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LING 534

14 AUG 2022

### Comparative Context Analysis: University-Level Indigenous Language and Adult ESL

Within the scope of language education, there are many different factors within different contexts as well as the learner needs to be aware of. In the learning context of a university-level Indigenous level classroom, there are usually varying learner needs depending on the status of that language. Especially as a lot of Indigenous languages are in the process of being revived or revitalized, these needs vary based on the community and the stage in which the revitalization process is at. I decided to examine this setting within the context of the affordances, constraints, learner motivations and teaching approaches as I wanted to examine where university-level Indigenous language classes are currently, and to see what approaches are working and where further work is needed. It is important to continually address and change teaching approaches to match the changing needs of the community over time, and in examining this context we could move closer to creating more effective and appropriate strategies and methods. Another context that receives much attention is adult learners learning English as a second language. This context is very commonplace in “English-speaking countries” such as the U.S., in which English is considered to be the only language of the region. Because of this, all members of these communities are expected to be fluent in English and are also expected to have a native-like control of the language. For this reason, there is much focus within language education on ESL, and the needs of learners are met by classes that vary from business English to casual English. While there are currently many programs and services available for English learners, I wanted to

look into these programs and this larger context in order to see what current approaches are and how effective they are for learners. I also wanted to examine what strategies in an adult ESL context might transfer well to the Indigenous language context and vice versa. Both of these contexts place focus on adult learners (in university or not), and both carry ideologies of nativespeakerism and are impacted by the concept of a monolingual, “English only”, nation. While they are impacted by these things, the impacts are realized differently in each context and this will be explored further below. Where these two contexts mainly differ is in terms of what resources are available to them, and the lack or presence of support from institutions and the government. In order to further examine these similarities and differences and to see what the contexts can draw from each other, they will be analyzed in terms of affordances, constraints, learner motivations, teaching approaches, and relevant political, social and historical factors below.

### **Affordances:**

Within a language revitalization context, many of the affordances are due to the surrounding community and the culture that is inherently tied to the language. As Hinton opens her article with “Indigenous and minority communities around the world are making strong efforts to regain knowledge and use of their endangered languages”, (Hinton 2013) we can see that it is really communities that are driving language revitalization efforts. Furthermore, Anderson states that “It is important in this time-sensitive context to design curriculum that is directly useful as defined by the community to whom the language is related” (Anderson 2020). From these two points, it becomes further visible that in language revitalization and Indigenous language learning contexts it is the community that is driving the language programs and supporting revitalization efforts. This is greatly beneficial within this context as it allows for

instructors to cater the curriculum directly towards what is needed in the community which helps instruction to meet many speaker goals within the larger communication context. This community-driven approach can be realized through a teaching strategy in the University of Oregon's Ichishkiin class, in which the instructor frequently asks learners to set their own goals with the material (Collins 2022). This allows learners to engage with the material in relevant ways to them, and also gives the instructor room to cater to the community as needed.

The adult ESL context tends to have different affordances in comparison to the Indigenous language context, and most of these affordances relate to the presence of resources and support from institutions. Many ESL programs are directly supported by the government and other educational institutions. There are many ESL programs that are available at a university level such as IEPs (intensive English program), and there are also many benchmarks and standards that help learners to measure and judge their achievement and success within the language (Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006). The availability and measures of these programs are extremely beneficial to learners as they both help them to access the language and track their progress within their programs. Support for language programs is key in adult ESL programs, and they are often supported by the government (as seen by the NCLB act (McCarty 2013)) which also means that many resources are available for ESL teaching and learning. Li and Sah point out that many programs are "Driven by the "fast language learning for rapid employment" ethos, many programs and courses focus on discrete elements that are teachable and testable in a short period of time" (Li & Sah 2019). This demonstrates that there are resources and developed curriculums that are available for instructors with the goal of quickly developing English proficiency in learners. While these types of programs make it somewhat easier for learners to

develop English skills, this quote and these types of programs also demonstrate a constraint of adult ESL, and this will be investigated further in the constraints section.

These two contexts greatly differ in terms of affordances, as Indigenous language learning contexts feature deeply community-driven approaches that foster greater learner relationships with the language, and as adult ESL contexts feature many resources and structured support from existing governments and institutions that work to quickly build English competence in learners. Based on these differences and the correlating success of each context's learners, it seems as though it would be beneficial for each context to potentially "borrow" the practices of the other when possible. Indigenous language learning contexts would benefit greatly from increased efforts to create more resources and institutionalized support for the learning and revitalization of languages, and ESL contexts could also benefit from building more of a community effort around language learning and building the curriculum to meet the needs of the learners.

**Constraints:**

In an Indigenous language learning context, one of the largest constraints is the "missing generation" of speakers of the language. Through government measures to take Native land and instate Indian Boarding Schools, they mostly destroyed an entire generation's opportunity to learn and engage with their language with their families (Jansen et al. 2020). This resulted in an entire generation of Indigenous people that are unable to speak their heritage language. This generation of speakers itself is constrained in that the speakers have not had access to the language for much of their lives, and many are still wary of using the language due to harsh consequences in boarding schools (Jansen et al. 2020). This deprivation of language further harmed the transmission of the language to the next generation, and many children being raised

in these communities often do not have parents that know or speak the language. This in turn would result in yet another generation that was deprived of the language, but thankfully more and more revitalization efforts have been made to directly combat this.

Within the context of adult ESL learning spaces, one of the main constraints is that the scope of the class can be rather small or specific. As alluded to earlier by Li and Sah, many English language programs are aimed to create basic proficiency within speakers as quickly as possible (Li & Sah 2019). This limits the amount of time that learners would have to learn the language, and also limits the variety of language and the exposure to language that learners would get if they had more time. As also discussed by Li and Sah, “. . . these levels of host language skills that educated immigrants require in order to function in their specific disciplines are not included in most language programs that focus on general language learning” (Li & Sah 2019). So, often the specific needs of English learners are not attended to in the curriculum and the only goal of the program is to quickly produce proficient speakers.

Once again, these two contexts differ in terms of constraints; university-level Indigenous language learning contexts are constrained in the presence of a “missing generation”, and adult ESL contexts are constrained in that they are developed without specific learner needs in mind and limit the amount of time the learners spend learning the language. These constraints are greatly different in that one deals with a lack of proper focus in curriculum, and the other deals with awakening the linguistic and cultural ties of an entire generation.

### **Learner Motivations and Outcomes:**

Learner motivations within university-level Indigenous language classes are often driven by the goal and need of connecting to one’s heritage and culture, and strengthening the language and culture for future generations. Within the UO Ichishkiin class, one of the main learner

motivations for learning the language was to connect with their family, heritage, or culture (Collins 2022). When learners are able to connect with their family and heritage, they are able to more strongly align with their own identities and selves. This benefit has been shown through many studies, and Jansen et al. state that “In asking students about whether knowing their Native language and culture makes them confident, 50% of students either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that knowing their language and culture makes them confident” (Janesn et al. 2020). While this study was on high school students, this does demonstrate that the motivation to learn one’s heritage and cultural language has positive outcomes for the learner in their own identity and their sense of identity within the community as a speaker. So, this shows that a strong, family/culture-based motivation within language learning creates positive outcomes within learners.

This type of motivation is usually less common within adult ESL contexts, and usually the motivation within this context is focused on academics, business, or immigration. As investigated by Delsanter, “For learners of English for business purposes in Buenos Aires, much of their desire to learn English did not come from self-generated interest but was motivated in the form of bonuses and promotions within the company if employees undertook the task of learning English and doing so in a manner that aligned with company goals” (Delsanter 2022). While this investigation was focused on English learners in specifically a business English classroom, this notion of learning English for the purpose of employment is echoed in other literature. Li and Sah state that “Economic integration is acquired through a successful admission in the labor market and is considered the most crucial to newcomers” (Li & Sah 2019). So, again we see that there is this need among adult English learners to learn English specifically for employment purposes. Along with this, many immigrants wish to learn English as it has become increasingly

considered a “global language” in recent years; English is often idealized as opening doors for employment and educational opportunities on the global scale, and these learner motivations represent that. The outcome in this case has been described by Li and Sah as creating short programs that aim at creating basic language proficiency for the purposes of finding a (usually lower-paid) job (Li and Sah 2019).

Once again, these contexts greatly vary in learner motivations and outcomes. Much like the variation in the affordances section, the Indigenous language context differs in that it focuses on family and the community while adult ESL contexts focus on proficiency for the purposes of employment. This demonstrates the varying needs of learners when entering these spaces, and we have to account for these varying needs and address them in our instruction and with the strategies we use.

### **Appropriate Approaches to Teaching/Learning:**

Within a university-level Indigenous language teaching context, many new strategies have been developed and implemented over the years. McCarty highlighted an approach at an urban charter school in which “Students learn their tribal language alongside Spanish as part of the ‘foreign’ language curriculum – a policy-making opportunity seized in a state that requires (safe\_ foreign-language education but bans (dangerous) bilingual education” (McCarty 2013). This structural approach allows educators to continue teaching the Indigenous language under the guise of ‘foreign’ language instruction. While this does help to create language outreach and opportunities for students to learn their language, it also brands Native language as being “foreign” when in reality it is far from that. So, while this approach is helpful, it is not necessarily very appropriate to the context. Jansen et al. discuss a Place-based approach, and describe this community and place-rooted approach as being “. . . the heart of language education

in the region” (Jansen et al. 2020). This shows that Place-Based learning approaches fit the communities needs – especially as they allow for the learning to be grounded in the community and its corresponding spaces. This approach is appropriate to this context, as it was addressed earlier how relevant and important community-based learning is for Indigenous language contexts. With the recent global pandemic, educational spaces have changed and many have been moved somewhat online. This also applied to the UO Ichishkíin class that is being considered here. Some scholars are wary of this notion, and there are concerns that “. . . language revitalization needs to focus on making the heritage language a medium of instruction rather than its content” (Wagner 2017). So, with online content becoming more widely available and curated, there are concerns that more focus will be placed on memorization and learning the content rather than learning *in* the language and about it. Despite these concerns, the UO Ichishkíin course maintains the usage of the language as a medium, and the instructor starts every class with a discussion in Ichishkíin and attempts to instruct in Ichishkíin when it would be understood by the learners as well (Collins 2022). This approach of using the language to delivery information about the language asks learners to more critically engage with the language, and to practice their skills as they gather new information. For this reason, and as this combats the concern of how online education may change the perception of Indigenous language, this does seem to be an appropriate and effective teaching approach.

Within an adult ESL context there are a variety of learning and teaching strategies as well, but many of them cater to aspects of standards and testing. Hong-Nam and Leavell discuss the motivations of IEP learners and their metacognitive approaches to be geared towards the Test of English as a Foreign Language. They state that “The sooner they [the students] graduate the program (which can only be accomplished by achieving adequate scores on the Test of English



as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)) the sooner they can begin taking regular university coursework” (Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006) . This demonstrates that the learner approach within this context is to manage themselves in ways so that they can approach and pass the TOEFL test. While this may be an effective approach and allow learners to move upwards with their education, it may not be the best approach for developing a deep understanding of the language as it is being learned to match a very specific standard.

Once again, these two contexts seem to vary greatly in terms of both learning and teaching approaches. In the university Indigenous language context, instructors approach courses with community-based methods as well as providing high amounts of input in the language. In an adult ESL context, learners approach the material by engaging with it in ways that will help them to pass the necessary standardized tests so that they can move on to the next stage in their education or employment. These approaches also point towards learner motivations, and this begins to explain this wide difference in strategies used to meet these needs and motivations.

### **Relevant Social, Political and Historical Factors:**

Some of the relevant social, political and historical factors that impact a university-level Indigenous language learning context have already been introduced here, and often the individual factors related to the context have to do with all three aspects of this category. As discussed earlier, many Indigenous peoples had their language, culture and land stripped away from them and a whole generation was sent to Indian boarding schools. This resulted in a major loss of culture and language, and much of the language revitalization work being done today is a direct result of these past tragedies. Not only has this historical eradication of language had a harmful role in Indigenous language learning contexts, but so has the “English-only”, monolingual ideology of much of society. Li and Sah discuss two programs in Canada, and

state that “Both programs aim to promote assimilation to the mainstream Canadian values through its English- and French-only ideology to achieve a homogeneous linguistic and cultural nationalism” (Li & Sah 2019). They further go on to demonstrate how this monolingualistic ideology is realized in other regions and countries, and this evidence shows how this ideology is harmful to the language and cultures of people who do not speak the dominant language (usually English). In fact, this ideology works to erase languages and cultures that do not align with the perceived monolingualism of that society. Another factor that is relevant to this context is the concept of an ideal, nativelike speaker. There is a concern among some scholars that providing learners with only language from elders and idealizing their, and only their language will be detrimental to some learners (Wagner 2017). This concern outlines how a perceived goal may sometimes be unreachable, and might discourage learners in their fruitless journey towards that goal, regardless of how valuable and beneficial elder language and wisdom is. So, the concept of an ideal, nativelike speaker that is present in many L2 curricula also plays a role in a somewhat negative light in an Indigenous language learning context in the eyes of some scholars.

The concept of an idealized native-sounding speaker also has a large impact on adults in ESL contexts. Delsanter comments on this in his investigation in business English education in Argentina. He states that

It could be reasonably expected that higher value would then be placed on native English speakers over L2 English speakers due to their sounding “native”. Such was the case as found in the interview where native speakers’ instruction was more valued over the instruction of their L2 English speaking counterparts since they knew English at a proficient level, could teach topics in a way that promotes native pronunciation, and had a unique knowledge of what was and wasn’t used in natural speech. (Delsanter 2022)

This observation demonstrates that for both learners and instructors that there is emphasis placed on sounding and acting like a native speaker when using the language. Based on language development theories, it is most often impossible to sound like a native speaker when using a late L2, and expecting this of learners can be harmful to their efforts to work towards this. It seems like the same outcome of discouragement would arise from this unreachable goal.

In this way, the relevant historical, political and social factors of these two contexts are somewhat similar in that they are both impacted by the concept of an ideal, nativelike speaker, and that the English-only ideology that has a negative impact in Indigenous language learning contexts is sometimes the basis of learning in adult ESL contexts. These factors show both the similarities of these two contexts, as well as their opposition in the ways that societal ideas around English impact each context. It also seems like many of the affordances and constraints above are a direct result of some of these relevant factors. For example, the lack of resources for Indigenous language education is a result of English-only ideologies as well as the historical deprivation of Indigenous culture and language.

**Conclusion:**

Based on this, it seems as though in the future we will want to turn our focus not towards actively changing and shaping affordances and constraints of teaching and learning contexts, but focusing on changing relevant social, political and historical attitudes in order to create the most effective learning environments for each context. For example, if we could start to move away from English-only ideologies, then there would be more acceptance for the instruction of Indigenous language and it may receive more support from institutions and therefore more resources. While that is somewhat theoretical, it is based on principle and it is definitely the case

that history has had a great influence on the current state of Indigenous language education, and that working to fix the wrongs of history may create a better present and future.

Another takeaway from both of these concepts is that learner motivations seem to directly impact learning and teaching approaches in each context. This shows that each context is working to meet the needs of learners, and the relative success of learners within each context will demonstrate the effectiveness of the methods in relation to learner motivations. For this reason, it is important to always have one's learners in mind when developing lessons and activities. With all of this in mind, it becomes clearer how the learner should always be at the center of all instruction, and that we as instructors should work to create positive and effective learning environments for them by working to create beneficial relationships between societal factors and the learning context.

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