It’s time we stopped teaching students how to count and started teaching them how to talk

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With few exceptions, Native language programs do not create second language speakers. This is especially true for non-immersion programs at any level.

Successful programs have not been devised to deal with the special problems inherent in the polysynthetic nature of North American Native languages. One exception is the two-year, full-time adult immersion program conducted at Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa on the Six Nations Grand River Territory. The program creates speakers with an Advanced Level speaking proficiency in line with the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

The program uses “root-words” (morphemes) as the basis of all instruction. It has devised a grammatically simple-to-complex curriculum that enables students to master Kanyen’keha (the “Mohawk” language). It also uses in-class teaching methods geared to create speaking proficiency through oral comprehension. Evidence of the program’s effectiveness is presented in before-and-after videos demonstrating student progress.

Because Native languages present special teaching challenges, Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa’s approach presents the possibility and perhaps the likelihood that its principles and practices can be adopted and adapted by Native language groups across North America.