Reducing Anxiety, Increasing Core Competence: A Practical Program for Beginner Adult Heritage Learners of Eastern Algonquian Languages

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We report on a new curriculum approach for beginner learners of three Eastern Algonquian languages (Penobscot, Maliseet, and Mi'kmaq) that actively targets the practical needs of L1-English adult heritage learners, and challenges still-too-often unquestioned default priorities of school-based teaching. In this model, beginner-course content minimizes busy adult learner anxiety and memory load (and optimizes for purely oral instruction) by limiting itself to seven brief lessons, each introducing at most two to three sentences’ worth of new information.

Each lesson’s new information is carefully selected as the intersection of two essential criteria: (a) it must be a simple model-word/phrase that forms a key step within a clear progression of essential morphosyntactic patterns, and (b) it must be immediately communicatively useful in daily life. Having implemented the program through the fall 2015 semester, the Maliseet revitalization team reports extremely positive results: that students are no longer overwhelmed, and instead are consistently confident as learners, and enthusiastically use what they have learned with each other and with fluent speakers.

In an area that can often seem frustrating and hopeless, this approach appears to be making real progress. We attribute this to a design effort that joins a careful, linguistically informed pedagogical minimalism with an active effort to address the real social/emotional needs of adult heritage learners—particularly as agents of both their own learning, and that of fellow community members.