

Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angooga'm:
Seeking spoken language, from our Ancestors

by

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək^wəŋən (Songhees and X^wsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək^wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This research explores the application of Total Physical Response (TPR) as a method for teaching *Sim Algyax* (Gitxsan language) within a school context that emphasizes both language revitalization and land-based learning. Using autoethnography as the primary methodology, I documented my personal journey as a Gitxsan language learner and educator through reflective journaling. These journal entries served as the foundation for analyzing key themes related to language acquisition, comprehension, learner engagement, and the challenges and successes encountered throughout the process.

Central to this inquiry is the concept of *Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angooga'm*—Seeking the spoken language from our Ancestors—which emerged as a guiding principle during the research. I highlight the ways in which curriculum design was adapted to include culturally relevant stories and experiential learning rooted in the *lax yip* (territory), aligning with Gitxsan ways of knowing. As a Gitxsan educator and daughter of parents who attended Indian Residential School, Day Schools, and Boarding Schools, my work is deeply informed by intergenerational resilience and a commitment to creating safe, supportive learning environments for Indigenous language learners. This research affirms the Gitxsan *Ayook* of *Gwiihl Yee'insxw*—the responsibility to pass on knowledge to future generations—and offers insights for educators engaged in Indigenous Language Revitalization. Through storytelling and self-inquiry, this project contributes to broader conversations about decolonizing education and sustaining Indigenous languages within a school setting.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate my research of *Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angoo'gam, Seeking the spoken language of our Ancestors*, to Residential School survivors, Indian Day School and boarding school students. This quote by the Late Senator Murray Sinclair (2024,) beautifully captures the genuine intention that needs to be thought of and implemented while working in our communities:

In order for Indigenous societies to function properly, they must raise and educate children so that they can answer what Elders from all walks and cultures in the world call 'the great questions of life.' These questions are:

Where do I come from?

Where am I going?

Why am I here?

Who am I?

Children need to know their personal story. We all need to know the stories of our parents and our grandparents, our direct and indirect ancestors, and our real and mythological villains and heroes. As part of that story, we also need to know about the story of the community of people to which we are attached, our collective story, all the way back to our place in the creation of this world. (p. 5)

As well as dedication to my Ancestors, the present and future generations. Since re-learning my language, I have learned the history that Indigenous people have faced and experienced. It has been my motive to work in a school, that does the opposite of those colonial education institutions. I truly believe this research will support healing, reclamation and pride in passing on my Gitxsan language, in safe, trauma informed spaces within education.

I have learned my Ancestors had dreams and visions of a Gitxsan education for the *ma'jagalee gal jep*, children of the village, to learn who they are, their language and from the land.

This research work continues in 2025 and forward.

Introduction

Simgi'gyat, Sigidim Hanak ganhl wela nihl hlguba wilsiksw.

Sinensxw, Jessica Starlund'hl we'y. Lax Ganeda p'deeky, Wilps Haluus winsa witxw'y.

Asaga'y dim gun gya'andy es nisim guhl jeb'y, ehl algyax txas hilt k'uuhl ehl didilsy ii go'ohl

Gitwangax. Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angooga'm sa'wet dit tun.

Above is the Gitksan protocol I follow to introduce myself. It is expected to address the chiefs, matriarchs and all the Gitksan next in line for leadership. Within the speech, I must state my name: Sinensxw (Jessica), my clan, which is frog, and the house group I come from. Additionally, I stated “I would like to show the work, I have been doing in my language, life and in Gitwangax. This project is called *Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angooga'm*, which translates to ‘seeking spoken language, from my Ancestors.’”

Chapter One

1.1: Gigi'ihl Algyax ehl Angooga'm

The setting of my research and study is in *Gitwangax*; the name, when translated, means Land of the Rabbits. *Gitwangax* is one of six Gitxsan villages in Northern British Columbia. The Gitxsan are members of one of the *Lax Skiik* (Eagle), *Lax Gibuu* (Wolf), *Lax Ganeda* (Frog) or *Gisk'aast* (Fireweed) Clans. Each clan is comprised of many House groups, and each of these House groups has one head chief and may also have two associate chiefs. A person is a member in the mother's clan by virtue of laws of matrilineal descent (Smith, 2004). In the village of *Gitwangax*, where I am from, there are three clans: *Lax Skiik*, *Lax Gibuu* and *Lax Ganeda*.

I am a Gitxsan language learner who has elevated to a Gitxsan language teacher. The Gitxsan speakers belong to the *Sim Algyax* language family but the specific dialect I learn is called *Gitxsanimx*. I work in a Gitxsan school named *Wilp Si'wilaksinsxwhl Sim'gigyet*, which means "the Chief's house of learning." My research purpose is to present teachers in the Gitxsan Territories the knowledge about implementing the Total Physical Response method, to teach *Sim Algyax* in the classroom. The devastation of residential schools, Indian Day Schools and boarding schools have had an impact on my communities and family, especially our language. The teachers need to understand the history of the education of their Gitxsan students because it will create an understanding, to work towards creating trauma-informed safe spaces for learners, to learn their Gitxsan identity and language, and to provide teachers and Gitxsan and First Nations students with authentic materials to use in their classroom and schools.

Autoethnography is the research method I will be using to discover the challenges and successes of spoken language. It is my hope that Gitxsan and Indigenous Language teachers will

be able to use my research as they gather tools and knowledge to adapt to their language revitalization efforts.

1.2 Overview of Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method founded by Dr. James Asher. I have found TPR to be a method that allows learners, at any level, to be involved in learning at their level of comfort. Garcia, Asher & Asher (2001) share:

The idea of introducing a second language to learners by acting out commands is derived from the natural path by which we all learn our first language. In the early stages of acquisition of a natural language, the child first listens and responds by acting out or doing things in response to requests, directions, or commands that other members of the family direct. (p. 1)

This fact of the TPR method prompts me to reflect on my experience using this method, in the classroom and in my life. Also, it makes me connect the natural way of teaching young children in the home or language nest. It's a natural, fun and less stressful way to teach a second language.

I have used TPR as a main tool to teach language lessons for Gitksan students. One question that has guided my research is:

1. What are my experiences of using Total Physical Response to teach the First Nations' Language Essentials curriculum in a classroom?

Throughout my years I have received rewards of validation that I strongly feel are from my Ancestors. Spirituality is important as it allows me to be open to receiving messages, such as recognizing that it is a message when I hear learners speaking *Gitksanimx* outside of the

classroom. I will continue to share my finding of connections with language, spirituality and identity through my research work.

1.3 First Nations Language Essentials Overview

My journals are based on my experience, learning opportunities and practice using the curriculum called the First Nations' Language Essentials (FNLE). The FNLE is a curriculum that uses the methodology of Total Physical Response. I gained training of this method in 2014 at the Summer Institute for Teachers of Indigenous Languages, hosted by the staff at Chief Atahm school¹.

I have experienced challenges to teaching language within school settings. Working in a school leaves limited time to teach language. Therefore, it is difficult to find an effective methodology. The FNLE was written by Dr. Kathryn Michel with the support of the First Nations Education Steering Committee. It uses the Total Physical Response-Story method. This curriculum teaches the building blocks of high frequency words used in conversations. I see this as building blocks because learners, including myself, begin learning commands and grammar, especially with learning sentence structure. The beginning units focus on “he/she says” or “walk to [a place or object],” which I feel supports communication for learners and myself during lessons as well as outside of lessons.

¹ <https://chiefatahm.com>

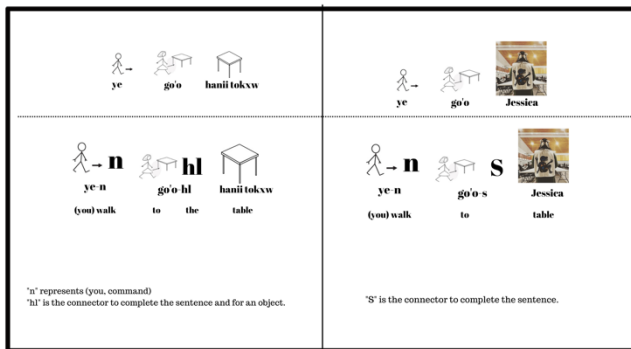


Figure 1

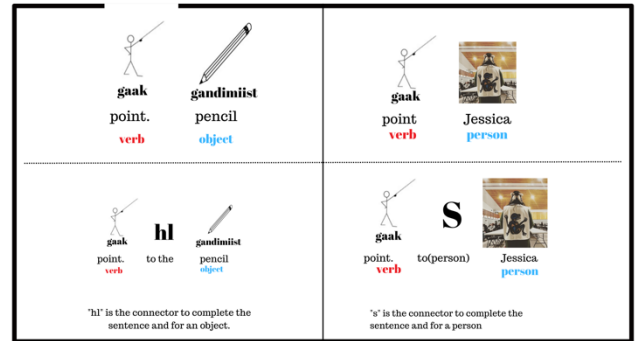


Figure 2

Here is an example that shows one lesson I have used. These are examples of how I use the visuals within the First Nations Language Essentials to learn and teach the sentence structure of putting together sentences, to eventually build stories. This visually helps students to learn proper grammar. I found learning the difference of when to say the “hl” or “s” sound was important because it identifies objects and people. As a language learner, I find learning small components of proper sentence structure makes me feel more comfortable in applying my language with fluent speakers.

As a part of my research project, I wrote journals in the fall and winter of 2023 and the beginning of 2024. I will speak of my analysis of the journals, as well as my findings of how learning this method has elevated my language proficiency in other areas of my Gitxsan life. As a new Indigenous scholar, I am excited to learn that journaling and dreams are a part of Indigenous Research. Dr. Belinda kakiyosēw Daniels shares in her academic papers that, “Indigenous knowledge is still there, often revealed to us in the form of stillness, silence, prayers, and dreams to stir and revive our faith to help students and young people remember who they are” (Daniels, 2014, p. 108). My community work in Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) has given me a perspective that the education I have gained has been given to me by my Elders, fluent speakers and Gitxsan people. This knowledge has beliefs and protocols to be

followed with spirituality and dreams. Research provides me comfort, as I research to support Gitxsan education, which prioritizes language and ways of being.

Among the findings of my autoethnography are indications of effective language acquisition and identifying what support learners need to become comfortable speaking *Gitxsanimx*, which will be detailed further in Chapter Four. However, I also discovered an unexpected finding, which was myself independently using language, which I took as my Ancestors being beside me on my language journey. For example, through this process I have found areas in my life where I have applied the FNLE language into writing an opening speech or independently translating my *Ganeda Adawaak* (frog history) shared within a ceremonial feast. Within the *Wilp Li'ligit* (feast), I have a responsibility to show strength and share my specific clan history, crests and songs. Independently translating and sharing my history, in *Gitxsanimx*, has indicated that this method is effective for not only teaching learners but also for me, as I have gained proficiency and would now be listed as High Beginner on the First Nations Language Benchmarks (Johnson, 2013).

I feel that as a Gitxsan language teacher it is valuable to share resources, tools and experiences that will help with Indigenous Language Revitalization efforts. This project will provide an opportunity to identify language acquisition and share how this curriculum can be implemented within a school. The community I come from continues to have big dreams and vision for providing a Gitxsan education. I feel my research will contribute to our collective effort for practicing *Gwiihl Yee'insxw*, the passing on of knowledge to the next generation. This will support learners and community with reclaiming their ancestral language in an educational setting. Now, I would like to share all I have learned.

1.4 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has me reflect on my young adulthood. In my twenties, I was a young mom and lived away from my community for a few years. When I returned, I used my Early Childhood Education – Assistant certificate to work in our local daycare. This was where I learned our daycare was a Language Nest, which holds the same name: *Wo'umx Sim Algyax* (Cradle of the Language), since 1993. During my time working, in the *Wo'umx Sim Algyax*, I began to realize the state of my language and was alarmed that it was declining. I observed the amount of work the Elders and fluent speakers had to do to teach the language. This is where I felt eager to learn my language and help contribute to Gitxsan Language Revitalization and the Spirit of Gitxsan was awakened within me.

Living and working in a remote community has successes and challenges. I have pride and gratitude in sharing that one success is being surrounded by Elders, speakers, and community on Gitxsan territories. One challenge that I have seen is certified educator turnover, for educational programs such as the *Wo'umx Sim Algyax* and *Wilp Si'wilaksinsxwhl Simgi'gyet* Elementary School. I bring this up because I have been asked by outside support to apply to post-secondary institutions to become a certified educator. I appreciated the suggestion and support. However, my response was, “Right now, my education is with the Elders and remaining fluent speakers.” I felt the language, knowledge and teachings from my Elders and remaining speakers was worth more than moving away to become certified.

I often reflect on my teachings in community. The *li'ligit* (feast system) is practiced amongst the Gitxsan villages. I have spent hundreds of hours within the feast hall. There are many protocols and laws to follow. One important lesson that stands out to me is when you are a

guest at a feast, it is the *Ayook' Gitxsan* (Gitxsan law) that you cannot say “no” when the host feast clan offers you food, *gwiikxw* (money) or gifts. My reflection on opportunities in my life remind me of this law. I have applied this Gitxsan law to my journey with language and work. I was in my early twenties when I began learning *Gitxsanimx*.

I remember many times feeling fearful of learning the language. I had an opportunity to learn through the Mentor-Apprentice Method as well as becoming the lead Gitxsan teacher, inheriting a matriarch name, presenting, and applying for my master's program through exceptional entry. Although there have been times I have wanted to say “no,” I intuitively knew I needed to accept these offerings of opportunities. Each opportunity has provided me with growth and a relationship with Gitxsan identity through like-minded people, and language revitalization achievements. I see the universe as the host clan. When the universe offers me an opportunity, I practice this *ayook* (law) and I accept what the universe offers me.

I feel my perspective, which influenced my choice to stay in community and continue to learn and work in the language nest, has provided me with rich experiential learning. Many more responsibilities surfaced from learning my language such as participating in the Gitxsan *Li'ligit* (feast), which is hosted to conduct significant and historical business of hereditary names, totem poles and territory. I also feel responsibility to connect language and land through Gitxsan education.

Now, I am in my thirties and I hold a strong understanding of my identity and language of the Gitxsan people. In this Masters of Indigenous Language Revitalization (MILR) program I have learned that my experiential learning over the past decade has given me a strong foundation to walk on my journey as a language learner and scholar because experience is knowledge (Ermine, 1995).

1.5 Hagwily yen Sinensxw (Walk Gently)

I am Sinsensxw, a *Sigigidim Hanak* (matriarch) from the village of *Gitwangax*. I sit in the frog clan and my father clan is the wolf clan from Gitanyow. I received this name in 2019 in a *Gitwangax* Frog Headstone Stone Raising feast. The name Sinsensxw, is a house matriarch name, one who stands beside the head clan chief. This name holds a *Nox Nok*, which is spiritual act. A *Nox Nok* represents the spiritual history, attached to high-rank Gitxsan names and practiced at Gitxsan ceremonies.

Sinensxw was not my first Gitxsan name. When I was eight years old, I received the name Hla Algyax. This was passed down to me when one of my sisters passed away. That is how names are moved, in a feast hall and when a Gitxsan person transitions to the spirit world.

As a little girl, I felt my opportunities to learn about Gitxsan were limited. So, when I started re-learning my language, I began asking fluent speakers the meaning of my name, Hla Algyax. Many told me it sounded like “about to speak,” which I found so fitting for the journey I was on. However, I remember my grandmother sharing the meaning of Hla Algyax. She shared that it meant “the communication of two people, across from each other, on the riverbank.” Nonetheless, as an adult learner, I found a deeper meaning of this name, given to me in 1998.

It was a collective decision made by my frog chiefs, for me to take the name Sinensxw. To take a high rank name, in the Gitxsan, there is a bigger process of formal invitations, ceremonies and more specific steps. When I took Sinensxw, I learned it was one of my grandmothers, who held the name. Many remembered her as they witnessed my work and practice of the *Nox Nok* (spiritual act). My previous name Hla Algyax was passed down to my niece, which is a Gitxsan protocol of passing names to nieces or nephews.

Holding this name carries much responsibility and reciprocity to my Gitksan communities. As young leaders, with names, we are always reminded to *howtsima tse'diks gwel'e'n*, meaning do not dirty our button blanket (regalia). I interpret this as we must be mindful of our words and actions.

1.6 Gitksan World View

The Gitksan concept of non-linear time emerges from our worldview of the co-existence of the realms of the physical and supernatural worlds and our belief in reincarnation. In addition, Gitksan stories, laws, songs and language that shape our worldview come from the Breath of the Grandfathers. (Smith, 2004, p. 15)

I am so fortunate that my journey has led me to cross paths with Dr. M. Jane Smith. The work she has done is admirable but most of all valuable. Her written work and conversations remind me and teach me my Gitksan identity and history.

When I was younger, I had limited opportunities to learn about my identity as a Gitksan, especially in education. After re-learning *Gitksanimx*, I began to learn my identity through language learning and building relationships with my families and communities. Matrilineally, I am Nuuchahnulth but have been adopted and raised as Gitksan. My journey had brought me to reflect on how strong my father's side of the family was in upholding the Gitksan language, traditions and lifestyle.

I've been blessed to meet many language learners who share the same path for Indigenous language revitalization. One quote that stood out to me was "beginning to learn about your language is like beginning to see the world in full color" (Martin, 2018). I feel this

articulates Indigenous worldview because as I began reclaiming my language, it has enriched my life, living on the Gitksan territories, with gratitude and intention.

Another thought that I have on Gitksan worldview is the word *yulhlimxhl*. I asked my dad what this word means. He shared *hlimxhl* of *yul-hlimxhl* means “sound”. When *yul* is applied it means sounds in the body. To transfer *yulhlimxhl* is to instill sound into a person which he says is “passing down teaching styles, methods and providing guidance.” I’ve heard this word being spoken in the feast hall, by Gitksan Elders, chiefs and matriarchs. They speak on ways to teach *yulhlimxhl* to young Gitksan people. I see this as Gitksan people being taught holistically with language, protocols, lifestyle, ceremonies and being on the land. All these collective teachings become responsibilities that I have as a *Gitksan Sigidim Hanak* (matriarch), to take care of my *wilp* (house/clan group) and the land and to pass on *Gitksanimx*.

Chapter Two

2.1 Literature Review

This project is researched with the intention to support Gitxsan [Indigenous] language revitalization efforts in education. I used autoethnography as a research method to reflect on which teaching methods were having the desired impact of language revitalization among the students I was teaching. Auto-ethnography is a blend of autobiography (research of self) and ethnography (research of culture). I feel this method will reflect the effectiveness of language teaching methods.

The purpose of my research stems from challenges I have faced as a young child in local schools as well as those faced while being a language teacher. A part of my reflection shares the impacts of colonialism within educational programs, for Gitxsan learners which include Indian Residential School, Indian Day School, boarding school and the public schools. I strongly feel the responsibility I hold as a Gitxsan mother, matriarch and member to implement one of the *Gitxsan Ayook*, of *Gwiihl Yee'insxsw* (to pass on all you know to the next generation). Learning our Indigenous languages has been proven, within many Indigenous research methodologies, to be healing. I have observed, read and felt it. It is my hope that my research on using TPR can provide helpful insight for Indigenous language revitalization efforts in schools as well as to instill pride in learners and future generations as we all collectively reclaim our right to learn, practice and speak our Indigenous languages. Also, I hope these tools and strategies will support and teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers.

Total Physical Response is a method founded by Dr. James Asher; he describes the “principle of TPR of language acquisition as equivalent to what gravity is to physics” (Garcia, Asher & Asher, 2001, pp. 1-11). This is significant to me because I want to learn methods that

will be effective to learners, within a school setting. Personally, I have observed the challenge of teaching language within schools due to limited or little to no time. There is also the challenge of navigating how to support learners at diverse levels of language acquisition. I have found TPR to be a method that allows learners at any level to be involved in learning at their level of comfort.

Asher shares

The idea of introducing a second language to learners by acting out commands is derived from the natural path by which we all learn our first language. In the early stage of language in the acquisition of a natural language, the child first listens and responds by acting out or doing things in response to requests, directions, or commands that other members of the family direct. (Asher, 2001, pp. I-1)

This makes me think of the number of years I have applied TPR to language lessons for students and how long they have internalized the acquisition by exposure at school. Also, when I interact with them outside of lessons, I apply commands to them, which is making it into relevant, real-life learning for them to continue to practice responding through listening, physical and small responses. I have learned that there is scientific knowledge that scholars use to support TPR as language acquisition, such as “the findings about lateralization of the brain by Dr. Sperry and others, [which] comes down to the fact that the left and right brain hemispheres into which the brain is divided are, practically speaking, two independent neurological entities” (Asher, 2001, pp. I-1). This makes me think of the enhancement of not only the learner’s brain but to their spirit while learning their ancestral language. Since learning how the Chief Atahm School in Chase uses TPR, I have been inspired to implement it with my Indigenous language revitalization efforts. Total Physical Response is an effective method for language acquisition. (Billy, 2003, p. 22)

First Nations' Language Essentials: There have been times I have felt isolated with the big responsibility as a Gitksan teacher to learn my language, learn a method, teach the method, and deliver lessons in a school setting.

Most students in First Nations schools are exposed to English as their first language both at home and school. The challenge for teachers is to give students targeted and direct instruction in the First Nations Language. There is a heightened sense of urgency in this work. The First Nations Language Essentials (FNLE) was created as a tool to guide language teachers in their daily classroom instruction. (Baker-Williams, 2016, p. 2)

The First Nations Education Steering Committee has completed a pilot project for the beginning stages of implementing the First Nations Language Essentials curriculum. I have been fortunate to be a part of this project to gain knowledge and experience while networking with other language teachers within BC. The First Nations School Association (FNSEA) shares Kathryn Michel's FNLE with the three main goals being the learning outcomes of "Self-Expression, Social Interaction and Discovery" (Baker-Williams, 2016). This curriculum includes benchmarks to document and show learners' comprehension of language.

2.2 Gitksan Education

The Gitksan continue to persevere and practice a Gitksan Law, *Gwiihl Yee'insxw*. A *Sigidim Hanak* (Gitksan Matriarch) had described this word as "passing on all that you know to the next generation." Through *Gwiihl Yee'insxw* the oral teachings of language, history, stories, songs were passed down. I have learned that the Gitksan have a concept, which is that "non-linear time emerges from the worldview of the co-existence of the realms of the physical and

supernatural worlds and our belief in reincarnation” (FNSC & FNSA, 2020, p.131). I am a Gitksan language learner. My first language exposure was in the *Wo’umx Sim Algyax* (Cradle of *Sim Algyax*) language nest. Then, in my twenties I began re-learning *Gitksanimx* through immersion programs, the Mentor Apprentice method and building relationships with mentors, chiefs, and Elders. I would like to share my perspective on the identity I have learned. It is not only a part of the Gitksan *Ayook* (law) but a responsibility to the future generations, to pass on all that I know. Dr. M. Jane Smith writes “Gitksan educational materials can and should be integrated into the common school curriculum” (Smith, 2004, p. ii). I feel this is very important as a Gitksan teacher. Smith also shares her Gitksan perspective on how “working with elders on the land and listening to stories have had a profound effect on her way of being” (Smith, 2004, p.11). This inspires me to continue to pursue Gitksan teachings, to provide to Gitksan learners the same impacts as well as share them with future language teachers.

I have been learning ways of “implementing Article 13 of UNDRIP, from a Gitksan perspective” with my father, Simoo’get Malii, Glen Williams (personal communication, 2024). Article 13 states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” (UNDRIP, 2007). I feel this is important to reference because as we move forward into the future, we need to connect modern and Gitksan ways of being, utilizing documents such as the United Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

My effort in Gitksan language revitalization is inspired by the efforts made in the 1980’s, in the Gitksan village of Gitwangak. The *Wilp Si’wilaksinsxwhl Simgigyet* (Chiefs house of learning) Elementary School was fundraised for and built by chiefs, Elders, and community

members. Their dream was to provide a Gitxsan education to the *Ma'ja'galee gal jep gal jep* ([flowers] children of the village). A Gitxsan education is to teach *Gitxsanimx*, as well as Gitxsan identity, traditional lifestyle and being on the *lax yip* (territory). Many *Gitwangak* members remember the words of Simoo'git Lelt (Chief Fred Johnson) who said, "if we nurture and care for our children, they will grow to be bright and beautiful." Reflecting on their efforts allows me to connect how I was once a *ma'ja galee* in their program, which has provided a strong foundation in my life to walk proudly as a Gitxsan woman. Their efforts were a seed planted in me and I have now grown to be "bright and beautiful." I want to focus my efforts on continuing this dream work. With that being said, I try my best to create a safe space for learners in my classroom. When you enter into my classroom, you will see Gitxsan and other Indigenous artwork or posters, which I feel represents the pride I have as a Gitxsan person. I practice sharing my findings of emotions, history, language, experience and spirituality through my journey as a Gitxsan matriarch, teacher and learner.

Growing in my journey I have observed that my community has very limited fluent speakers and learners. This observation provides one example of why it is important to share my teachings.

2.3 Implementing Total Physical Response in the classroom

In the beginning of my TPR journey, using this method was intimidating because I had to step out of my shell. I needed to practice and be brave to not only learn and speak my language but also to teach it. Through my research I felt like I was more aware of spoken language, and it made me feel that my Ancestors were showing me signs, that I am on the right path with hearing the *Gitxsanimx* language being spoken. I wanted to explore using the method of TPR to teach language. One research question that I have asked myself is: "What are my experiences of using

Total Physical Response to teach the First Nations Language Essentials curriculum in a classroom?”

After translating this curriculum, I began to organize for teaching. I was blessed to be a Gitksan apprentice, which meant I had my mentor to support and guide me. My mentor and I would review and practice the pronunciation and actions prior to my teaching. I would set up the chairs for the learners, my mentor and myself. I remember feeling scared to lead a lesson, but my mentor would be behind me, whispering words to me. She would also see when I struggled and begin to lead and be the role model for me and the learners.

A few years later, my mentor moved to work in her community. This meant I needed to elevate myself, to be the lead Gitksan teacher. I was back to being scared but after years of practicing, I knew my language proficiency had increased. Since 2020, I have been continuing to re-organize the FNLE curriculum to deliver this method daily to learners. It's almost like juggling because I teach two classes, each at diverse language levels.

As a Gitksan language teacher, I have experienced challenges teaching the language within school settings. Working in a school, one has limited time to teach language therefore it is difficult to find an effective methodology. Personally, I feel this curriculum teaches the building blocks of high frequency words used in conversations. One way I implement the language from this method is by using visuals and creating customizable stories. With my years of experience, I have been learning how to be aware of what really goes into implementing this curriculum.

I strongly believe that enjoyable games that complement the language lessons are very effective to retain *Gitksanimx*. One game that is suggested within the FNLE is *Hes Simon*, which is Simon Says. Learners have an exciting and engaging way to practice their comprehension through their actions. As students progress and become familiar with vocabulary, I can speed up

the game and change my tone to attempt to trick them. *Hes Simon* is a game that they request to play. Another popular game in my class is called Fiddle Sticks. Fiddle Sticks is a game that I adapted from an English Literacy game. It's inexpensive to create, all you need is popsicle sticks, small printed TPR visuals and a cup. I find this game provides an opportunity for learners to make connections with words and visuals, which will support them in creating a story. One example of Fiddle Sticks being effective is when a new, young learner started in my class and he always grabs this game to play with others. One day, I asked him a question and he responded with *nay* (no) or *hanii tok* (table). He was using the language of his Ancestors, independently.

Opportunities for learners to create stories are included with the FNLE. Personally, I like to create short stories using the projector from the Smart Board to demonstrate creating a story. Once we practice a custom story together, I assign learners to, independently or in a group, work to create a story. If I observe any learners facing a challenge, I will ask them to provide one or two sentences to me. Every sentence or story that they complete, I will ask them to circle questions to prompt students to provide full sentences back to me. I have witnessed advanced learners enjoy creating a story that involves their family, pets and other scenarios which is the learners expanding their language use through their eagerness of creating a longer, complex story. Finally, in terms of creating stories, I have created stories that I use before going onto the land and when we return. The stories I created are based on their experiential learning while following Gitxsan protocols of going on to the land, which involves chiefs and asking permission.

TPR provides more opportunities to use the language independently. I love this because it means I can begin to play in the language with the learners as well as use humour. My workplace strives to continue to enrich the educational programs from Language Nest to Grade 7.

Throughout my time working in this field of Gitksan language revitalization, I have heard the quote “once you hear the children playing in the language, that’s when you know it’s working.” Now that I write that, it makes me reflect on seeing a connection between how I was once the child in the Language Nest, and now I am a teacher playing in the language with them. The seeds we plant at any level will always grow. It may not happen immediately but there will be a time where the seeds of language blossom.

In conclusion to implementing TPR in my classroom I find that when I put my identity as Gitksan first, it allows me to blend the principles of my language and the method to be able to adapt and create a meaningful lesson to the Gitksan learners.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Findings

3.1 Methodology of Autoethnography

One of the methodologies that I am using is called autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves a combination of autobiography (study about self) and ethnography (study of culture). (Harrison et al., 2023). I will be researching through my journals, where “I am my subject” (McIvor, 2010). This methodology resonates with me, as I have learned so much with growing up, living, and working in my community. As I academically reflect on myself, I can indicate many teachings from my journey. Whitinui (2014) says “Indigenous autoethnography as a distinct ‘Native’ method of inquiry requires that a person of Maori descent introduce themselves.” This resonates because Gitxsan people have the same social identity introduction. I wrote my introduction in this document in reference to what I have learned from fluent speakers in the feast hall. These introductions allow people to learn about our identity, which holds our language, history, culture and land. I think this is why autoethnography is fitting to use because within my project I will be diving deep into my journals of my experiences and identifying successes and challenges while upholding my Gitxsan worldview. It can capture who I am while sharing findings within my Gitxsan language revitalization efforts that can help other language teachers.

My master’s project is called *Gigi’ihl Algyax ehl Angooga’m*, which in *Gitxsanimx* translates to “seeking spoken language from our Ancestors.” Through my research I felt like I was more aware of the learners speaking language, and it made me feel that my Ancestors were showing me signs that I am on the right path.

I will share how I used my journals as the basis for my autoethnography. My journals reflect on my use of TPR in the classroom and teaching the First Nations Language Essentials

curriculum. My desire is that my reflections on using TPR will be helpful to other teachers of Indigenous languages, and specifically for teaching *Gitxsanimx* in our community school. The way I think of autoethnography is a blend of who I am and the knowledge I have gathered as a Gitxsan language learner. My ethnography part is who I am as a Gitxsan person, living in the Gitxsan lifestyle and on Gitxsan territory. Autobiography is all about self. In my work in the field of Indigenous language revitalization I have learned so much through my journey. The method of autoethnography is also largely about telling stories, in this case one's own. (McIvor, 2010). I am excited to share all that I have learned in my story.

3.2 Autoethnography: Using journals of learning and teaching Gitxsanimx

Within my master's research project, I have chosen to use my journal reflections as part of my autoethnography. It took me a while to decide what to write about because there are so many areas of need in support in Indigenous language revitalization. Working as a full-time Gitxsan language teacher, I found it fitting to reflect on the methods I use every day. To give more context to my journals, I dedicated one month in the fall and winter of 2023 to reflecting on my lessons from teaching language in my school. At the end of each day, I would record myself talking— to share my feelings, and the attitudes of learners engaging their interest and challenges. Through my focus and commitment to the daily journals, I found myself more aware of when *Gitxsanimx* was being spoken outside of my class. It allowed me to recognize this in both learners and myself. Once I completed my journal entries, I wrote them out and then reviewed them. I highlighted experiences where it indicated implementing strategies or creativity to keep learners engaged. This is the way I analyzed my journals.

3.3 Findings of my journals

This chapter adds to my understanding of autoethnography and learning my *Gitxsanimx* language. I wrote my journals from the perspective of a Gitxsan teacher who is a matriarch and was raised on the Gitxsan territory. Through reading and analyzing my journals, I have discovered findings that validate that my Gitxsan language revitalization efforts are working.

To provide some context for my journal entries, I wrote every day for a month in the fall of 2023 going into the winter of 2024. The purpose of my journals was to document how each language lesson went, with learners, in a classroom. I would like to share that I have been practicing and gaining experience in using the method of TPR since I received my training in 2017. This method involves the teacher role modelling language through speaking and actions.

Once I had completed and gathered my 20 journal entries, I analyzed and read them (Janesick, 1998). Out of the 20 entries I analyzed, I speak to 9 of them in this section. I highlighted areas where I noticed learners were engaged and beginning to speak, which I found exciting and indicated them as findings. As a Gitxsan language teacher, the findings that indicated language acquisition, comprehension, learner engagement, challenges and successes, are important. I find these important because it helps reassure me that my efforts of ILR are working within a school setting. Personally, I feel honoured to work in a Gitxsan school that prioritizes language and being on the land. My findings also identified what supports learners need to become comfortable speaking *Gitxsanimx*. Lastly, I wanted to share how I used this FNLE curriculum to create relevant stories, for learners, who have experiential learning on the *lax yip* (territory).

Below are my categorized findings, from my journal entries. I hope that my discoveries will be helpful for Gitxsan language teachers.

Language Acquisition, to speak

One of the most important findings for me is about the spiritual importance of speaking the language. This is where I feel my spirituality helped me become more aware of the “spoken language of my Ancestors” through the learners and myself. I have faced challenges in life, both with language work and personally. When I reflect on certain challenges that happened in my life it leads me to remembering the spiritual healing I learned. I have become aware of messages and signs from my loved ones who are now Ancestors. Most of the time the messages come when I feel I need it the most. Therefore, every message is important, and I have gratitude.

Language revitalization is complex and requires a holistic approach,” Coon says. “There needs to be a real multi-pronged approach to getting the language out in the community. It requires more than just teaching the language – it requires creating spaces for the language to be spoken. (as quoted in Branswell, 2019)

First entry: This is where one example of this took place; on December 7, 2023, in my journals, I noted language being spoken during breakfast time, where one learner shared that “Gitxsan words keep popping up in her head.” On this day, I felt the Gitxsan expression of *luu amhl goot’y* which means “my heart is happy.” I felt this way because it triggered a memory of my late brother, who worked alongside me. He used to send me voice clips of the commands I teach. At the time I found it funny that my brother shared “I just have the words ‘yen, yen, yen’ [command for walk] stuck in my head.” I told him that I was happy because he was learning. Another highlight on this day was as I was helping a learner tie her skates and used TPR commands and language while I helped her. She followed the command and made the comment:

“do you just teach Gitxsan everywhere?” This journal entry indicates to me that learners are understanding language outside of the lesson.

Second entry: On November 29, 2023, we went into the smokehouse, and I used very simple sentences to go with actions that they were doing with putting the beaver meat over the fire to smoke. I highly recommend using language with any interactions with the learners, especially with cultural learning opportunities. This is a natural way of learning our Gitxsan ways of being through language.

I took these moments as messages from the Ancestors. Messages that validated that my effort for *Gwiihl Yee'insxw*, passing on all that I know to the next generation, was being reciprocated by being spoken.

Comprehension

Comprehension stands out to me because it shows understanding from the learners. Their comprehension allows me, as the teacher, to see how I can support their level of language. It also shows me how they are beginning to “think in Gitxsan” by putting together sentences to communicate.

In my journals, I write about how the learners continue to show growing comprehension. In the beginning of every lesson, I start off with commands to review. Then, I introduce new commands to build their comprehension.

The use of skilful questioning will enable the students to begin acquiring other language structures, such as the present progressive tense. For example, Teacher: who is running?

Students: John is running. It is essential to incorporate other forms of speech as the students may remain speaking in the imperative. (Billy, 2003, p. 29)

As I am role modelling new words, I ask circling questions that will prompt learners to answer. Most times, they respond with a one-word question. If they do, I then model the proper full sentence.

Third Entry: On November 15, 2023, I made a note that “I have been surprised that some of the students, who I find to be quiet or not engaged, have been becoming comfortable to speak.” For example, a learner, who just moved into my school, answered a question. The language is new to her. During a lesson I directed a question to another learner, and she unexpectedly shouted out the correct answer, giving me such great surprise. She was also surprised at being correct too.

Another opportunity I take to engage learners is that when they are ready to transition to lunch I have them lined up and I ask them to look at the visual on the popsicle stick and give me the word. Also, for learners with strong language comprehension, I will challenge them and put a noun and action word together, so they say a small sentence. They become competitive with one another and like to answer. For teachers of the language, I highly recommend this approach for moving learners to go deeper with their language building.

There are moments within my journals where I noticed students are beginning to put together small sentences, using action words with objects in the room. Some of the objects were not in my lessons, so this indicated to me that students are learning more than I anticipated. I feel this could be learned by me giving them a command in the classroom such as “get the scissors,” where I am applying FNLE commands to new vocabulary in the classroom.

Fourth entry: On November 23, 2023, my journal entry was about introducing a new vocabulary word. In this lesson, I used commands they knew and applied them to an object. I observed learners were able to show comprehension of the language through action commands. This showed me that there are some learners who have not been exposed to *Gitxsanimx* before and they are showing that they are understanding.

Fifth Entry: On November 28, 2023, I had the shift of cooking breakfast. Some learners arrive earlier and wait with me, as I cook before scheduled breakfast time. On this day I noticed this learner was able to understand me speaking *Gitxsanimx*. I was communicating by putting together sentences of TPR words and phrases. There were moments where the learner didn't understand. In those times I used body language and then she was able to understand.

I get excited when I see moments of learner comprehension because it indicates that they are beginning to think in *Gitxsanimx* with commands, putting together sentences and independently remembering words.

Learner engagement

Learner engagement is important, especially when learners are at diverse levels of comprehension. The FNLE curriculum suggests incorporating trendy characters such as Mario or Santa to engage learners. This helps capture interest and prompts them to say a short story.

Sixth Entry: On November 27, there was one young learner who wanted to create a story on the computer, with the help of a teacher. His story involved the character of Spiderman telling Santa commands. This stood out to me because I have never seen young learners be so eager to

create a story independently. I made minor edits to his story. The edits were proper sentence structure. I feel his creation of his story had an impact on other learners to create. The pride that was shown by the learner and staff is very valuable for supporting learners with the language. I feel this pride keeps them engaged with language in their lives too.

I enjoy creating games to utilize and to complement the language lessons. I find games are supportive for repetition and language retention. Some of these games are Fiddle Sticks and UNO. The game Fiddlesticks has popsicle sticks that have small photos of the TPR visual commands. It's a competitive game that all learners, at different ages, enjoy, including the adults.

Another important part of supporting engagement is the preparation and organization for lessons. Sometimes, before moving onto another unit, I need to assess the group. I had noticed that learners were getting bored of the lessons and they needed to be challenged. This is good because it reassures me that holistically, the group is learning and ready to elevate their language.

Last, I enjoy using TPR commands in physical education. I turn the commands into a warmup activity and game, where I can alternate commands at different speeds. As a Gitxsan Language Teacher this is so helpful because I want to provide language learning opportunities outside of structured lessons.

Challenges and Success

My effort as a Gitxsan language teacher comes with challenges and successes, which were noted often in my journalling. I'd like to start off with one success indicating that I am at a level of being semi-fluent, which plays a big role in teaching the FNLE curriculum.

Some challenges that I have faced are being well organized and prepared, which can be difficult to balance with a busy workplace. There are many steps to take to be prepared for learners by setting up the physical environment for movement and practicing language with sentences and questions. I strongly believe that being consistent is important with your own language learning because it will help support you with teaching language. However, with enough practice you can begin to recognize the pattern, sentence structure and circling questions to deliver a fluid lesson.

Seventh Entry: On November 20, 2023, I am excited to share some highlights, that I see as successes. I noted that there were 2 learners speaking and responding back in *Sim Algyax* during a conversation with me. This took place outside of my Gitxsan class. This indicated to me that I can apply my language to learners and use full sentences to hold short conversations. This is my favorite because it also allows me to play with language, test their boundaries, and add humor. As I write this highlight it reminds me of a time in the summer of July 2024. I was working in a summer camp and one of my younger learners, who is my nephew, was a participant, along with my son, Cailin, who is a former student. I was outside a smoke house with both of them. I applied commands to the younger learner, indicating to hang the fish in the smoke house. He followed directions. My son came by us, and I gave the command *haldim guuhl* [learner], which translates to “pick up the [learner]. My son followed the command and picked him up. Then I said *betsdis* Cailin [learner]” (Cailin is packing the learner). As the learner walked away drinking a juice box, I said *hlodaxs* [learner] *bo* and he quickly turned around to give me a wrinkled face and smile. The learner, my son and I laughed because they knew I was bugging him and told him, “he is drinking a baby bottle.” Through my journey with language

learning, I have heard from Elders the importance of humor. My parents will remind me of the words they remember from the Elders, when they started working at the school, which were: “when the children are laughing and playing in the language, that’s when you know it’s working.”

Another noted success within my journals is the learners can respond to questions and begin putting together sentences in lessons as well as beginning to create their own stories. Through my journal entries I can read and learn what I found challenging and how I overcame it to support my learners.

The last success I would like to mention is about myself. I have learned and visually seen how much my language proficiency increased with my experience learning language and teaching. I made this image, below, to share. It contains speeches and learner quotes as well as a photo of me speaking, as a host clan representative at a feast. Since I’ve started learning my language I have made it a priority to attend Gitksan traditional events and only speak in the language. There are two speeches; one is where I independently translated and the other is an opening speech for a Gitksan language conference. I had very little corrections from a fluent speaker on my speeches, this indicated to me that I am becoming fluent, which is such a huge milestone.

As a result of journaling, I have become aware of the spoken language in my life, through learners and myself. Regarding analyzing, I reviewed my speeches and highlighted the language I had learned from teaching the FNLE curriculum.

Eighth Entry: November 24, 2024. One of the quotes on this image is from my late brother’s youngest son, at the feast tonight. He was away and I didn’t see him at school. I said *E*,

asagay luude 'imsxw. Nekxw win huuxw gya'an. Neddi gya'ay niin gans wek'n go'oh school ehl 5 sa. Hogyax't holiday'ya? (I'd like a hug, I haven't seen you for a long time, I haven't seen you at school for five days. Were you pretty much on holiday?). He nodded yes and says *go'ohl Gitwinsilkxw*. I love that he knew what I was saying.

Analyzing my journaling shed light on the spoken language of my Ancestors, through my learners and myself.

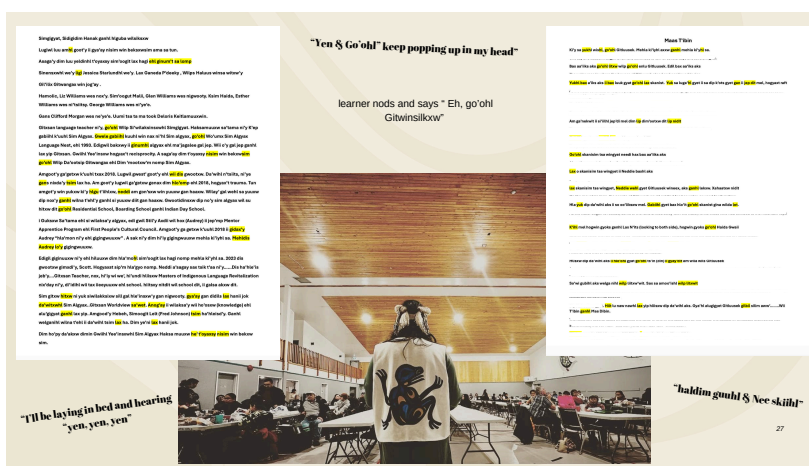


Figure 3

Creating Comfortable Spaces

I strongly believe that creating a comfortable space for learners is very important. In my language journey, I have had to learn how to overcome fear of speaking because of mistakes and being corrected. To ensure I have a space that supports learners, I remind everyone of how to gently correct, encourage one another, and that it is okay to make mistakes. I have learned these principles in training for the Mentor Apprentice program. Along with my experience of being corrected, and sometimes discouraged, learning the language, I have learned to advocate to create a safe space for learning language within my classroom.

Honouring my emotions and the learners' emotions is valuable because it creates a good relationship. There were days where the students and I felt tired. When I can see learners having low energy, I will play *Hes Simon* (Simon Says) or other language games to still practice the language. Through my healing, I acknowledge mental health and sometimes having easier activities are helpful because learning a language is very difficult. As a reflection as an adult learner, I take into consideration the mental wellbeing of the learners.

Another part of creating a comfortable space for learners, I feel, is following their lead. There was a day where learners came into my class and were excited to show me a new game. They shared, "we learned a game and we can use it for Gitxsan class." Their eagerness and excitement to share indicates to me that they feel confident to teach *Gitxsanmix*.

My time and experience of learning this method and curriculum allows me to be flexible while honouring our emotions as a teacher and learners.

Creating Relevant Experiential Stories

Ninth Entry: The final journal entry was January 9, 2024. I wanted to experiment and see how learners would respond to this story after Christmas break. This entry is based on a lesson that allowed learners to reflect on their experience on the land. I take working in a school that prioritizes the Gitxsan language and land as motivation to elevate my ILR efforts. A part of Gitxsan protocol it is *Ayook* (law) to ask permission before going onto a Gitxsan Chief's territory.

Prior to this lesson, I invited a chief into my classroom to meet the learners. There was one learner who felt comfortable to ask permission. The chief gave us permission to trap a beaver on his territory. We went onto *Lax Skiik* (Eagle) territory and were successful with

trapping a beaver. When we trapped it, we brought the beaver back to the school and had a teacher skin it. I thought this experience would be great to capture and make into a story for the classroom. The photo below shows the story, where I used the visuals from the FNLE, Gitxsan names and new vocabulary. This story captures the learners' experience, Gitxsan chief names, land, gratitude and protocol.

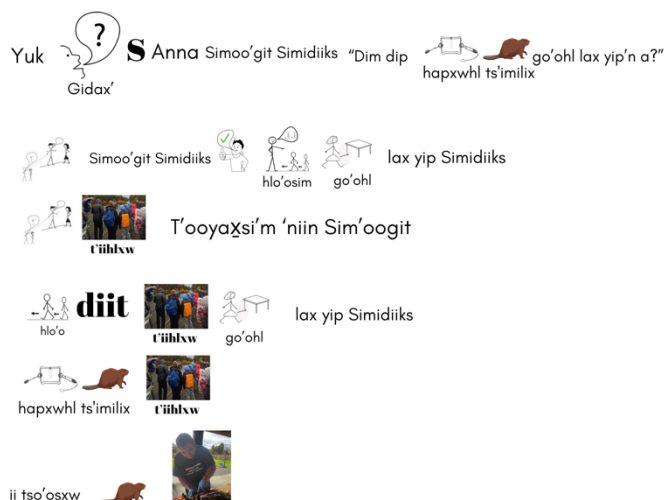


Figure 4

This story was my personal experiment, to see if learners can piece together learned vocabulary from the land and harvesting using the FNLE learned words. I started off reading the story but some learners, who are advanced, jumped in to read the story out loud. They needed very little help. I asked questions such as “who asked permission?” and they were able to respond back with “L1 asked Chief Simidiiks permission?” This was great to witness because I now know I can use the method of TPR and FNLE curriculum to have my learners relate to reflective, experiential stories.

Chapter Four: Amhl Wila Yee

My concluding thoughts of my research work are listed below. I have learned so much and enriched my knowledge academically and within my identity as a Gitksan person. I have gratitude for everyone with whom I have crossed paths, because their work and efforts have inspired and motivated me to continue work in Gitksan language revitalization. I feel blessed to be able to continue to build relationships with my Gitksan chiefs, Elders, speakers and community, through this work too.

4.1 Additional notes on language learning

I find an effective way to retain language is to immediately teach it. I am blessed to cross paths with many like-minded Indigenous language learners and allies, where I have learned principles of language retention. Some important principles are about corrections. As a learner, I have learned to accept corrections and practice gratitude when a speaker corrects me. I remind myself that corrections come from a place of support to learn and speak fluently. As a language teacher I have also applied corrections to learners by being positive, gentle and encouraging, which contributes to a safe space where learners can make mistakes. One example of correcting learners is to role model how to properly say a word within a sentence.

One strategy I have taken as a *Gitksanimx* Language teacher is finding opportunities to promote and share tools that staff can use within my classroom. Some of the tools are shared from the Mentor Apprentice Program Handbook (2012) from the First People's Cultural Council. One example of promoting language learning is learning "Survival Phrases" to ask questions to fluent speakers or teachers.

I try my best to reach the goal of immersion classes but there are challenges because of limited speakers and learners. However, I find having an “assistant,” who I call my apprentice, is very beneficial. Although I have one assigned apprentice to teach, I also take opportunities to provide encouragement and tools to all my coworkers. I find supports for *Gitxsanimx̱* throughout the whole day within the school. For example, incorporating routines during class where everyone practices greetings, conversations and stories.

Another important aspect for Gitxsan language revitalization are the relationships with community which involve the Gitxsan chiefs, Elders, parents and families. Not only as a Gitxsan language teacher but as a Gitxsan woman and *Sigidim Hanak* (matriarch), it is important that I reciprocate support back to my community. I find that this reciprocation is valuable because it builds relationship with community, Gitxsan language, and Gitxsan ways of being. Also, when I call on support from my community, the people feel comfortable to work in a space with me for language.

Most importantly, I feel it is mandatory to begin teaching the foundation of Gitxsan speeches, which follow protocol and situating oneself, such as introductions or feast speeches. I feel this is important because the Gitxsan villages still host *li'ligit* (feasts). This allows learners to begin to recognize the language being spoken in the feast hall by Gitxsan Chiefs, Elders, fluent speakers and adult learners.

I feel there are so many efforts, big or small, that contribute to learners feeling comfortable to learn language. I see this as part of a shift of attitudes, from community, that are wanting language to be learned and spoken.

4.2 Beginning to Think in Gitxsan

I spend a lot of time to sit and visit with my dad and talk about my work with language. He was a big pillar with leading the Gitwangak Education Society in 1989. I value his expertise and perspective because he has learned so much his whole life. He often shares his memories of visiting his grandfather. His grandfather would teach him the history of totem poles, clans and the land, all in the Gitxsan language.

For me, this is an example of the ultimate Gitxsan education. I enjoy conversing with my dad, it makes me think of autoethnography and reminds me of the “Kitchen Table” Theory (Absolon, 2022) because the teachings are rich. My dad describes his memories of developing Gitxsan Curriculum where they discussed with their working team the phrase “thinking in Gitxsan.” Becoming aware of spoken language is the learners’ “thinking in Gitxsan.” When I think of all the unexpected moments, it really does feel like my Ancestors are providing messages to me that I am on the right path and my effort is working. Aside from teaching *Gitxsanimx*, I do participate and practice Gitxsan lifestyle of being in the feast hall or on the land, harvesting traditional foods or medicines. Within my participation, I remind myself of the importance and *Gitxsan Ayyok* (Law), where, years ago, it was a law to only speak in *Gitxsanimx*. I take many laws seriously, but I prioritize this one the most. Therefore, I challenge myself to “think in Gitxsan” and create speeches, translate my frog clan history and hold conversations with fluent speakers.

When I put my energy, thoughts and focus on speaking language, it is where I feel my Gitxsan Language Spirit. After I learned about “language spirits” from Dr. Belinda kakiyosew Daniels, it provided me with a new spiritual perspective. Now that I think of not giving up, it brings up a memory of when I was driving home from work and this song popped up in my head.

It went *amhl wila yee, amhl wila yee, t'oyaxsy niin, amhl wila yee*. I asked on my social media if anyone knew what it translated to and coincidentally my Gitxsan teacher from when I was a little girl answered. She shared that it means “walking on the right path, thank you, walking on the right path.”

In conclusion about “thinking in Gitxsan,” I feel it comes with challenging my learners and self. Whether while on drives, in solitude, creating a speech from my heart or my learners having an understanding that I will only communicate in *Gitxsanimx* to them, so they begin putting together words to communicate to me. Sometimes challenges aren't always negative. It's moreso raising the bar higher for us to reach fluency in our beautiful ancestral languages.

4.3 Culture and Languages

Our work in the field of ILR comes with learning how to advocate for “un-learning” ways of being or learning. It is exciting to see historical policies to Indigenous Languages be amended or changed for the better. Some examples of this are place names are changing, provincial organizations are working with Indigenous community organizations to develop programs that uphold and prioritize Indigenous ways of being, with language and provincial and federal governments acknowledging UNDRIP and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

The collective efforts of all Indigenous people, since time immemorial, provide a strong foundation to move forward to reclaim our rights for language, land and societies. Personally, my ILR effort is to continue to honour the Residential School Survivors, Indian Day school students, and boarding school students, especially my parents and brother. I hold all of them in my heart and remind myself of their histories and experiences in these educational institutions because “Every Child Matters” and deserves to know “where I come from, where I am I going,

why am I here? And who am I?” (Sinclair, 2024, p. 5). It’s through learning my language I feel I have been answering these questions for myself and I would like to support learners to have a strong foundation of language, culture and being on the land to find the answers to these questions.

4.4 The shift of Sim Algyax

In reference to my father, he shared a memory of his visit with his grandfather. He shared he was blind and would share so much detail about the land and visions. There was one time where his grandfather was speaking in *Sim Algyax* and said:

you watch that all these things I’m telling you is going to be more accepted by the non-Gitksan/Indigenous. It may be a small little light, not very bright and later it will get a little bright and it may flicker. It may go out but it will flicker, again, and get brighter and brighter and one day it will be in the Canadian Law.

My *Hebeh* (great grandfather) was a visionary. His vision of this light makes me think of the shift we are in, in terms of sharing our history and advocating our Indigenous Rights to practice who we are, through language.

I feel the light is shining through in my workplace; I have observed staff, of all ages, become more involved in learning with the students. They are taking risks and supporting me with teaching. Some examples are they will lead games, circles, songs and role modelling commands or stories.

I have learned the importance of the family roles with living and working in my community: “Parents and families are fundamental to children developing self-confidence and a positive self-identity. Parents and families transmit their values and culture to their children, which is key to their overall development and educational success” (FNESC & FNSA, 2023, p.

6). I have observed families in my community have a shift towards wanting their *ma'ja'galee* (children) to learn their Gitksan identity, language, land and lifestyle within their education. The families show excitement for their learners speaking in school or at home. Also, parents are taking on responsibility to begin their own language learning journey. I say a shift because the capacity of learners and families has grown a lot since I have started working. The growth of capacity indicates there is a positive shift happening for Gitksan language.

There are growing numbers of adult learners amongst the Gitksan territories as well as young adults returning home with a desire to learn their language and Gitksan lifestyle. There are programs for land-based learning camps, parents raising their children in the language and language beginning to be spoken at home.

The shift is exciting and happening. It's a great reward and indication that my effort is on the right path.

4.5 Final thoughts

Belinda Daniels shares how her “Reflections on the Cree language and Five-Day Cree Camp” has been built from her understandings of Cree pedagogy and epistemology (Daniels-Fiss, 2004, p. 46). Her work gave me insight on how to use autoethnography. I felt autoethnography could capture my findings because it provided me with an understanding from my Gitksan worldview, though language learning, my relationships, of living and working in community, and Gitksan ways of being. If I were to research language learning again, I would have more detailed journals. I mention this because throughout my journalling there were moments where I wish I captured it in fuller detail to provide readers with good context.

I hope my research provides support to Gitksan and Indigenous language teachers. Also, it is my hope that my research and findings will provide a growing understanding to teachers, to create safe spaces for Gitksan learners. The education that brings knowledge and awareness to the histories of Indigenous people while inspiring movements to reclaim Indigenous languages that have been impacted.

I can see this project continuously evolve and elevate because it contributes to research on Gitksan language learning especially because of limited “in school” resources for language teachers. My project made me more aware of the need to pay attention to spirituality because I have seen, in many ways, my Ancestors and loved ones provide me with messages. Every message reassures me that I am on the right path, like the song that popped in my head, called *Amhl wila Yee*.

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