

## **Native Language for Every Subject: The Cree Language of Instruction Project**

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In the last twenty or thirty years, the time period covered in this paper, well-ingrained colonial beliefs about the need and means for English (or French or Spanish, etc.) language imposition--including the beliefs that English is best taught monolingually, the earlier English is taught the better the results, and the more English is taught the better the results (Phillipson, 1992)--have come into direct conflict with United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) 1953 declaration that, all other things being equal, it is best to teach a child, at least for the first few years of schooling, in his or her mother tongue. These two profound positions clash in the Cree School Board's case, described here, over the issue of priorities concerning language and culture learning.

Ever since Europeans started coming to North America, they have increasingly been inclined to use pressure, even force, to make the Aboriginal peoples use European languages, usually to the exclusion of their own languages (Tschantz, 1980). Formal education, although desired by most Aboriginal parents for their children, was used as a tool to enforce English language learning in North America. Only recently, now that many of the Aboriginal languages are in grave danger because of these educational policies and other factors, have a few programs been initiated to teach Aboriginal language speaking children in their own language. This paper outlines some of the issues that the Cree School Board and Cree parents had to deal with in order to establish such a program.

In the Cree area of northern Quebec, various factors have influenced the development of the Cree Language of Instruction Program. In a study of census figures on Aboriginal language in Canada in 1986, Burnaby and Beaujot found that Aboriginal people in northern Quebec were maintaining their Aboriginal languages as home languages and passing them on to their children at a higher rate than anywhere else in the country, including Labrador and the Territories. From the 1970s, satellite technology permitted the use of electronic media and telephones in these communities, and the building of roads from the south to service the building of hydroelectric dams has changed the language context considerably, but the children still mostly learn Cree as their first language. Outside of this island of Cree language use, Canadian tensions about the role of French in Canada have resulted in the Quebec government taking political control over Arctic Quebec through the James Bay Agreement of 1975 so that the value of French, in addition to English, as a language of economic activity and government, has been rising.

For four years now the Cree School Board's Cree Language of Instruction Program (CLIP), which operates under Cree leadership to serve a number of communities on the east coast of James and Hudson's Bay and inland, has been introducing the use of Cree as the medium of instruction in a number of schools a grade at a time. English or French is taught as a subject of instruction and the medium of one or two subjects (such as art and physical education) starting in Grade Two. At Grade Four, the main medium of instruction becomes English or French but a number of subjects, such as Cree literacy, Cree culture, and moral instruction will continue to be taught in Cree. Currently, schools

in two communities, Chisasibi and Waskaganish, have had a cohort of students who have reached Grade Four through CLIP. Other communities started the program in subsequent years. Formal evaluations were conducted during the first years of operation of the Grade One level (Burnaby, Faries, Fietz, et al., 1994) and the Grade Two level (Côté & Fietz, 1995).

In this paper, the history of CLIP will be outlined with reference to events that we see as significant to its development since the 1960s. Then, issues that have arisen during that history will be discussed in terms of community attitudes, educational elements, and local control.

### **History of Cree Language of Instruction Program**

By the 1960s, many Cree people of northern Quebec were in the process of settling into permanent communities (Tanner, 1981). Old Canadian federal policies that favored paying Christian organizations to provide education for Aboriginal children were ending so that schooling in what was to become Cree School Board territory was still administered partially by Christian organizations, but also partially by the federal government itself, and partly by the province of Quebec. In the tradition of the mission schools, at least some Cree was used as subject or medium of instruction (Preston & MacKenzie, 1976; Tanner, 1981), and this tradition persisted in a number of the schools under various administrations in the area. As Phillipson notes about colonizing powers and language issues elsewhere, "there was genuine uncertainty about what the essential content of primary education should be... , reflecting the duality of the evangelizing, transforming cause [of Christian values and European worldview] and the need for sensitivity to local acceptability" (1992, p. 117). The provincial curriculum of Quebec was the nominal standard, but there was no mechanism for coordination much less enforcement among and within schools. Preston and MacKenzie, in reviewing this situation in 1976, point to the basic problem in education in the area as lack of community level decision making.

Central, of course, to issues of schooling is the personnel involved. Most of the teachers in the late '60s and early '70s were non-Aboriginals from outside the Cree communities. They made up the complement of certified teachers on site. A few Crees enrolled in a special one-year teacher training program in Montreal in 1969-70. From 1969 to 1976, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) provided training for Cree people to become teacher aides. These people often were given full control over early elementary grade classrooms, and sometimes taught those classes almost entirely in Cree (Preston & MacKenzie 1976). In many cases, those with teacher aide training became the instructors of Cree literacy as a subject of instruction (Tanner, 1981).

In 1972, a Native North American Studies Institute was created under the leadership of the Quebec office of DIAND, which promoted the training of Aboriginal teachers to teach through the medium of their languages in their schools (Bourque, 1979; Gagné, 1979). From 1973 to 1976, it offered summer programs at La Macaza, Quebec to train teachers under the auspices of the University of Quebec at Chicoutimi. The first Crees who attended this program had been Cree language teachers. An emphasis in this program was on Aboriginal language materials development and underlying linguistic work such as dictionaries and orthography standardization. The need became evident for

Aboriginal language speakers trained in research and development, so a program was created to train "technolinguists" in both linguistics and education methods. After several years, the main program was organized into Stream A (for teachers to teach through the medium of their Aboriginal language) or Stream B (for those to teach Aboriginal children through English as a second language) (Preston & MacKenzie, 1976). Also in this year, DIAND started funding Cree as a subject of instruction classes in the schools it supported (Curriculum Development Team, 1979).

From 1973-76, an exceptional undertaking, the Cree Way Project, operated out of Waskaganish, a community in the Cree School Board area, to produce teaching materials and resources, mostly in Cree, for schools (See [Stiles, 1997](#) for a short description of this program). The intent was to make available to students and teachers materials that reflected the local language, culture, and approach to learning. This productive operation was at arms length from government school authorities (Preston & MacKenzie, 1976; Tanner, 1981), and it was later incorporated as part of the Cree School Board.

In 1975, the James Bay Agreement was signed between the federal and Quebec governments in which Quebec took over general administrative control of Arctic Quebec and two regions were created, one under a Cree regional authority and the other under an Inuit one. Within the Cree authority, the Cree School Board was formed in 1978, basically as a regular provincial school board, but released from a number of provincial regulations to permit, among other things, the use of Cree as a medium of instruction in schools (Tanner, 1981). From 1976, teacher training for Cree candidates was transferred from the La Macaza program and the DIAND teacher aide training to another Quebec university. This training involved supervision of teachers-in-training in their home communities, and developed, over the years, a system of offering many of its courses in the communities as well. The Stream A and Stream B system was maintained.

The new Cree School Board was given considerable latitude through the James Bay Agreement to create curriculum based on local language and cultural interests. It commissioned a position paper on language of instruction that was submitted in 1979. Following the vision of Aboriginal language medium of instruction for much of elementary schooling for Aboriginal language speaking children as set forth in the Amerindianization Project and by other educators worldwide (Curriculum Development Team, 1979), this paper proposed four potential program types ranging from no Cree medium instruction to all Cree medium instruction from Kindergarten to the end of high school. Although the paper left the choice among these open, it made the option of having Cree as the medium of instruction for the primary grades, with Cree as the first language of literacy and continued use of Cree medium instruction, appear more attractive than the other options. In this document there was also an extended discussion of how Cree cultural elements could be incorporated into the curriculum and the needs for Cree language and materials development to support a Cree medium program. It notes that the Council of Commissioners had already adopted a policy whereby Cree would be the language of instruction for Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten. The Council also had allowed for the teaching of Cree literacy as a subject of instruction, and for Cree to be the medium of instruction for moral and religious instruction and for physical education (Tanner, 1981).

Although the Cree School Board worked towards the development of Cree medium of instruction with gradual transition to English or French, there were almost immediate problems with this approach. Tanner (1981), an anthropologist who had worked extensively in the region, was hired in 1981 to research the background of the issue and to survey parents' attitudes. His summary of grounds for opposition to the program included: Cree speaking teachers available were trained to teaching in English or French, not Cree; only two of the eleven teachers knew the Cree writing system; materials were scarce and curriculum inadequate; and parents expected English or French to be taught from the beginning to prepare children for later school demands. In his survey, Tanner found that parents were not consistently in favor of any one of the four options developed by the Curriculum Development Team, but that those in communities with more traditional economies tended to prefer the options with more Cree, while those with less traditional economies tended towards more English/French. Parents, he notes, were particularly worried about their children becoming literate in Cree *before* English or French. As had Preston and MacKenzie in 1976, Tanner focused his analysis of the issues on the need for consistent, clear goals for the language program and lack of integration with the goals of the rest of the school curriculum.

Between 1981, with Tanner's report (and a set of community meetings on its results) and 1993, when the CLIP program was initiated in two communities, the use of Cree in the Cree School Board schools remained very little different from what it had been in the early 1970s (Tanner, 1981, pp. 16-17). Cree was sometimes used in Kindergartens; literacy in Cree was taught as a subject; and Cree was the medium of some subjects such as traditional skills, religion, and physical education. However, other changes were taking place that could alter the conditions for Cree medium instruction. Work begun at La Macaza and called for by the Curriculum Development Team (1979) on orthography standardization and training of technolinguists continued through various phases resulting in a dictionary, various teacher support materials, and a great deal of awareness on language issues on the part of local teachers and curriculum support professionals (MacKenzie, 1985). The teacher training programs were transferred to McGill University in Montreal and continued to certify local people as fully credentialed teachers, who then gained experience in the schools. In the early 1990s, a language teachers' specialization was initiated within the teacher training program. The old Stream A had been mainly used for teachers who would teach Cree literacy as a subject of instruction. However, its original intent as a program for teachers to teach in Cree as a medium of instruction gained interest, and the new specialization offered support for the literacy and pedagogical needs of B Stream teachers contemplating Cree medium teaching. Teachers and pedagogical counselors at the Cree School Board participated in the development of an English as a second language, language arts program for Aboriginal children in northern communities (Burnaby, McInnes, Guebert, et al., 1986-88). This program served not only as a set of materials for use in Cree School Board English classrooms but also as a model of language arts and curriculum design. Overall, the Cree School Board was gaining in experience and was resolving its general curriculum issues. A document was produced outlining the Cree values and knowledge that community members agreed should be part of school education. These values were integrated with the framework of the Quebec Ministry of Education's (MEQ) curriculum. In addition, the communities settled economically, politically, and socially into their new situation under the Grand Council of the Crees.

In the early 1990s, a group of people in Chisasibi strongly lobbied the Cree School Board to institute a school program using Cree as the language of instruction, at least for

the first few grades. It is interesting to note that it was on account of opposition to such a program *from that same community* that the Tanner survey was commissioned in 1980 and that the policy to use Cree as the medium of instruction in Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten was abandoned (Tanner, 1981). Nonetheless, in 1992 it was agreed that a pilot Cree-medium program would be set up in Chisasibi and Waskaganish. For a year, teachers were prepared; a curriculum combining the MEQ's framework, the Cree values curriculum, and a language arts approach was created; and materials were developed, adapted, or translated. The evaluation of the first year noted the success of the program but listed predictable issues yet to be dealt with such as the need for more literature in Cree, language support for the teachers, community education to involve other teachers, parents and others in the program, the need for various normal educational supports (supply and remedial teachers, methods of student evaluation), better planning for future years and revisions, better integration with other school programs, and so on (Burnaby et al. 1994). In the second year, Grade Two levels were added in the original schools and Grade One was started in various others. The evaluation for that year expressed similar overall satisfaction with the program and general needs as well. Currently, the program was in its fourth year of operation in 1998.

## **Discussion**

### **Local control**

Clearly, in a complex situation such as this one, there are many lessons to be learned about language, education, and many other things. From the perspective of the most rudimentary politics of the situation, it is clear that simply having local control over decision making in the school jurisdiction was not enough to bring about the change. It is evident from Tanner's survey results in 1981 that the communities were not ready to accept the proposal made by the Curriculum Development Team in 1979 no matter how well researched it was. In our view, the crucial element in the change from unacceptability in 1980 to acceptability in 1990 is time. It takes time for the community to come to terms with certain changes; they cannot be implemented by fiat. Over that decade or so, language attitudes changed substantially, especially in the key community of Chisasibi. Another generation of parents came up with different experiences of schooling, different expectations and concerns for their children, and different views on their place in the language contexts of the world around them. In addition, the years of that decade gave the Cree School Board time to establish itself, to create a credible infrastructure, to get groundwork done on language resources, to train personnel, to get its basic curriculum working, and so on. Once the parents had confidence in the capacity of the school board, they were prepared to take a risky move, and once the teachers had confidence in their skills, they were prepared to attempt this big change. Thus, this situation demonstrates that efficacy of local control is highly dependent on the community climate no matter how well intended and researched its proposals. Also, innovations, especially about something as deeply appreciated as language, take time to prepare for.

### **Community attitudes**

Aside from the matter of who is making the decisions, this story tells a great deal about language attitudes among all the stakeholders. One could begin by looking at the languages that parents take seriously as needed by their children for their future lives.

Tanner's 1981 survey indicated that parents expected that learning English would be a central part of the education for their children. A considerable number of parents were prepared to have Cree eliminated from schooling altogether. Whatever such parents expected would happen to their children's skills in Cree, they clearly put their priority on English as a central part of schooling. Howard, writing about language programs for the Dene in the Northwest Territories, mentions "opposition from native people who, not understanding the concept of bilingual education, apparently thought there was a move afoot to shut them out of the economic life of Anglo Canada" (1983, p. 8). Tanner (1981) lists, as one of three priorities that Cree parents saw as impediments to a Cree medium program, the need to raise formal education standards. In other words, formal education success and English achievement were strongly linked, but Cree was not seen as a contributor and perhaps a hindrance. An additional complication to this picture has been the rapidly rising profile of French in Quebec Cree territory since the early 1970s with the development of the hydroelectric dams on their lands and the associated rise in Quebec interest in gaining control over that part of the province. Tanner (1981) gives the second priority of the Cree parents that would hinder the implementation of Cree medium instruction as their demands that children be taught a third language (i.e. French in addition to English or vice versa).

The exact relationship in the minds of Cree community members between language, economic potential, and success in schooling cannot be teased out here, but there is no doubt that it is strong. Something must have happened in the language context of the Cree area to have changed its levels of priority in the minds of parents between 1980 and 1990. In sum, with all these languages valued in one way or another, parents and community members place high value on English (and perhaps French). If they were put in a situation to choose among them, it seems likely that Cree in 1980 would have been eliminated from the school but that it has regained priority in recent years.

People usually have opinions about how learning does and should take place. As noted above, Phillipson (1992) has shown the strength of the colonial position on the learning of colonial languages as well as its methods of teaching the language monolingually as early and as much as possible. Tanner (1981) indicates that the expectations of parents seemed to most closely conform with a similar kind of education program, one that currently tended to exist in the schools. The simple point to be made here is the inertia of the ways things have always been done augmented by the lingering authority of the position of earlier colonial influences.

In juxtaposition to this entrenched view of how language is learned (in schools at least) is the problem of the fact that the position in favor of using the vernacular language as a medium of instruction is counterintuitive in that it promises not only the maintenance and development of the vernacular language but also better second language learning with less time spent directly on it. This promise is based on the notion that skills learned relatively easily in the first language will transfer readily to those in the second language. It also assumes that children will adapt better to early schooling in their first language than in a second (e.g. Cummins, 1991; Fillmore, 1991). UNESCO in 1953 recognized this issue as a major concern in the implementation of vernacular education programs. Drapeau (1992) shows in detail, in her analysis of a program to use Montagnais as the medium of instruction similar to the Cree Language of Instruction (CLIP), that this counterintuitive notion of transfer was not convincing to parents, who put pressure on teachers to include French as well as Montagnais in the Grade One Montagnais-medium

class. Preston and MacKenzie (1976) and Tanner (1981) give various examples of Cree people's fears that time taken for Cree in the curriculum would mean reducing valuable time needed for good English language learning. Persuading community members that this kind of transfer is possible is difficult without opportunities to demonstrate the results.

One final point with respect to attitudes towards language and language learning relates to the fact that parents seemed to feel specifically that their children should learn *literacy* in English or French first rather than in Cree. Drapeau (1992) considers this a likely reason for the parents pressuring the teacher in a Grade One Montagnais medium class to teach French as well as Montagnais and to offer remedial classes in French reading outside of school hours. Tanner comments "the main difference between Cree expectations and the concept of Bilingual Education is over the role played by mother tongue literacy in the latter approach" (1981, p. 19). While Cree parents could see the point of using oral Cree to explain concepts and do classroom management, they were not as sure that literacy in Cree first would be appropriate. In the case of the CLIP program at present, there is no doubt about the fact that initial literacy in Cree is a central part of the program. What has changed in the community and its context to allay parents' fears about the format of the program, and the potential for transfer to English and French from Cree language speech and literacy? The answer is not clear, but the fact that this change has taken place is evident.

### **Educational elements**

Looking at reports on education in the Cree area of northern Quebec before about 1990 would lead one to think that educational change in the direction of Cree medium programs was doomed to failure. As noted above, there was about the same amount and kind of Cree language use in the schools in about 1975 as there was in about 1989 (see Tanner, 1981). In addition, a considerable amount of the Amerindianization vision was not realized in teacher training because Stream A, supposed to train teachers to teach regular classes through the medium of an Aboriginal language, turned into a stream to teach Aboriginal teachers to teach their languages as subjects of instruction (Tanner, 1981). The Cree Way Project produced a considerable amount of curriculum material in the 1970s, but this did not appear to be making much impact.

Nevertheless, the development of Cree literacy through standardization and language support documents continued during the 1980s. This process involved and directly or indirectly trained a significant number of teachers and other school related personnel. The values curriculum was created, which put emphasis on the Cree perspective on the world for teachers, children, and parents. The technolinguists/pedagogical counselors were gaining experience and confidence in curriculum work as the Cree School Board matured and its programs stabilized. Therefore, in the long run, all the pieces were in place when the various political and social elements were ready to try Cree medium instruction again.

In addition to problems, discussed above, of persuading the community to adopt a program of vernacular language in the school, UNESCO (1953) identified that getting enough educational materials developed in the language, getting enough general reading materials prepared, and getting enough teachers trained were crucial potential obstacles to vernacular education. It appears that the educational materials necessary

for Cree medium instruction were on the horizon in 1990 thanks to work done for Cree subject of instruction classes, from the Cree Way Project, and in general curriculum organization in the School Board. The Cree Way materials also contributed towards the supply of general reading materials; however, both evaluations of CLIP have noted the need for more such material, including the re-production of Cree Way books in the standardized orthography. Finally, the teacher training program was well established and could accommodate the renewed request for support for teachers in Cree medium classrooms. In the CLIP evaluations, there were calls for various means to continually support the teachers in CLIP classrooms, but it is clear that their basic training was adequate for and suitable to the work.

### **Conclusions**

This story shows that many factors combine to make an Aboriginal language medium program possible, or conversely that many factors can prevent it from happening. Clearly, just having local control over education or certifying local teachers is not enough. As we have seen it, some critical elements were the facts not only that local people gained control of the school authority and that teacher training evolved in the direction of preparing local, fluent Cree speakers to take on the role of Cree medium teachers, but also that linguistic and cultural work was done so that materials could be prepared in a standardized and accepted orthography and that teachers could be trained in that writing system, that a curriculum model was available on which to base the new program, that cultural standards had been articulated by community members, and that community members were confident that Cree medium elementary school met with their priorities for and intuitions about their children's linguistic education. Others who look at this situation might see different issues or add more as important to the success of the program. The main lesson we take from this experience is the complexity of the ingredients necessary to make an Aboriginal program work. In addition, it is essential to appreciate the strength of parents' beliefs in matters of language and the importance of taking those beliefs into account.

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