general, little of it relates directly to the Inuit and almost none links to literacy. The roundtable provided a forum to present the findings from recent research on Inuit language acquisition and literacy. The following provides highlights from the research that was presented.

1. Language Acquisition and Literacy Development

The Government of Nunavut has set a target date of 2020 at which time Nunavut will be a fully functional bilingual society in Inuktitut and English. The goal is to achieve bilingualism and bi-literacy whereby every individual has the opportunity to acquire basic and then advanced skills in both languages. Currently the Inuit language and English are widely learned and used but there is some concern that the use of the English language is surpassing that of the Inuit language, ultimately threatening a shift from bilingualism in the Inuit language and English to English language only.

Dr. Shelley Tulloch of St. Mary's University presented a synopsis of the research report, *Building a Strong Foundation* undertaken for the Nunavut Literacy Council. The report asked what is needed to achieve and maintain a thriving bilingualism and biliteracy in Nunavut and what are the links between language acquisition and literacy development. The research involved an extensive review of relevant research related to first and second language acquisition: bilingualism: language revitalization and planning: and emergent literacy. The report incorporated the integration of community knowledge through interviews with language role models in four communities in Nunavut.

Dr Tulloch presented a framework for understanding the many components of literacy skill development. Fully functional bilingualism doesn't always mean equal skills in two languages, all advanced to the same level. Language skills exist on a continuum that encompasses different types of skills such as understanding, speaking, reading, writing and artistic uses. It is "a continuum of abilities and

practices, shifting throughout lifetime, where skills in one area support and reinforce skills in another¹.”

Language skills can support each other in the following way:

- Development of oral language skills forms the basis for the development of literacy skills;
- Development of advanced oral skills forms the foundation for the development of advanced literacy skills;
- Development of advanced language skills in the mother tongue, i.e. the Inuit language, supports the development of advanced skills in another language, i.e. English.

The research shows that the Inuit language must be put first if the goal of thriving bilingualism is to be achieved. Currently both Inuit language and English are widely learned and used but the tendency for many is to use English as the default language. Efforts are needed to counteract this with greater support for learning with a particular focus on the development of language and literacy skills in the Inuit language. Dr. Tulloch stressed the importance of early childhood programs to support early learning. To date, many of the policies of the federal and territorial governments have focused on workplace and workforce job-related training. There is an important need to look at language of the home to ensure there is support for early childhood language development. Research carried out across Canada suggests that programs that target children and their parents help develop a strong foundation for other learning. Where a decision was made to speak the Inuit language at home, the children developed stronger Inuit language skills. It is thus important to reinforce the efforts of the parents.

Dr. Tulloch noted that creating a context with both exposure to rich and advanced language use and encouragement of the Inuit language between peers ultimately supports the goal of functional bilingualism. Models that have been used in other settings such as language nests or the master-apprentice program should be adapted and implemented in Nunavut.

Dr. Tulloch offered the following recommendations to encourage stable bilingualism in Nunavut:

- Support and promote bilingualism in both policy and programming;
- Create contexts where the Inuit language is favoured;
- Support language learning for all Nunavummiut;

¹ Tulloch, Shelley. Building a Strong Foundation: Considerations to Support Thriving Bilingualism in Nunavut

- Support the development of Inuit language programs for families, early childhood, youth and adults;
- Promote and support programs that help parents help their children to develop a strong oral language foundation in the Inuit language.

There are many potential partners including international organizations, governments at all levels, Inuit organizations, workplaces, research institutions and grass roots community-based organizations that can help achieve the goal of bilingualism.

Individuals that are bilingual and biliterate will not only have enhanced language ability but increased life and job skills that in turn will lead to greater self esteem and pride and improved intergenerational relationships and social stability.

2. Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Language Acquisition

The second presentation highlighted the work of a partnership between the NWT Literacy Council, the University of Lethbridge, the community of Ulukhaktok and the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre. A panel including Helen Balanoff of the NWT Literacy Council, Dr. Cynthia Chambers from the University of Lethbridge and Emily Kudlak of the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre presented **Living Literacies**. This ongoing research project examines the understanding of literacy in a northern Inuit community.

The traditional definition of literacy is based on a Western (English)–view of literacy, and most researchers understand it from this perspective which defines literacy as reading and writing, typically by an individual. This definition is too narrow as it does not reflect the richness and multiplicity of literacies nor does it take into account the role of literacy as a community resource. It also ignores the social and cultural practices that serve as a basis for literacy. Within an Inuit framework literacy is viewed as a social practice that takes in to account culture and local contexts and is shaped by history. Text is interpreted as the complex symbol system people understand and use, one that goes beyond language and print and can include visual, oral and gestural as well as games, dances, art , stories, and songs.

The literacy of Ulukhaktok is a living literacy, one that is evolving and changing. Literacy is learned through use and experience; not in a mechanical fashion. Within the Inuit framework, knowledge and skills are combined whereas frequently from a western perspective the two are split up and isolated. In Ulukhaktok, knowledge and skills are all embedded and found together.

Dr Chambers spoke of “skilled practices” such as sewing or telling the weather. These skills are learnt in the appropriate context through practice and experience,

and not learnt in a mechanical way . They require an understanding of the environment, care, judgement and dexterity.

The **Living Literacies** project challenged researchers' understanding of what literacy is. In the Western paradigm, literacy practices are alphabetic and organized, they are print based, and primarily linguistic. These Western literacy practices are a way to transmit knowledge and they assume knowledge can be taken out of context. An alternative approach is to look at literacy as pattern based instead of print based. It is multi-modal, visual and embedded in the world. It is dependent on context.

3. The Role of Family and Community in Language Acquisition

Dr. Donald Taylor, professor of Psychology at McGill University, presented results from the Nunavik Language Project. The study was undertaken in Northern Quebec with Inuit children as they move from Inuttit language education to dominant English or French second language education. Nunavik schools have Inuttit, English and French streams for grades 1 to 3. Parents choose which stream their child will enrol in. English and French become the dominant languages in teaching after grade 3. Researchers were able to compare several cohorts of children in kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 over a 10 year period as they progressed through the school system. During this period the children were given a battery of tests designed by educators to test IQ, self esteem and academic language proficiency.

The results of the study demonstrate the importance of mother tongue instruction. The research shows a direct, cause and effect relationship between good indigenous language skills and good progress with second, dominant language skills. Additionally Inuit children who received Inuttit instruction demonstrated higher self image and self esteem than those in French or English streams.

Good Inuttit skills to start and ongoing progress in Inuttit academic skills contribute to progress with second language academic skills in grade 4 and beyond. The Inuit children benefit from teaching in their first language as it gives them a platform and foundation to maximize their abilities in developing skills in a second language. Inuit children from the Inuttit stream demonstrate stronger second language skills than those schooled in the second language during the primary years.

According to Dr. Taylor, in order for the Inuit language to flourish children need to arrive at school every day, physically healthy, psychologically healthy and motivated to learn. It needs the full participation of every family in the education process. For a child to be successful requires a partnership between the family and the school but families don't trust education. Many families feel inadequate and are dealing with multiple challenges. When teachers and parents promote the indigenous language, the children succeed. Dr. Taylor's research clearly demonstrated that strong first language skills enable learning of other languages.

4. Canadian Language Policy

The last presentation by Dr. Barbara Burnaby discussed language policy, programming and practices in light of aboriginal languages and literacy. The general acceptance of a Western definition and framework towards literacy affects policies as well as which programs are implemented. The difference in style and understanding between a First Nations' approach and a Western approach is significant and this needs to be reflected in policy and programming. This is a gap that needs to be solved collaboratively.

It is important to find a way to build on the existing foundations, and work cooperatively to enhance the resources that are available to do so. It is important to find solutions and celebrate what works. Being creative and innovative and making better use of new technologies is key in sharing information.

Roundtable discussions

A series of roundtable discussions following each presentation led the participants to build on the evidence presented in each session and apply it to their own experience. The following summarizes the key issues identified by participants and proposes actions to address their concerns.

1 Importance of bilingualism and biliteracies

Key issues

- There has been a common misunderstanding that a focus on Inuit language is at the expense of English language skills, but the research has shown that is not the case. If Inuit have strong Inuit language skills, it will be easier for them to acquire strong English skills.
- The Government of Nunavut has established a target date of 2020 for bilingualism. The Inuit Language Protection Act establishes the framework for bilingualism and biliteracy. Participants acknowledged there has been an erosion of language skills among youth. English has become the default language. In some cases this is because there may be more than one Inuit language or dialect in a workplace or community. Some participants felt that using dialect is an excuse to cover the fact that the language usage has weakened, particularly among youth. Bilingualism will be fully realized when the Inuit language is recognized and supported as the “default” language.
- Leaders at all levels need to model behaviour. They should be encouraged to make greater use of the Inuit language at all meetings.

Proposed actions to strengthen bilingualism

- Standardization of terminology and subsequent training of staff within sectors and professions is key to the full use the Inuit language in the workplace.
- In order for the language legislation to be fully implemented, a comprehensive implementation plan with specific targets must be developed.
- Providing incentives in concrete form will assist in the development and preservation of the Inuit language. For example, if you speak the Inuit language you receive a bilingual bonus no matter what your employment.
- Tests for accreditation in the Inuit language for unilingual Inuit speakers should be available and recognized in the workplace.
- Territorial and provincial daycare legislation and programs should encourage services in the Inuit languages.

2. Literacy and language policy and programming

Key Issues

- Improved literacy levels have many positive outcomes for individuals and communities. These include better jobs and opportunities, and less dependency on government support. Individuals have greater self esteem and there will be greater family and community cohesion.
- Policies and programs need to address the spectrum of literacy from all early childhood education programming (daycare, preschool, head start, home visiting programs, family literacy programs) through to adult learners.
- Inuit language must be the focus for success in improving literacy for Inuit language. The focus has to be within the whole society not just in specific programs.
- Participants were critical of the federal government policies and programs. There is frustration at the lack of coordination between federal departments as well as fragmented and short term funding; they would like to see more comprehensive funding, and greater dialogue between Federal government departments and community groups to help remove some of the roadblocks.

The federal funding from Canadian Heritage for the Inuit language is insufficient and not equitable.

- Programs need to build on strengths of communities which also require an understanding of the context. Communities must participate in the identification of local needs when accessing funding.
- There were many useful examples of programs from related fields or other jurisdictions that could be adapted to support bilingualism and biliteracy in Nunavut. The official languages program that has strengthened and promoted the French language from the federal level is one useful model. The language nests programs of the Maori and Hawaiian people have positively affected their system of education to reflect culture and language.
- Research on language acquisition should be reflected in legislation. The new language legislation has the potential to be effective but it requires establishing standards as well as providing resources and materials.
- Unilingual Inuit language speakers are a source of strength and an asset to bilingualism and can be role models for young people. Participants noted that young people who are using the Inuit language often have difficulty finding peers to speak with. The best approach is not always

through formal programs but in skills classes, sewing circles, and other programs, where the language is embedded.

- Inuit language must be the language of instruction in the primary grades with a gradual transition to English. At the higher levels, programming should be mixed where Inuktitut is the language of instruction for some subjects. Immersion should continue through high school. Participants recognized that Inuit teachers are experiencing too much pressure and that the schools need more Inuit language teachers.
- Not all of the problems can be attributed to lack of funding. Small NGOs and community groups need more information as to where to get funding for projects and help in developing and writing proposals. Larger groups can provide support.

Proposed Action

- As a first step existing policies, programs and practices at the Federal, Provincial/Territorial and Inuit organization levels should be reviewed to:
 - Identify specific gaps;
 - Assess what policies and programs may need modifications to reflect the research evidence;
 - Establish concrete targets for programs which should be evaluated on a regular basis.
- Programs for children to stem language shift are critical if communities are to maintain their language. Greater emphasis in early childhood programs will help create a more bilingual community. Current Inuktitut daycare and head start programs should be a model for other programs and an expansion of parent/community daycare and head start programs is needed.
- Develop curriculum with age appropriate materials to help support the schools in programs that will help stem language shift. Community members should be engaged in the development of this material.
- Additional programming for adult learning is required as well. It was suggested certain programs such as nursing could be delivered in the Inuit language.
- Provide support for those with project ideas but who lack specific skills in proposal writing.
- Specific policies to recruit and retain Inuit language speaking teachers are required.

3. Incorporating culture to support the Inuit language.

Key Issues

- Community programs and ways of life sometimes conflict with school and government regulations;
- Traditional cultures are often not incorporated into programs;
- There is a need for Inuit language programming for children with Inuit role models on popular topics;
- There is a need for culture champions.

Proposed Action

- Develop and fund projects that make good use of modern technologies and new communication tools such as computers, television and radio, e-publishing;
- Create an Inuktitut presence on the web;
- Fund a project to film and record elders;
- Create more choices for youth that incorporate aspects of traditional culture with modern culture such as drum dancing in hip hop and use of popular figures. For example, Dora (the Explorer) successfully teaches some Spanish language.
- Support the arts and culture in the Inuit language including support for the development of popular culture such as a publishing house for Inuit language books.

5. Conclusion

The overall goal of the roundtable was to encourage evidence-based decision making in Inuktitut literacy and language policy and programs. The research findings suggested areas where policies and programs could be modified or adjusted to improve outcomes.

For Inuit, learning is holistic and experiential. Learning takes place along a continuum is ongoing and can be both formal and informal. Skills in one area support and reinforce skills in another. Language and literacy skill development are supported through interaction between parents and children, elders and youth, peers and in many other social situations. It is a communal activity and must involve all aspects of the community. The research clearly demonstrates that the acquisition of skills in the mother tongue lays the foundation for all other language skill development. This needs to be supported in policy and programming.

The workshop brought together government representatives, non - governmental organizations and researchers to exchange information, experiences and ideas. This experience will help lay the foundation for future collaboration and partnerships leading to better policy and programs to support the Inuit language.

Nest steps for moving forward

- On-going support for early childhood programs targeted to mothers and children; incorporating creative approaches that will support parents in developing their children's strong language skills;
- New tools and creative approaches using the latest technologies to promote language acquisition to children and youth;
- Continue dialogue between government, non government organizations and researchers. The exchange of information and knowledge among all the stakeholders will help improve programs at all levels.

Appendix A

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