

# **Tahltañ**

## **Verb Classifiers:**

### **Introduction**

by Louise S. Framst, B.Ed



*Dedicated to the Elders and Fluent Speakers  
who are our language Mentors*

This project could not possibly have been completed  
without their invaluable knowledge  
and their loving support.  
Mēduh esdene.

In one of my assignments I wrote: all that I have been learning at university are only shells. Those shells needed to be filled with the knowledge from our Elders and Mentors for my education to be complete. It was true then and it's true now, especially when it comes to learning my heritage language.



## Acknowledgements

I give thanks for the support of the Tahltan Band who helped fund courses at both the University of Victoria and the Simon Fraser University. I am grateful to School District #87 (Stikine) for use of an office and office equipment. The staff at the Board Office have been strong supporters, giving any assistance that I needed. My thanks to them. Thanks to the Tahltan Central Government for their support. I am grateful to the staff who went out of their way to help with printing and for the map of Tahltan country.

I lift my hands to our instructors who were dedicated to helping our cohort succeed, 'going beyond' to give us help and support as needed. Special thanks to my supervisor, Dr Marianne Ignace, who was always there to answer questions. And, many thanks to Dr John Alderete, co-supervisor. I am grateful for the advice given by the other linguists in my life: William Poser, Amber Blenkiron, and Sarah Kell.

My family and my friends have given total support, by providing information and help whenever they could. Special thanks and many hugs to Sofia and Derek Ingram, owners of the Arctic Divide Inn in Dease Lake. They treated me like family, creating another family-away-from-home for me. Of course, fellow students in both the Dease Lake cohort and the SFU cohort laughed and learned with me. I credit much of my progress to them; I always have and always will.

And, as all of us who are involved in revitalizing our language know, we could not have learned our language without our native speakers, our mentors, our Elders. We cannot thank you enough. When our mentors did not attend classes with us, we felt at a loss, insecure because our "parents" were not with us. So, to all of the fluent speakers who helped us,

*Łān mēduh*

Funding received from SSHRC Partnership Grant 895-2012-1029, "*First Nations Languages in the Twenty-first Century: Looking Back, Looking Forward*", Dr. Marianne Ignace, Director.

*This set of study booklets contains material from previous research:*

1. Study booklet #1, *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics*, with minor edits.
2. Pages 36 to 44 are from unpublished research for a SSHRC PG Research assistant project in 2017. The document was called *Making Culturally Relevant Learning Materials: The Cube* by yours truly, Louise S. Framst. These pages were updated to contain recently-gathered information. Minor edits were also made for clarity.

### *The map*

**Fig. A.** The map on page 7 is printed with written permission, courtesy of Tahltan Central Government (TCG).

**Fig. 1.** The cover of the first study booklet.

**Fig. 2.** Page 9 of *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics* gives the meaning of the classifier *-ka*, as well as provides a practice exercise in choosing the appropriate classifier.

**Fig. 3.** From *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics* (p. 3)

**Fig. 4.** This chart is from *Final Report on Polysynthetic Languages...* by Sarah Kell (2014: p. 211).

**Fig. 5.** The Carrier Language: A Brief Introduction by William Poser. (2017: p. 37)

**Fig. 6.** From *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics*. (2017: p. 4) The stems are underlined.

These morphemes describe the item that is being handled.

**Fig. 7.** Example of a polysynthetic language showing the four morphemes that make up the word-phrase *esghanā*. Note that the hyphens in the morphemes are place-holders.

**Fig. 8.** An example of a polysynthetic language showing the morphemes under the headings *prefix* and *root word*.

## Preface

I will begin by introducing myself in the Tahltan way:

*Louise Framst usheya.*

*Edlā Grace Creyke Edzerza.*

*Ete'e George Agouta Edzerza.*

*Chi'yone esdahtsehī. Tahltan ja'sini.*

I am Louise Framst. My mother's name is Grace Creyke Edzerza; my father's name is George Agouta Edzerza. I am one of the Wolf people. I am Tahltan.

I acknowledge that my ancestry includes people from England and Scotland. I was raised in the Tahltan culture, so call myself Tahltan.

Tahltan country is located in north-western British Columbia, Canada. There are approximately 5,000 members of the Tahltan nation. There are three settlements in the area: Telegraph Creek, Dease Lake, and Iskut. Fig. A.

There are an estimated 20 fluent speakers as well as many who are silent speakers. Silent speakers are those who understand, but do not speak the language.

Most of these speakers live in Tahltan country.

Revitalization of the Tāltān language began with classes in January of 2016 under the leadership of Endosdi (Judy Thompson, PhD). Eight students are currently enrolled in language courses that will lead to a Diploma in First Nations Languages from the University of Victoria. One Tahltan already has a Master degree in Linguistics, and two others are currently completing Masters degrees. All of these programs should be completed in April of this year, 2019.

This project fulfils requirements for my Master of Linguistics, First Nation language (MALFNL) I chose this topic because it was one that my Tahltan language class had difficulty learning. And, it is a topic that has not been previously researched. Our language, *Tāltān*, has never been formally studied and documented. Some work has been done on documenting our language, but only in bits and pieces.

Tāltān<sup>1</sup> is a First Nations language of the Athapaskan/Dene language family. One of the features of this language family is that it contains a group of verbs with special classifiers. In a previous course, I wrote a study booklet on these classifiers called *Tahltan*

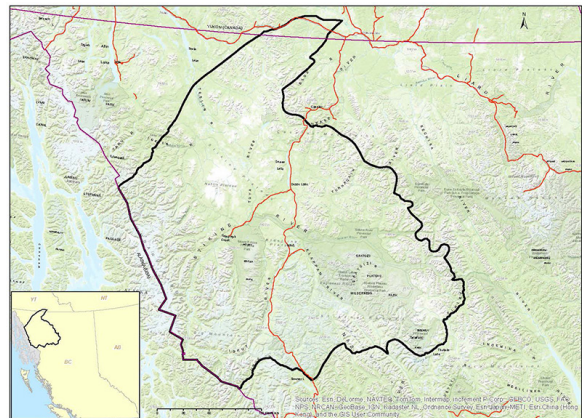


Fig. A. Tahltan country in northern British Columbia. Printed with permission.

1 *Tāltān* is the name of our heritage language. I will also use the alternate, common spelling, *Tahltan*.

*Verb Classifiers: The Basics*. This booklet was created from class notes with support from fluent speakers.

My master's project enlarges on this topic, creating more detailed study booklets from literature research as well as from information from fluent speakers. I set out to create several study booklets that cover the topic of Tahltan verb classifiers. Each booklet will cover some aspect of this topic. This booklet, *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: Introduction*, is written to share what I learned with my fellow language students. We recognize that as language speakers we will likely become teachers of Tăltăn, so they will be interested in what I learned, especially about methods for teaching our language.

I began research for my booklets, by doing a literature search to find out what is written about what linguists call *classificatory verbs*. In our language classes, we have call them *Tahltan verb classifiers*. The next step was to contact fluent speakers to discuss how they, as speakers of our language, understand the classificatory verbs from a Tahltan point of view. My final task was to collect Tăltăn verbs that are in this special group.

I also chose this topic because I am a teacher. When I was about 12 years old, I had a waking vision in which I saw myself teaching children with visible handicaps. Growing up in a very large family and in a culture of children was a perfect training ground for a budding teacher, especially when I was one of the babysitters. For 12 years I taught in public schools, teaching single- and multiple-grade classes, and filling the position of school librarian. Then I began working with children with special needs as a Learning Assistant Teacher in School District #60 (Peace River North).

In 1978, I became one of the first Itinerant Teachers for the Visually Impaired in British Columbia. Several years later, I switched jobs to become the Resourceperson for the Mentally and/or Physically Handicapped. After teaching for twenty-two years, I was finally working with the children I had seen in my vision. This part-time teaching position was very demanding. So, I took a year off to rejuvenate, and had so much fun that I have never returned to the classroom. My 'fun' included taking contracts, such as writing the Draft IRP for Tăltăn as a Second Language for SD#87 (Stikine), and, writing and publishing books for beginning readers. Although I had left the classroom, I was active in the field of education—and still am.

So, how did I end up at Simon Fraser University (SFU) working on my master's degree? The answer to this question began a long time ago. The Indian agent and the priests in Telegraph Creek advised my parents that they should not teach Tăltăn to their children. They did not teach us our heritage language, my mother said, because they were told that it would "ruin your English." My parents believed that we needed to speak 'proper' English to be able to live successfully in the modern world. As a result, wanting the best for their children, they did not teach us to speak our language.

My family left Telegraph Creek in 1942. At that time, Tăltăn was the language that everyone spoke, including my older siblings. However, from the time we left our homeland, our heritage language was not spoken in the presence of us children—unless my parents did not want us to know what they were talking about. My parents also believed that, in the modern world, their children needed new skills and the way to get these skills was through education. That is why, in their large family, each of their children has training and/



or formal education beyond public school. One might say that lifelong learning was an important belief in our family. Of my favourite sayings from my dad was: *Don't get yourself fired—you might lose the chance to learn something new.*

In 2013, the University of Victoria (UVic) held a meeting to explore the possibility of setting up a program for revitalizing our Tahltan language. In January of 2016, this program became a reality. Although I had never actively worked towards learning to speak our language, I always knew that someday I would do so. That is how, as a Tahltan Elder, I went back to school.

One of my great frustrations as a student of our language was that there were few resources to help me to study on my own. My teacher instincts also were being tickled, making me see that my teacher skills might be used to help others learning our language. So, I signed up to take a master's degree in Linguistics, focusing on First Nations languages in applied linguistics at Simon Fraser University.

Linguistics, according to the dictionary is a scientific study of a language: its structure, its grammar rules, and other topics related to the study of a language. My project falls under a branch of linguistics called applied linguistics. According to the Linguistic Society of America:

“Today, the governing board of AILA [the International Association of Applied Linguistics] describes applied linguistics ‘as a means to help solve specific problems in society... applied linguistics focuses on the numerous and complex areas in society in which language plays a role.’”

(AILA Vadermecum, 1992, p. 2)

The ‘specific problems’ that I mean to help solve relate to the low number of reference and learning materials for our ancestral language. I chose this branch of study because I know that my teaching skills will be useful for creating learning resources. I believe that my study booklets would provide a resource for studying our language.

When I was deciding on what topic to choose for my capstone project, the final project for my master's degree, the student in me asked for more materials to help me learn Tāltān. Maybe I should write books for beginning speakers in our language. My professor and supervisor, Marianne Ignace, suggested the next level of study booklets on Tahltan verb classifiers would be a good choice. My teacher's voice agreed, recalling that we have so few reference materials at this time. My Indigenous-self asked questions about how this topic would be relevant to our culture and our Indigenous ways of learning. My challenge as the writer of this capstone project was: *How do I weave these strands together to create a pattern that would have meaning and meet the needs of all of these voices?*

## A. About Classificatory Verbs...

### *Purpose of this Project*

For my final master's project, I set out to create a set of study booklets on the topic of what we learned in our Tältān language classes as *Tahltnan verb classifiers*. These booklets would provide information that will help students to study this grammatical feature on their own by:

- providing information about the meaning of the classifiers.
- providing information for beginning language learners as well as for students who are more advanced in our language.
- including suggestions for practicing this group of words, and,
- providing a Glossary of words that fit into the category of Tahltnan verb classifiers.

This topic was chosen for several reasons:

- Tahltnan verb classifiers was a topic our language class had difficulty learning.
- One of our instructors, Dr. Trish Rosborough, advised that students often write the material that they wished they had when they were studying. I, personally, wanted resources that I could study in my own way and in my own time.
- One of my great frustrations while studying our Tältān language is the lack of resources. Other than class notes from language classes, we do have two excellent resource books written by a Tahltnan, Hotseta (Oscar Dennis, MA), with his father, James Dennis. However, these books do not provide enough details on all topics. Nor were they meant to do so.
- We have *A Children's Dictionary* by C. Carter. However, it does not contain enough words or details to satisfy advanced language learning. Our recordings are excellent, but are in the process of being organized so they are not available to us. At this time, recordings are also in the process of being collected from various universities and from private collections. Other resources are being developed, but are not available yet.
- There has been no research into this grammatical feature to date. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It is a disadvantage because a considerable part of my time in research must be spent in gathering information from our fluent speakers. And, will the fluent speakers be available?

The advantage is that I have the privilege of gathering information about our Tältān language from the fluent speakers. Research into a Tältān grammatical feature by a Tahltnan person; one who collects information about an original

grammatical feature by a Tahltan person who collects information from original sources: fluent speakers and Elders who are also Tahltan—that is a good thing.

### *Proposed Research*

In order to write the study booklets, I needed to do background research. My plan involved looking for answers to the following questions:

- o What are Tahltan verb classifiers?
- o What are classificatory verbs?
- o What are similarities and differences between Tahltan verb classifiers and classificatory verbs?
- o What is the best way to teach this grammatical feature?

### *What I know so far...*

- I have created a study booklet, the *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics*, as a class project for a different course. This booklet will become one in the new set I am creating for my master's project.
- For this first booklet, I collected information about Tahltan verb classifiers only from class notes and from fluent speakers.
- Our language is part of the Dene/Athabaskan language family. I use either term.
- We learned that Dene languages are made up of meaningful parts that linguists call morphemes. Suffixes and prefixes are examples of morphemes. *The fact that Dene languages are made up of smaller parts (morphemes) is a very important concept.*
- Reminder: *Prefixes* are morphemes added to the beginning of words. *Suffixes* are morphemes added to the end of words.
- In our language classes, we learned of special suffixes, endings, added to verbs. These suffixes describe nouns. We learned this grammatical feature as *Tahltan verb classifiers*.

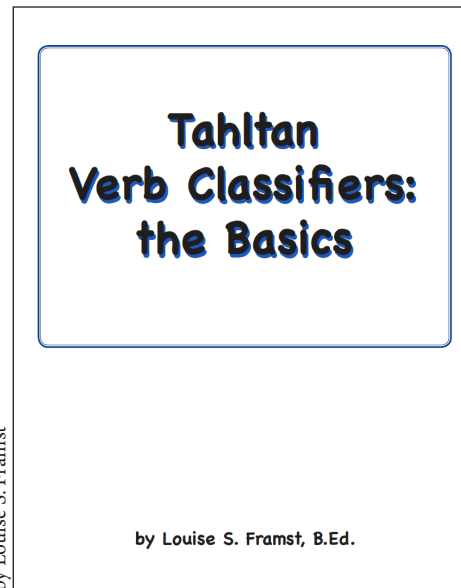


Fig. 1. The cover of the first study booklet.



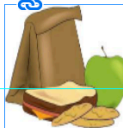

- An example of a Tahltan verb classifier is the word *esghankā*, meaning (*you*) *hand it to me*. The verb is *-ghan-*, the special ending is *-kā*, as described in Fig. 2, below. (The hyphens in these word parts mean that these parts-of-words cannot stand alone. They have meaning only when other parts are added to them.)
- Information in these booklets must be accurate, so, proof-editing was done by: Jenny Quock, a born-to-the-language speaker, Odelia Dennis, language instructor, and Angela Dennis, a born-to-the-language speaker. Both Odelia and Angela also are teachers of our language who can also read and write the language.
- The following page is an excerpt from the first study booklet. It shows one of our special suffixes and its meaning.





**-kā = food; things in an open container**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the object food? If yes, maybe... use -kā</li> <li>• Is it food, but heavy or large? use -tī</li> <li>• Is the object is in an open container? If yes, use -kā</li> <li>• Is the object is in a container, closed? If yes, use -ā or -tī</li> <li>• More than one? use -lē</li> <li>• Is food item only 1, not in a container? use -ā</li> </ul>	
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Practice on these examples:

			
-kā or -ā	-kā or -tī	-kā or -lē	-kā or -ā

	→		→		→	
-kā or -tī		-kā or -lē		-tī or -lē		-kā or -lē

[food, even covered: -kā. If we could not see that food is being cooked in this pot, we would be looking only at the pot. Then we would use -ā; food, heavy: -tī; many food items: -lē; liquid in an open container: use -kā. It is acceptable to use -tī because it can spill.]

beads in open box: -kā; 3 bags of food: -lē; food, two cans: -lē; If only 1 can then -tī because it is heavy for its size, or -ā is acceptable; food, 2 bags: -lē]

by Louise S. Framst

Fig. 2. Page 9 of *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics* gives the meaning of the classifier *-ka*, as well as provides practice exercises in choosing the appropriate classifier.

## What I learned from reading...

- The first step in my research was to search for *verb classifiers*. Imagine my surprise when I read research articles and found that linguists define verb classifiers as forms of a verb. (Faltz: p. 10) Examples of these verb classifiers:
  - *I ate, you ate*
  - *We ate, they ate*, and so on.
- So, I continued to search. In the article entitled *The Phonology and Morphology of Tahltan (Northern Athabaskan)* by John Alderete, et al, (2014: p. 27), he mentions a possible future project for Tahltan language study: a grammatical feature called classificatory verbs.
- Following up on classificatory verbs, I found that they are very similar in appearance to what we call Tahltan verb classifiers.
- Fig. 3 is a chart showing the six Tahltan verb classifiers.

<i>Suffix Classifier</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<i>-chūsh</i>	<i>something soft; one thing</i>
<i>-tī</i>	<i>something dangerous, sharp, heavy for its size, big, delicate, can spill, shape = long</i>
<i>-ā</i>	<i>something hard; one thing</i>
<i>-tē</i>	<i>a living being; or toy that is like a living being</i>
<i>-kā</i>	<i>food; liquid and objects in an open container</i>
<i>-lē</i>	<i>more than one thing</i>

Fig. 3. From *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics* (p. 3)

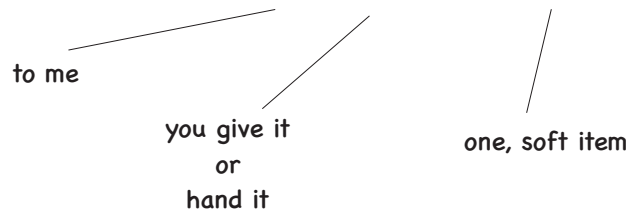
- Dene K'è, another Dene language from the Slave Lake area, also uses this pattern. Fig. 4 shows asking for tea in a similar chart in Dene K'è.

In Dene K'è, one may ask for tea (lidí, from French le thé) in a variety of ways:	
Lidí seghán -chu.	'Hand me the tea.' (a single box or bag)
Lidí seghán -wa.	'Hand me the tea.' (boxes or bags)
Lidí seghán -hxo.	'Hand me some tea.' (a handful)
Lidí seghán -hxe.	'Hand me the tea.' (in a deep, closed container)
Lidí seghán -hge.	'Hand me the tea.' (in a cup – open, shallow container)

Fig. 4. This chart is from *Final Report on Polysynthetic Languages...* by Sarah Kell (2014: p. 211).

- The two charts are similar because they have endings that have specific meanings.
- The Tältān language also uses different endings for shape, number, etc. (See the Fig. 3 on page 7.
- The diagram below shows a Tahltan verb classifier, with the meaning of each part of the Tältān word-phrase, meaning *(you) hand it or give it to me*.

**Esghanchūsh = es + ghan + chūsh**

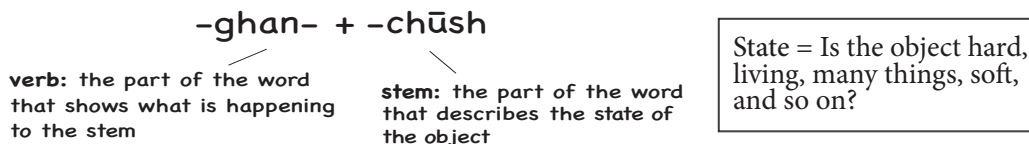


- As you might expect, the first morpheme in the verb phrase above could be changed to pronouns: him/her/it, them, us.
- In this section, we will focus on only parts of the verb phrase shown below:

**-ghan- + -chūsh**

Reminder:  
The dashes in the morphemes  
(parts of words) means that that  
part cannot stand alone.

- Linguists call this grammatical feature *classificatory verbs*.
- They also have names for these parts of the word in classificatory verbs. For convenience, I will use the same terms. See the diagram below.



- Dene languages have this grammatical feature in common.
- My research showed that In Cherokee (not a Dene language), the stem includes both the verb and the ending. (Blankenship: p. 93)
- Hotseta (Oscar Dennis, MA) describes the stem as a *mass classificatory stem*. (p.103)
- In my booklet, I call it a *special suffix*.
- I learned that in the Dene languages, there were variations.
- For instance, the number of stems (as shown above) varied from one Dene language to another. Example: Koyukon has 11 stems (Henry: p. 112) , while Tahltan has 6 stems.

- In some languages, the stems are sorted into groups, categories, or systems, such “...events involving location, free fall or change of location, handling, and caused motion.” (Rice: p. 103)
- In Carrier, “there are actually four systems of classificatory verbs.” (Poser: p. 37) They are: controlled handling, uncontrolled handling, location, and inherent motion, such as falling.
- Tältān does not group.
- In some Dene languages, Navajo and Chipewyan, for instance, classificatory verbs can have a metaphoric meaning.
- The following is an example, from the Navajo language (Field, 2009: p. 297):
- The ending -déeł, means rope-like things.
- It can have another metaphoric meaning as well: moving at the speed of light.
- Lightning or a sunbeam is compared to a rope-like thing .
- So, moving along lightning or a sunbeam would be a very fast action.
- Field explains that this extreme speed explains how their gods can be in two places at once.
- I did not find references of this kind in our language—so far.
- Research of classificatory verbs was done by a number of researchers, such as David and Kay Henry (1965), Rice (1998), Kilbrik (2001), Field (2009), Blankenship (1997), and William Poser (2017). These researchers write about classificatory verbs in Dene languages, such as: Apache, Navajo, Denekéh, Kaska, Carrier, and Koyukon. However, none of the research has been done on our Tahltan classificatory verbs.
- Hotseta (Oscar Dennis) has a brief description of this feature in *Talkin’ Tahltan*, but gives no details. (p. 103)
- The findings of the researchers are basically the same. It is explained by David and Kay Henry as: “A highly developed system of classificatory verbs is found in all Athapaskan languages. These verbs deal with *the handling of certain categories of objects* which are classified according to the size, shape, texture, and number of objects.” (1965: p. 110) [My emphasis]
- In other words, in classificatory verbs, the focus is on the stem, the ending, not on the verb. The item, the noun in the word-phrase, is the focus.
- Note: According to Wikipedia, one definition of stem is that it is the part of a word left when all affixes are removed (that is, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes).

According to this definition, the verb in classificatory verbs is a prefix.

- The following chart demonstrates how the verb describes the way the item is being handled in the Carrier language. Fig. 5.

behana <u>it</u> lh <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to take it out
diduta <u>l</u> h <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to hold it up
dugha <u>it</u> lh <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to hang it up
k'it <u>al</u> h <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to put it on (the table)
k'un <u>ai</u> lh <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to put it back on (the table)
k'un <u>ai</u> ti <u>l</u> h <u>ch</u> u <u>s</u>	he is going to take it off (the table)

Fig. 5. *The Carrier Language: A Brief Introduction* by William Poser. (2017: p. 37)

- Note that the stem, the ending, remains the same while the verb changes.
- Kell states that “The *choice of verb* root depends on the shape, consistency, number, and containment of the object in question, reflecting that these features affect how the object moves or is handled: Tea in a cup is handled differently from a handful of tea leaves.” (p. 211) [My italics.]
- The following chart is from the first study booklet. The chart is similar to the one in Hoseta’s book, *Talkin’ Tahltan*. (2015: p. 103) Fig. 6.
- Note that in this chart, the verb stays the same while the stem changes. In this chart, the focus is on the verb, not the stem.

• Ts’ah esghanch <u>ū</u> sh.	= Give me the hat. (Soft, perhaps a toque; one)
• Ts’a’ esghan <u>ā</u> .	= Give me the plate. (Hard object, one.)
• Tlī’ yāze esghan <u>tē</u> .	= Give me the puppy. (living being)
• Kuntz esghank <u>ā</u> .	= Give me the potato. (food in a container)
• Ts’ah esghan <u>lē</u> .	= Give me the hats. (More than one)
• Bēs esghan <u>tī</u> .	= Give me the knife. (Dangerous, sharp, long)

Fig. 6. From *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics*. (p. 4) The stems are underlined. The morphemes describe the item that is being handled.

- What does the difference between these two charts mean?
- Since our Tāltān language has never been fully documented, I did not find an answer to this question in the literature.
- Which lead to the next section: What I don’t know...



### *What I don't know...*

I have identified seven questions I have about Tahltan verb classifiers. This information will be collected from fluent speakers, Elders, recordings and the Tahltan Language Committee.

1. How does our language explain this grammatical feature?
2. Do we have more stems than the six common ones?
3. Does our language use these stems in a metaphoric way?
4. Do we have stems for abstract concepts?
5. Are these verbs only for people? Or can we use them for animal action as well?
6. Does our language have classificatory verbs, other than the ones gathered from class notes?
7. How should we teach this concept?
  - as classificatory verbs?
  - as special suffixes?
  - other suggestions?

When I began Graduate Studies in July of 2017, one of my first classes was Methods in Field Research. Anvita Abbi, PhD, was our professor. She was noted for “her pioneering work on endangered languages of India.” (SFU Staff biography, 2018) Our class was studying First Nations languages, with eight different languages represented. She taught us to question everything about our heritage language. Just because we are all learning our First Nations languages does not mean that we understand the world in the same way. For instance, look at the meanings for the word *coyote*:

- Secwepemctsin (Kamloops area): *coyote* means *the dog that lopes along*.
- Tǎltǎn: *coyote* means *the dog that does no work, so it is 'good for nothing'*.

Although Dene languages share classificatory verbs, I am following Dr. Abbi's suggestion to question the meaning of classificatory verbs in our Tǎltǎn language. I do not presume to say that this feature in Tǎltǎn follows the descriptions from current literature. Nor do I presume that it does not, either. That is why I will ask the Elders and fluent speakers.

### *What I did to find out and what happened...*

My first step was to find out which fluent speakers were available. Then I invited each of these to work with me. Attempts were made to set up times for interviews. After only two interviews, a teacher of the Tǎltǎn language classes in an elementary school and I decided that it might be best to have a group of us to meet as a focus group and talk about my research. Other meeting times could result from this meeting.

In the meantime, I continued to invite fluent speakers to work with me to provide vocabulary. I had one interview with a born-to Tǎltǎn language speaker who allowed me to record only his conclusion.

Six fluent speakers and I met at a school as a focus group. I presented my project to

them. In the discussion following, I explained that I needed two things from them to complete my project:

1. I was looking for answers to the seven questions on my list.
2. In particular, I wanted to spend more time discussing how they understood these classifiers from our Tahltan point of view.

I felt that we had good discussions. What I found out is explained below. After our discussions I invited them to help me by providing vocabulary about our classifiers. Of this group, only two were willing to help with this.

Later on, an elderly cousin of mine agreed to work with me. She has provided vocabulary during two half-hour sessions. She is a willing participant, but she tires quickly. Another speaker has since participated in two half-hour sessions during which she provided vocabulary. In addition, our language class lessons and recordings provided more words to add to the Glossary. A fluent speaker and I worked for three hours on one of the Tahltan verb classifiers. And we finished only five and a half pages of the fourteen-page vocabulary summary for *one word-phrase*.

### *What I found out...*

#### *1. How does our language explain this grammatical feature?*

The first interview that I had was with a born-to-speaker. Language is one of his main interests. He is a fluent speaker of our Tāltān language and is also learning to speak Japanese and Korean on his own. As he understands our language, the current literature that describes the item in these verbs as the focus does not fit our way of thinking. After much discussion (not recorded by request), he concluded that the ‘verb’ and the ‘stem’ cannot be separated, therefore, he thinks of them as one unit.

The next time this issue was discussed was at the focus group meeting. The consensus of the participants was that they did not think about our language “in that way.” They said, “We only know how to speak our language.” Therefore, they could not answer this question.

Hotseta (Oscar Dennis) had a different way of looking at this issue. He said that when he thinks of the word *esghanchūsh*, he automatically thinks *textile*, something soft, to hand to the person. (*Esghanchūsh* means *hand me the item that is soft*). Or, if someone says to him, “*K’ukā esghanā*,” he immediately looks for one hard object. His reaction is the same whether or not the person names the object being asked for. He looks for the *item* that is being requested.

Since this interview, I have asked several other Tahltan speakers what they think of when I say a word-phrase that is a Tahltan verb classifier. Their reactions were mixed. Some responded as Hotseta did, focusing on the item. Others focused on the verb. One gave both the verb and the special suffix as the first response.

2. *Do we have more stems than the six common ones?*

The consensus at the focus group is that there are no others. When questioned about shoveling snow, for example, they agreed that the classifiers we have would be used. Our language does not have classifiers to say how snow or mushy substances are handled.

3. *Does our language use these stems in a metaphoric way?*

(A metaphor is a way of saying 'That man is a bear,' when we mean that he's like a bear.)

*Answer:* No. We always use the word *k'at'e*, meaning *similar to*, or *like something else*.

4. *Do we have stems for abstract concepts?*

This question was answered in one of our language classes. Our instructor told us that we can use the word *esghanā* when giving a name, for example. So, the answer is that we can use existing classifiers when it is acceptable for them to be used.

5. *Are these verbs only for people? Or can we use them for animal action as well?*

Can we use these Tahltan verb-classifiers when speaking about animals? That is, can I say, *Eslīe utlan dechinh chinelē*. Meaning *My dog is gathering up lots of sticks?* (My dog had filled the little porch on my house with sticks.)

*Answer:* Yes, we can use these for actions by animals, too. But only when an animal can do the action. You wouldn't say that *your dog bought food*, for example. They cannot 'pick up' sticks because they have no fingers, but they can 'bring' a stick.

6. *Does our language have other classificatory verbs, other than the ones gathered from class notes?*

*Answer:* No.

7. *How should we teach this concept?*

- as classificatory verbs?
- as special suffixes?
- other suggestions?

This question was answered by the Tahltan Language Committee (DDN) in January 2018. The members of this committee told me that they liked how I handled this topic in the first study booklet that I created. They understand that the linguistic term for this grammatical feature is classificatory verbs, but for simplicity they prefer that we continue to refer to this set as Tahltan verb classifiers.

### *A final word from my research...*

Oscar Dennis states that "in Tāltān all of the stems, except /chūsh/, are contracted when the verb-phrase is placed into context/sentence." (2015: p. 103) During our discussion of this statement, February 2019, Oscar explained this statement with this example:

when we say *t'anlē* (*put lots into some container*), this is the contracted form (shortened form) of *t'anlēl*.

However, he went on to say that this is, more accurately, his preliminary finding. That is, he is in the process of verifying this statement by analyzing all of his recordings. When this statement is fully documented, he will share the information with me, and, perhaps this study booklet will be updated at that time. In the meantime, the way we are currently teaching the Tahltan verb classifiers is appropriate for *Level 2* learners.

## *My conclusions*

### *1. About Tahltan verb classifiers...*

The focus group answered most of the seven questions. The instructor from our language class and the DDN answered the remainder. (More from the DDN later.) The answer to the 'big' question that I was researching, however, was not as clear-cut.

My question was what is the Tahltan way of looking at this grammatical feature? From the results above, no answer is obvious to me. Two of our language learners with the most linguistic background do not agree. From my informal polling of Tāltān speakers, there was no consensus, either. I borrowed Hotseta's question and asked, "What comes to your mind first when I say *esghanchūsh*?" I received three groups of responses: *something soft*, *giving*, and *giving something soft*.

My final observation is that if this question is to be studied further, it would require much more time spent in discussion with many more speakers. The number of speakers who took part in this discussion is too low to give an accurate result. Also, some of the speakers who did not take part may have more information to contribute. However, we all agree that classificatory verbs and Tahltan verb classifiers 'talk about' items and how they are handled.

### *2. How will I present this grammatical feature in my study booklets?*

When my project was presented to the Tahltan Language Committee (DDN), the members stated that they liked the way that I presented the classifiers in the first study booklet. They wanted the term *Tahltan verb classifier* to be used. The members felt that this was a simpler term. There is no need to use the more complex term.

Because the DDN approved of the way the first booklet presented, the second booklet, *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: Level 2*, will be presented in a similar format. So, the classifier will be arranged by the verb. The final morpheme will be called *special suffix*, or, *ending*. It is expected that the term stem will also be used.

### *3. About collecting vocabulary...*

As I have been doing interviews and collecting vocabulary for the Glossa-

ry, I have two observations to share. The first concerns the fluent speakers. Since I had gathered information from written sources and recordings, my last source of information was the fluent speakers. They would be the resource for me to complete the *Glossary*. As I have stated many times before, these speakers are my walking dictionaries and encyclopedias. Sometimes catching up to them is difficult. This time is one of those.

Through an unusual sequence of events, my time for working with fluent speakers for this project is very short. In the beginning, I felt frustrated and stressed by the time constraint. However, after considering the situation, I realized that this is, in fact, a condensed version of the reality of fieldwork. It is a reality-check when relying on firsthand knowledge.

There are a few factors to be considered when working with speakers of Tahltan. First, there are a limited number of speakers, period. Secondly, many of the fluent speakers live in the three main settlements in the Tahltan nation. Thirdly, the other fluent speakers live a considerable distance apart.

The reality is that people have their own lives. They go on holidays. They attend a 4-day celebration in a neighbouring nation. They work long hours. They are caring for ailing relatives. They do not want to do this. And so on. The reality in this case, is that all of the above, and more, have actually happened since I received permission to approach them.

In addition, distance is a factor. I chose to stay in Dease Lake to complete my project because many of our fluent speakers live in the vicinity. When speakers from the area were not available, I looked elsewhere. But the nearest fluent speaker lives a 3-hour drive from here on a road where locals told me that I would need to 'drive very carefully.' The next nearest is a 9-hour drive away.

I have tried to collect vocabulary over the telephone in the past. Unfortunately, using the telephone has not been successful. Since I am the only speaker of our language in Prince George, I have relied on the telephone in the past. Telephone lines in the north are not always clear and I often had difficulty in distinguishing between sounds. It is difficult enough to decide between *ts'ah* and *tsa'a* when I can see the speaker's mouth. I have noticed that there is often only a slight difference between the correct word and an embarrassment. Video-conferencing has better results because I could see the speaker's mouth, but in this case, it was not an option. Also, internet in the north can be unreliable. So, my already-short timeframe for working with speakers near Dease Lake had dwindled seriously.

Eliciting vocabulary is a time-consuming activity. As a fluent speaker and I were working on a transitive classifier (more about that in *Level 2*), we became very aware of this fact. There were 14 pages of charts for this complicated classifier. After three hours with only a short break, we had completed only five and a half pages.

With this time factor in mind, I have revised my original plan for the *Glossary*. When I began gathering vocabulary for the charts, I realized that I would not be able to finish charts for all of the vocabulary that I had identified, although I

had hoped to complete several. The *Glossary* is now going to be a *works-in-progress* in which I complete what I can of the charts now. Other language speakers will be invited to complete the charts. I will collect vocabulary to complete them as one of my on-going projects while I continue to learn our language on my own.

While working on these booklets, I was disappointed because the fluent speakers were not available. I had no idea how I could find more vocabulary for the charts. I felt as though I were facing a blank wall. I felt hobbled, unable to know what to do next. I was at a standstill. What should I do? What could I do? Although I had frequently felt the frustration caused by the lack of resources, I had never felt so blocked.

Luckily, I had only one participant who would help, so that I could add to my chart. That person also agreed to proof-edit the language in my booklets before I submitted my project. I was offered unpublished vocabulary research to search for more words to fill my charts. Unfortunately, this material did not contain many words suitable for my charts. But these two participants gave me enough vocabulary to complete my project.

My situation highlighted a major concern with our language program: We are in dire need of resources. Reference materials and Apps are being developed. Are these efforts enough? What else can our program do? Are we making the best use of our knowledge holders?

William Poser, PhD, (2018) and I had discussions about whether or not this linguistic theory needed to be included in lessons to teach people to speak the language. He said to me that he believed that it was only “people like you” who would be learning theory at this level. He was referring to those of us who are studying the language at an advanced level. Having spent several hours debating the Tahltan worldview of Tahltan verb classifiers, I now understand what he means. We did not reach a decision, but we enjoyed the exchange of ideas.

The next section will address methods for teaching language. This section will give more insight into the nature of Tahltan verb classifiers and how to teach this grammatic feature.

## B. About Approaches and Methods in Teaching Language...

In the last section, the theory related to classificatory verbs was discussed. We left that section with the question of whether or not students need to learn that particular theory in order to learn to speak a language. As I read articles and books about theories and methods of teaching a second language, I asked myself how this related to me as an Indigenous person. Were some of the suggestions I read about relevant to my Indigenous culture? Then my teacher voice asked, “Were any of these methods ones that I would use to teach Tältān, my heritage language?”

The answer to these questions involves what we want the students to be able to do by the end of the lessons. The end goal will determine the approaches and methods to choose. Why do people want to learn a second language? Do they want to be able to read and write the language? Do they want to be able to speak it? Do they want to have only survival sentences to use while travelling? Do they want to attend university in a different country, in the language of that country?

*Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, third edition, (2017), by Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers has been one of my favourite sources of information for this section. The way that these authors describe the various approaches and methods used in teaching language appeals to my sense of logic. They believe that it is important for language teachers to have knowledge of various teaching methods in order to make informed decisions. A brief history of teaching methods is a good place to start.

### A brief history of teaching languages...

In High School, I took Latin as my second language study. Oddly enough, the study of Latin is an appropriate place to begin this discussion. Look far back into history and you will see that people did not go to school to learn a language. They learned other languages for a reason, usually motivated to learn another language because they traded with neighbouring nations. The Roman Empire was responsible for the widespread use of Latin, so 500 years ago, Latin was the common language. With the rise of the English Commonwealth, English became a widespread language. Latin was not spoken anymore but continued to be taught as an exercise to teach grammar. As a dead, so unchanging, language, it was the perfect language for studying grammar by those who went on to higher education.

Several world events caused changes in the way languages were taught. The second World War resulted in lots of people moving to different parts of the world. This movement in turn resulted in the need for second language speakers. As Richards and Rodgers (2017: p. 4) explain, further worldwide changes created the need for even more speakers of a second language. Globalization, the internet, and English as an international language, all added to the need to develop new methods for teaching a second language.

However, with the rising need for language acquisition, that is, the need to speak

languages, students wanted more than being able to read and write. New approaches and methods were needed, resulting in many being developed. Other changes to teaching language were also taking place, such as the creation of applied linguistics. This branch of linguistics covers "...activities which involve solving some language-related problem or addressing some language-related concern." (Tucker: p. 1) In 1946, applied linguistics was first recognized in the United States. Its focus was on improving the teaching of English as a second language.

This fact was especially true in North America. Throughout the first decades, the United States and western Canada viewed English as the only practical language. English was the language spoken everywhere and no other language was taught in schools. Nowadays, we see a different picture. Canada is officially bilingual with English and French the official languages. But, although students take French lessons, do they actually learn to speak French? In the US, English is still the official language. It only in recent years that funding is being supplied to help Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the US reclaim and revitalize their languages.

However, with the rise in immigration, there is more need for English as a second language. As a result, the search for more effective ways of teaching a second language is ongoing. We see programs being developed on a regular basis. New programs such as TPR, AIM, *Where Are Your Keys?*, and many more are constantly being created. The use of technology is now common. An online search turns up YouTube presentations that give lessons on how to learn a second language is one such example.

One change is very important for our Indigenous languages. In one of Anvita Abbi's lectures, she informed us that early linguistic research had been based on the grammar of Latin or Sanskrit. Therefore, when we study our Indigenous language, she advised that we be aware of this fact. In a private conversation with linguist, William Poser (2018), he said that this had definitely been true in the past. But, for the last 50 years, linguists have come to realize that the grammar of Indigenous languages need to be studied in a different way from English to respect their uniqueness.

## **What are some differences between English and Indigenous languages?**

One of the resources in a course reading list was *Pathways to Creating Onkwehonwehnéha Speakers at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory*, headed by Jeremy Green (2017). This document is the final report of a study to answer the question: How do we build on our success in creating second language speakers and create opportunities for a wider number of learners to achieve high levels of speaking proficiency? In other words, how do they increase the number of fluent speakers in their Six Nations?

This report compares the grammar of the English language and the grammar of Indigenous languages. Green wrote, "One of the key differences is that *English is a relatively analytic language* and *Onkwe'honwehnéha is polysynthetic*." (p. 53) [My italics.] This report was written about languages in Six Nations; Onkwe'honwehnéha is one of their languages. However, Dene languages are also polysynthetic. So, their findings are likely to apply to teaching Dene languages as well.



*What is a polysynthetic language?* Linguistically speaking, in polysynthetic languages, words are created by combining smaller, meaningful parts called morphemes. What looks to us with English eyes to be a word, might be more properly called a word-phrase in polysynthetic languages. Look at the Tältän ‘word’ *esghanā* as an example. This ‘word’ is made up of several parts as shown in Fig. 7. In polysynthetic languages, this ‘word’ is actually a verb-phrase. The report stresses that understanding the meaning of the morphemes is key to understanding polysynthetic languages. (p. 55)

<i>Word</i>	<i>Prefix</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Who is doing the action?</i>	<i>Stem</i>
<b>esghanā</b>	<b>es-</b>	<b>-gha-</b>	<b>-n-</b>	<b>-ā</b>
(you) Hand it to me.	to me	give/hand it	you	Something hard, one item

Fig. 7. Example of a polysynthetic language showing the four morphemes that make up the word-phrase *esghanā*. Note that the hyphens in the morphemes are place-holders.

Another difference between the two languages is that some Indigenous languages use postpositions and English uses prepositions. For example, in English we would say: *We are at the store*. Note that **at** is before the word *store*. It is therefore, a *preposition*, based on the morpheme *pre-*, meaning *before*. In Tältän, the word order would be: *Store-at-we are*. The word **at** is placed after the word *store*. It is therefore a *postposition*, based on the morpheme *post-*, meaning *after*.

Word order in a sentence is also another difference. English word order: *John hit the ball*. Tältän word order would be: *John-the ball-he hit*. English sentences are arranged as Subject-Verb-Object (SVO); in Tältän, the word order is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). Therefore, to teach the grammar of our polysynthetic languages most effectively, our approaches and methods must take into consideration the characteristics of our languages. From the description above, to teach my Dene language effectively, I must focus on two of our language features: *morphemes* and *word order*.

“Teach me your language and I will tell you your worldview.”

Anvita Abbi, July 2017

The differences above focus on grammar, but a major difference between languages of any kind is the fact that our languages carry our worldview, the way we see the world. Our language includes words that are important to our culture. In Tältän, we have pages of words for different types of weather because we spent our lives on the land. Weather still plays a role in choice of activities, such as travel plans. Road conditions are a common topic of conversation. Animals were also important in our world. Take a look at the Tältän word for *coyote*, *tidah tli*. *Tidah* means *good for nothing*. *Tli* means *dog*. So, in our culture, a *coyote* is a *dog that is good for nothing*.

To understand this definition is to understand the importance of dogs in our traditional Tahltan culture. The plains tribes had horses, we had dogs. In our old ways, we were semi-nomadic, moving a lot for hunting, fishing, and gathering. Sled dogs pulled our sleds in winter. They supplied the ‘horsepower’ for our sleds which would carry our furs, food,

people, etc. These dogs were working dogs, so most of the time only older children or adults were allowed near them. Dogs were also our pack animals, packing approximately 30 lbs of weight. Our Tahltan beardedogs were our hunting assistants and protectors because these little dogs could fight a bear until it sat down in defeat. A coyote, on the other hand, was a dog that did no work for us, so was 'good for nothing'. All of this is built into our word for *coyote*.

When I ask a mentor, *How do I say \_\_\_\_\_ in Tāltān?*, I am asking two questions at once. I am asking for the vocabulary (the words), and, I am also asking how I, as a Tahltan, would understand the underlying ideas, concepts, of the word. A classmate and I learned this in one of our beginner-assignments. The assignment was to write a short conversation about weather. In this conversation, we wrote about the types of weather we had in one day.

At the end, we wanted to say that the weather was *mixed up, crazy*. When we asked a mentor for the word meaning *mixed up, crazy*, we were told *dūzakhu*. My classmate and I then puzzled over how to express the idea of mixed up, crazy weather, we uncertainly wrote: *Ahene dūzākhu ahujah*. The literal meaning is *Outside mixed up, crazy is happening*. Our mentor looked at our sentence in surprise, beamed at us, and said that it was exactly the way to say it in our language. Therefore, when we are choosing approaches and methods of acquiring language, we must consider whether or not these teach in a way that captures what Gary Oker calls *the spirit of the language*. (presentation, 2018)

## A bit of housekeeping

The full title of the report that I have been quoting is *Pathways to Creating Onkwehonwehnéha Speakers at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory*. This title is very long, so for convenience, I will use *Pathways* as a very abbreviated title of the report.

Throughout the next section, I will be using some quotes from the report, as well. The quotes may use the name of one of the languages in the Six Nations. I, personally, find that these names to be unfamiliar and so are somewhat distracting. So, I apologize to the Six Nations in advance for taking the liberty of adding more general terms, such as [poly-synthetic languages], or [Indigenous languages], or some other term that keeps the meaning clear without naming their specific languages. The square brackets represent the words I am replacing.

## What I learned...

When I began researching ways of teaching a second language, I found the vocabulary to be confusing, especially the terms approaches and methods. A classmate provided me with a way to clear up the confusion by sharing an excerpt from *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* by Richards and Rodgers. (2017) I found the following description of terms very helpful.

In 1963, Edward Anthony, (Richards: p. 21) an applied linguist, created a means of organizing ideas related to teaching language which he called: *approaches, methods, and techniques*.

- Approaches: An approach refers to theories about basic ideas about language, and, how a language is learned.

- Methods: The methods are how “...theory is put into practice...” It includes choices about content, which skills to teach, in which order they are to be taught.
- Techniques: Techniques are what happens in the classroom.

There are other ways of describing approaches and methods, but these are the simplest. Other ways of describing these ideas are basically different ways of saying the same thing, but in much more detail.

As I read Richards’ and Rodgers’ book on approaches and methods, I was very aware that the information they gave was about teaching non-Indigenous languages. Would any of those methods useful in teaching Tāltān? Were some better than others? In *Pathways*, the report states that several second language methods they were used, “imbedded in an immersion framework.” (Green: p. 65) The approaches and methods that were most useful were those that focused on *teaching grammar*. Using these methods ensured that students learned the main grammatic features of polysynthetic languages: morphemes, and word order where this applied. The following are brief descriptions of some of the most effective approaches and methods used by the Six Nations.

### *Immersion Approach*

In *Pathways*, Green stresses the fact that all lessons are taught using the *Immersion Approach*. Dr. Trish Rosborough, a professor from the University of Victoria, was our main instructor for immersion. She explained that when we speak a language, we *privilege it*. When we use English, we *privilege it*. The goal for the immersion courses was to acquire our indigenous language through learning *how to privilege our heritage language*. To achieve this goal, once we began an immersion session, we spoke only in our language with No English Allowed, not even written English. Words are elicited through gestures, acting out, and context. Our instructor would have been proud of our class in our last immersion session. We finally “stayed in our language” throughout.

Our lessons in immersion stressed that to learn a language, we must *speak* it and *hear* it. Speaking it trained our muscles to produce the sounds. Our mouths gained muscle memory so that we could pronounce the words properly. When I began Tāltān lessons, I could produce the individual sounds of Tāltān properly. But when I spoke, I often felt like my nephew who complained that *the words kept getting tangled up in his mouth*. It was some time before muscle memory developed and the words did not tangle up so much. And, I soon learned that you can only say what you can hear. Although my hearing is good, my ear was not trained to hear the different sounds in the words. *Oglide* and *Odlide* sounded the same to me, but when I wrote them, I knew that *oglide* was incorrect because our language does not contain **gl**.

We had been taught that learning the language in context is a strength of immersion. Context helps to make language more meaningful. It took one of our immersion sessions to demonstrate this to me most emphatically. We were cooking over a campfire with several teams of students preparing the food. While I was waiting for my particular dish to cook, I listened to the chatter from the other groups. The person in charge was giving

instructions about what to do next. She repeatedly said, “*Me`en anlē*,” pointing to the garbage can at the same time. I had never heard these words before and was excited to realize that I understood what she said: *Throw it away*. That is how *Me`en anlē* became part of my vocabulary—*without me trying*. That is the power of immersion.

Netten and Germain (2012) noted that the one area of weakness in immersion, was the lack of student interaction. “However, it is only recently, as a result of the findings of neuroeducational research and a change in our understanding of literacy, that attempts have been made to encourage more student interaction in the immersion classroom.” (Netten: p. 106)

### *About Krashen*

In 1985, Stephen Krashen wrote *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. He also has a YouTube video online called *On Language Acquisition* (2010) that describes his approach to language. The YouTube video demonstrates his basic theory of language learning. He says that we all learn languages the same way: through “comprehensible input.” In other words, we all learn languages through messages that have meaning for us. The way the message is delivered is important, he maintains: it is best delivered in context. (Hinton: p. xiv)

In the video, Krashen demonstrated vocabulary through the use of a drawing. First, he gave a vocabulary sample by simply speaking. Next, he drew a simple picture as he repeated the same vocabulary. As he drew, I could immediately understand the drawing and, therefore, the vocabulary that it illustrated.

Consider the ways we can make messages understandable without speaking or writing English. We could use sign language, gestures, cultural gestures, drawings, and body language. We could use a program such as, *Where Are Your Keys?*, a program that uses sign language as non-verbal cues so that students can stay in the language. I found that when we did our immersion sessions in real-life situations, I learned the most language. Many of us still spend a good amount of our time outdoors in the summer camping, hunting, fishing, or simply enjoying being outside. So, cooking over a campfire was a perfect immersion activity for us.

### *Grammar-Translation Method*

Back to Latin: As mentioned, I studied Latin in the way it is traditionally taught. In this approach, the aim of the lessons was for the students to learn grammar and to use the vocabulary to translate from Latin to English, and vice versa. Method: We would study the Latin grammar, learn vocabulary, then translate sentences and/or stories from the textbook. We were not expected to speak Latin, only to be able to decode it. This approach to learning a language is called the *Grammar-Translation Method*. Obviously, speaking was not a goal for this approach. It is sometimes used today, but lost favour when other methods were developed. (Richards: p. 7)

However, the *Pathways* study also showed that in order for polysynthetic languages to be learned, students must master morphemes and their meanings, as well as word order.

The study uses the word critical to emphasize the importance of learning this concept. That is why the Grammar-Translation Method is one of the methods used. The main difference between the way that I was taught Latin using this method, and the way it is used in Six Nations teaching, is that in Six Nations lessons are taught in immersion. Grammar is therefore taught in context, immersed in the heritage language.

### *The Oral Approach/ Situational Language Teaching*

The *Oral Approach* later became known as *Situational Language Teaching*. These approaches were based on the belief that “Underlying every language was a system of grammatical patterns and structures that had to be mastered in learning a language.” (Richards: p. 47) Students are shown the pattern, without explanation, so that they could deduce the meaning. They would then apply their conclusions to language use outside the classroom. The underlying belief is that this is how children learn a language. (Richards: p. 49)

The most distinctive feature of these methods is that the language being taught is the language needed for specific situations. This method always begins with oral instruction. In the classroom, the teacher might list the vocabulary that is needed for a particular activity (situation). The class is then taught the vocabulary, using real items or items that represent the real items. We might see a toy frying pan, along with models of the food that will be cooked in it. These might be eggs, steaks, vegetables, etc.

The lesson is followed by practice in which students repeat the vocabulary after the teacher, answer questions, or do drills, etc. After sufficient practice, students then engage in some activity, such as demonstrating how to cook an egg while using the appropriate vocabulary. Or, the class might then do cooking as an immersion session. This lesson plan format “came to be known as the PPP lesson format —*Present-Practice-Production*— widely popular well into the 1990s and still used today.” (Richards: p. 54 )

Situational Language Teaching, with its focus on the structure of the language is a good fit for teaching polysynthetic languages. The use of real objects, or representations of real objects, helps students to focus on the message instead of the language. You see the item and know it, without needing words. When I began to acquire my language, I followed the Grammar-Translation approach that I had been taught. That means everything I heard and read needed to be translated. I would think it in English, then translate it to my language.

But in class we learned that when we learn a language, translating it will not lead to speaking the language. (Like my Latin classes?) After thinking about this, I slowly began to understand: If I *see* a picture of an object, I do not need to think its *name*. I simply know what it is without words. I can then think of the object in Tāltān. No English was privileged in the process. Anything we can do to eliminate English will help us to privilege our heritage language.

### *The Root Word Method (RWM)*

“The Root-Word Method was created to expedite the language acquisition process for learners of Rotinonhsyón:nih languages in the 1970’s and is built on the work of respected Rotinonhsyón:nih speakers: Reg & Marg Henry (CayugaZ), Nor Deering & H.

Delisle (Mohawk) and David Kanatawákhon Maracle (Mohawk) and linguists (Boas, 1909; Sapir, 1911; Lounsbury 1949; Chafe, 1967; Michelson, 1973; Fisiak, 1984; Mithun, 1986).” (Green: p. 65) In this method the structure of a polysynthetic language is taught in an organized way, from simple to complex. Also, the complexity of a polysynthetic language is taught in its most simplified form. One of the most distinctive features of this method is the use of a chart such as the following Fig. 8.

<b>Word</b>	<b>Prefix</b>	<b>Root word</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>esdaga</b>	<b>es</b>	<b>daga</b>	<b>for me</b>
<i>endaga</i>	<i>en</i>	<b>daga</b>	<i>for you</i>
<i>medaga</i>	<i>me</i>	<b>daga</b>	<i>for him/her/it</i>
<i>dahdaga</i>	<i>dah</i>	<b>daga</b>	<i>for us</i>
<i>hudaga</i>	<i>hu</i>	<b>daga</b>	<i>for them</i>

Fig. 8. An example of a polysynthetic language showing the morphemes under the headings *prefix* and *root word*.

By teaching the basic word plus any affixes, a student learns a group of words at one time. This method is more effective than trying to teach each word as a separate word. And, as the *Pathways* study explains, RWM is taught through immersion.

### *The Neurolinguistic Approach (NLA)*

The Neurolinguistic Approach (NLA) captured my attention because it is a brain-based approach to language acquisition. Research in brain-based learning theories have been an interest of mine since I began teacher training. It is the approach currently being used in the Northwest Territories. No reports have been published about the effectiveness of this approach in their classrooms to date. NLA, developed by Joan Netten, C.M., PhD, and Claude Germain, PhD, “...has been highly successful in enabling students to communicate spontaneously in a second language in a school situation.” (Netten: p. 106)

This approach is based on recent research into neuro-sciences, as noted below:

1. Research by Paradis (1994, 2004, 2009) showed that we have two different kinds of memory: Knowledge lives in declarative memory (*conscious domain*). Skill lives in procedural memory (*unconscious domain*). There is no connection between these two memories, but they are both required for language acquisition. (Netten: p. 89-90) This fact would explain how I, personally, have a reasonable amount of knowledge about my heritage language, but still speak hesitantly. I have not developed the unconscious skill to say what I am thinking—yet.
2. In order to develop implicit (unconscious) use of grammar, frequent use of language is required. “Paradis further indicates that implicit competence is a non-conscious ability to use vocabulary and structures of the language in *authentic communication*. (Netten: p. 90) [My italics.] We all understand that skill develops only by

frequent practice. This fact means that to speak more smoothly, I must, therefore, practice more. Netten suggests that beginner lessons should include frequent practice of relatively few vocabulary and sentences—in authentic use. Such as our immersion sessions in cooking where we learn to *cut, peel, stir, fry, bake*, and, hopefully, *not burn*.

3. There is more than one language center in the brain. A word is recognized in different parts of the brain depending on whether it is said, read, heard, or thought. (Macfarlane video)
4. “According to recent research in neuroeducation, the acquisition of oral language precedes the learning of explicit knowledge about the language.” (Netten: p. 91) In other words, when we are learning to speak a language, we begin by speaking it. Knowledge about structure of the language follows later. This discovery confirms the findings of the *Pathways* report.
5. *Transfer Appropriate Processing* (TAP) is a recent discovery by Segalowitz (2010): The brain saves its data (both knowledge and skill) together with its learning contexts. Therefore, both oral and written communication must be authentic. (Macfarlane YouTube video) This discovery supports the approaches and methods found to be most useful in the *Pathways* study.

The method of achieving acquisition with the NLA approach relies on a period of intensive immersion. Netton reports that, “After one semester of instruction, approximately 300 hours, 70% of students in the program are able to communicate spontaneously in French on topics related to their age and curriculum.” (p. 104) That amount of time is probably not an option in our schools at this time, but I do like the idea of learning through only speaking for a length of time when first learning. From my experience as a person who rarely heard our language, I felt that I needed to hear our language a lot more in the beginning lessons. I believe that I would also have felt more confident in my language learning by focusing on fewer sentences than I did in the beginning.

### *About the brain, the ear, and language*

A final word on what I learned from my research into learning languages comes from brain research. In his book, *The Brain’s Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from Frontiers of Neuroplasticity* (2016), Doidge reports on current research into how the brain heals itself. The following is a summary of what he has discovered about the ear and language learning. (Doidge: p. 294)

- Fact: The brain has areas dedicated to language.
- Fact: Hearing language is important, of course.
- Fact: Little muscles in the ear carry vibrations to the areas of the brain that process language.

## Conclusion:

In order to learn a spoken language, the student must *hear* it. That means, if you want to learn to speak a language, you must find ways to hear it. Not only do our ears help to distinguish different sounds in language, but little muscles of the ear are also involved in understanding language.

Ideally, the student would be immersed in an environment in which the target language is spoken every day, all day. (Hinton, et al, 2002) Otherwise, the student must find creative ways to hear the language spoken. Speaking aloud to oneself is one of the methods we learned in our classes on immersion. We learned to use the *Domain Method*. In this method, we first chose a domain to study for the week. Next, we identified five vocabulary words and five phrases to learn during that week. We practiced speaking these aloud to ourselves in self-talk. Also, we kept a record of our daily sessions, making notes for ourselves as we practiced.

As we studied our Indigenous language lessons, we, the students, came to realize that there is more to learning a language than vocabulary. We must also learn the intonation (how the voice rises or falls), and the rhythm of the language: fast, like Mandarin; slow, like Texan speech, for example. These unique features of our own Indigenous language, and more, can only be learned through hearing the spoken word.

## Findings from the *Pathways* report

Data for the *Pathways* report were gathered through focus groups and surveys. Findings from this yearlong study are included in the *Pathways* report in detail. Main points include:

- Adult immersion was the most efficient means of creating more speakers. (p. 62) The report goes on to give 39 specific requirements for immersion to be most successful.
- It takes an adult a minimum of 3600 hours to create a proficient speaker. (p. 11) A proficient speaker was a speaker who could speak in a way that was understandable by native speakers.
- “This lack of ability to use writing as a skill to support language acquisition and build language proficiency is a conundrum that requires immediate attention.” (p. 80) The report recommends that reading and writing of the heritage language be included in the lessons. Dr. Trish Rosborough advised that no reading or writing be introduced until we, the students, had an extended period of learning through listening only. The *Pathways* study reports supports this advice by stating that the program should “build literacy skills in the target language for curriculum content only after the content has been mastered orally.” (p. 63) In the study, 100% of the Advanced speakers could read or write. At the Novice level, about 50% could read and write.



- “The Master Apprentice program model was found to be most effective at strengthening receptive and expressive skills to ‘sound like a speaker’ at the ADVANCED to SUPERIOR levels (these figures also include residing and/or working with native speakers or highly proficient second language speakers).” (p. 38)
- In *Pathways*, the scale of learners was Beginner, Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior Distinguished. “Another interesting finding was that the Master-Apprentice program was considered the only method effective for learners at the ADVANCED level of proficiency.” (p. 39)
- Assessment was carried out using American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Guidelines (2012). “The simplicity of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and... language learner familiarity with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines were the two deciding factors in using ACTFL as the frame of reference for speaking proficiency.” (p. 27)
- “University/College programs and courses were found to be most effective at building meta-linguistic awareness of the morphology of [polysynthetic languages] at the NOVICE to INTERMEDIATE levels.” (p. 38) Meta-linguistics awareness is the ability to look at how a language is structured. Morphology is the study of the words in a language and how they are formed. Morphemes, prefixes, suffixes, roots, etc. Section A in this document deals with both of these concepts. I have been referring to these concepts as theory.
- There is not one teaching or learning method that is useful on its own.
- All of these methods teach specific components of the language.
- “It was also stressed that there is a sequence, or ‘right thing at the right time.’” (p. 39)
- Learners at different levels require different types of instruction. The needs of a Beginner speaker are far different from the needs of an Advanced speaker. Therefore, their programs are very different.
- It is no surprise that one of the findings was “that the efforts at school must be mirrored by equal efforts at home by parents.” (p. 44) If families spoke at home, children would have more opportunity to privilege their heritage language. I would suggest that a supportive home environment would also be essential. Encouragement from the parents, whether they speak the heritage language or not, somehow gives the child ‘permission’ to continue learning their language. Discouragement, especially if voiced, would damage the child’s spirit so that they may never even try to learn their heritage language.
- The findings in the *Pathway* study reinforced what all of us who are learning to speak our language know to be true: *To become a speaker, you must speak it.*

## My decisions

Now that I have gathered information, I can decide what to teach about classificatory verbs. Also, how to teach this grammatical feature.

1. *Learning the morphology of polysynthetic languages is essential.*

The first point that comes to mind is that teaching the structure of polysynthetic languages is critical to learning the language. Learning the parts of words and how they are put together to create meaning is basic to these languages because the meaning is contained in the parts of the word (morphemes). Therefore, I will present this grammatical feature through the Root-Word Method and through the Grammar-Translation Method.

2. *Reading and writing are helpful to learning faster.*

Being able to read and write adds another tool to our Language Learning Tool Kit. It is another way to expand our learning beyond one word at a time. Since I am creating a study booklet, it stands to reason that the students using these booklets must be able to read our language

3. *Grammar is important.*

Grammar is simply the rules used to make up a language. We learn grammar unconsciously, but learning more complex grammar will help us to learn the language faster. In *How to Keep Your Language Alive*, (2002) Hinton points out that when we use words like pronoun, postposition, etc., we are talking about grammar. She says, “We don’t have to be able to name grammatical structures in order to use them.” (p. 63)

Knowing the grammar of our language will help us to understand how to create more words. For example, we can look at how our language asks questions. In Tältān, the simplest way to form a question is to add *ā* to the end of a verb. *Dinbet* means you are hungry; to change to a question, add *ā*. *Dinbedā*, therefore, means *Are you hungry?* By knowing this grammatical feature, we now know how to create as many questions as we have verbs. So, grammar will also be part of my study booklets.

4. *Classificatory verbs or Tahltan verb classifiers?*

In January 2019, I made a presentation to the Tahltan language authority, the Dah Dzāke Nodeside (DDN) to request permission to study classificatory verbs. At that meeting, I also asked how they would like this grammatical feature to be taught. Should it be taught as classificatory verbs? Or as a special suffix? Their decision was that they wish it to be taught as Tahltan verb classifiers, for simplicity.

The members of the DDN indicated that students do not need to know the theory behind this grammatical feature. Their decision was reinforced in other, private conversations with fluent speakers who said, in more than one way, that they “didn’t know about all of that. We just speak it.” To clarify, their decision is that this theory should not be included in the booklets I planned to create.

The members of DDN supported the way I presented this grammatical feature in the first study booklet I created. They recognize that the linguistic name for this grammatical feature is classificatory verbs, but they believe that this theory is not needed in order to speak our language. So, *Tahltan verb classifier* is the term that I will use in the study booklets, along with the term *special suffixes*, stem, or the more informal, *ending*.

The next section of this document deals with teaching heritage languages to First Nations students. What are factors that must be addressed when teaching First Nations students? It must be pointed out that the next section is aimed at First Nations students, but what we learn from research into their learning applies to all children.

## C. About Teaching First Nations Students...

In Krashen's YouTube video, he closes his presentation by saying:

“We acquire language in one way and one way only:

When we get comprehensible input *in a low anxiety environment*.”

Stephen Krashen, in *On Language Acquisition*, 2010

(My italics)

In recent years, the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools in Canada is finally being recognized. Efforts are being made through the Reconciliation movement to repair the relationship between mainstream Canadians and the First Nations people of Canada. There is a realization that intergenerational trauma from these schools and other institutional racism is still being borne by our People today. As teachers of Indigenous children, we see that our children also carry this trauma. While it is clear that all children may suffer from anxiety and trauma, in our Indigenous communities there is still a significantly high level. What effect does anxiety and trauma have on how our children learn? What can teachers do to help students cope with their baggage. The answers lie in an understanding of what's happening in the brain.

### 1. The Brain and Learning

Brain theories have always interested me. I feel that when we learn, something must be happening inside the brain. If I knew more about what researchers think is happening, then maybe I could use that information to help students to learn more easily.

This section looks at brain research and how this research shows us links between how the brain functions under stress and how that relates to learning. It also gives suggestions on how teachers can be part of the solution by helping students cope with their anxiety and trauma.

#### a. *Brains can change*

In 1963, a woman named Marion Diamond and her team of researchers announced a startling discovery. They proved that the brain can, and does, change. Until she made her discoveries, we were taught that our brains were not capable of changing. The brain was incapable of healing from an injury, for instance. What brain we were born with is all there was.

In her book, *Magic Trees of the Mind*, (1998) Diamond describes her team's findings and how those findings forever changed the way we think about the brain. For instance, she explained that when we learn, there are physical changes in the brain. This change is part of what is called brain neuroplasticity. Some parts of the brain get bigger and/or heavier. Which means that learning is a brain altering process. And, we teachers, are always striving to have our students learn, to change

the brain. Teaching is a humbling experience. The important lesson is that the brain can change, and that means teachers can help students deal with the effects of trauma.

*b. The brain's way of dealing with stress*

Dr. Bruce Perry, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and neuroscientist, has spent decades studying the way children and adolescents deal with stress. He has researched how stress affects a student's brain. (Supin, 2016). The following section is a very brief description of his teachings on this topic.

Perry's research is important in helping teachers and mentors to understand their troubled students. It is of critical importance to those working with indigenous students as the following discussion will explain. Let us begin by understanding some basics of responses to stress.

Perry says that "we have many stress-response systems." (Supin: p. 6) For example, our brain has two branches in our nervous system that are automatic, that is, like a reflex. These branches seem to react without us thinking about it. These systems are called the sympathetic system and the parasympathetic system. The following story shows how these two systems operate:

*Think of walking down a city street. It's a nice day—just the way you like it. There are very few cars on the street. Not many people, either. On each side of the street, there are stores with large windows. You are glancing into these store windows as you walk. Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see a big, black dog jumping at you.*

How do you react? Do you flinch? Do you freeze? Do you jump backwards? Do you put your arms in front of your face? Do you scream? Do you cower on the ground with your hands over your head? We all have our own way of reacting to what we think is a threat. How did you react? Why?

Back to the story:

*In the next moment, you realize that what you saw was a reflection from across the street. A tall man in a long, black coat just opened a glass door and walked out into the street.*

What is your reaction? Do you sigh with relief? Do you laugh at yourself? Do you curse in relief? Do you clasp your hands to your heart with a deep sigh? Do you almost faint from relief? Again, we all react in our own way to this situation. How did you react?

The first part of the story illustrates the *fight-or-flight* reaction of the sympathetic system. (Elder David Rattray adds *freeze* to this list of reactions.) Our brain saw what it thought was a threat and prepared for defense. At that moment, our whole brain has one goal: *safety*.

In the second part of the story, the brain has had time to send messages to the thinking part of the brain. This part of the brain understood what was actually happening, then sent a message to the parasympathetic system, the second part of this stress-response system, telling it that there is no threat, no danger. The body then begins to return to normal.

The ability to respond to stressful situations and to return to normal quickly is called *resilience*. One of our goals as teachers/mentors is to help develop resilient students. We can do that because the brain can change, can heal. And, “Resilient people are made, not born.” (Supin: p. 6)

c. *What happens if our stress-response system does not return to normal?*

We have all seen that not everyone responds the same way to events. Even two people attending the same party, hearing the same thank-you speech, might leave with opposite reactions to that speech. In the same way, two people, together the whole time, could survive the same traumatic event and have different reactions. They both have stress-responses, but one returns to normal within a reasonable amount of time. The other does not return to normal. His or her body shows signs that he or she lives in a state of anxiety and/or fear all the time. This person might always be nervous, or ‘fly off the handle’ quickly, or be quick to take offense, and so on.

If the student was from a home where he/she was loved and nurtured, and given support when needed, the story would likely be different. This student would likely be resilient, one of those whose stress-response returns to normal in an expected time frame.

To fully understand why a person’s stress-response might not return to normal, we need to understand more about stress levels and what causes a stress-response. In the story above, our fight-or-flight-or-freeze response was activated because you thought a dog was jumping at you. There are many sources of stress, such as these:

- physical danger, or something we think is a physical danger (such as the dog in the story)
- poverty
- hunger or thirst
- loud voices (at school, at home, anywhere)
- tiredness
- abuse: emotional, physical, mental
- neglect, absence of nurturing,
- continued difficulty with learning at school
- others...

How we react to stress depends on our earlier experiences. For this reason, it is important to know a student’s life story. Taking the above story as an example

of stress, and observing the reaction of a student, we can understand the underlying cause of their particular stress-response if we ask ourselves questions such as these:

- Was an attack by a dog part of the student's story? Or seeing someone attacked?
- Is the student from a home where there is not always enough food? Does this student often come to school without breakfast or lunch?
- Was the student raised in a household where he/she was not allowed to share their fears, and so be comforted?
- Is the child from a home where mental or physical abuse is 'normal' behaviour?
- Did the student grow up in a household where the parents were unable to give love and/or support, for whatever reason?

If the answer to any of the above questions is yes, then it is likely that the student is one whose sympathetic system does not return to normal. If a student does not return to normal, we consider that student to have trauma. If a student has suffered trauma over a long period of time, and from a young age, he/she might consider their feeling of danger, or fear, to be normal. (Supin: p. 6)

If we could peer inside the brain of a person who is traumatized, we would see that the sympathetic system would be on alert all of the time. But to our eyes, we might see a variety of behaviours. For instance, a student might seem to be nervous or anxious much of the time. A boy might be 'acting out', whereas a girl might be quiet and very obedient, avoiding bringing attention to herself.

When we thought we were being attacked by a dog, all of our thinking was focused on our safety, only our safety, nothing else. For those who are traumatized, the feeling of being unsafe and afraid persists. Our traumatized students always feel unsafe, so a good percent of their energy being used to maintain their defense system. What energy is left for learning?

*c. A little more detail about our stress response.*

Let us look more closely at what happened in the brain when we thought we saw the dog jumping towards us. There is a part of the brain that is between the top of the spine and the base of the neck. When the brain was evolving, it developed this part first, then more parts developed, moving upward, until we reach the front of our brain, behind the forehead. The first brain, lizard-brain, as it is commonly called, was probably the first brain to develop because it is the system that is concerned with safety.

When we are presented with any information, our senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, or taste) bring us information. This information first goes to the lizard-brain. This part of the brain rapidly assesses:

- Is it familiar?
- If familiar, then the message moves to a higher part of the brain.

- If it is familiar, then our brain thinks back to our experiences. Is this familiar information linked to a memory that was good or bad?
- If the information is both familiar and safe, then there is no stress-response. The parasympathetic system is active.

However:

- If the information is *unfamiliar*, there is a stress-response in those who are traumatized. The brain automatically reacts as if ‘*new*’ information is *not a good thing*. The stress-response happens whether the information is something good or not. Perry points out that for those traumatized, “any novelty, like learning something new—activates our stress-response system.” (Supin: p.6)

The conclusion is that any degree of stress for traumatized students results in a stress-response. The longer the student has been traumatized, the greater the level of stress-response. To put it into a picture: Imagine a student who has been having difficulty learning in school. He or she knows this. So, simply going to school is a stress filled situation. Then, when the student is at school, he or she might be presented with something new, creating even more stress. So, that student’s brain goes in to defense mode, concerned only with safety. What is happening in the upper, learning brain? How much learning do you think is happening? To sum up, in the words of Dr. Doidge (2016), “*The problem is that a person in fight-or-flight, can’t heal or learn well in this state...*” (p.111) [My italics]

d. What is the effect of inter-generational stress on language learning?

Edōsdi Judy Thompson, PhD, wrote *Hedekeyeh Hots’ih K!hidi – “Our Ancestors Are In Us”: Strengthening Our Voices Through Language Revitalization From A Tahltan Worldview* in 2012. It was her doctoral thesis. In it, she explained that there are many reasons why our children might be hesitant about learning their heritage language. She gives an indepth discussion about this topic. In fact, her discussion on this topic runs from page 125 to page 160. The term that is often used today to summarize her findings is intergenerational stress.

The parents and grandparents of many First Nations children were punished severely for speaking their heritage language. Their stress from this punishment often resulted in reluctance to speak their language. This feeling was passed to their offspring. So, learning their heritage language is a form of trauma that must be overcome. The non-native child has no such baggage, so they learn with no stress. That is why people have observed that the non-native child often learns the heritage language quicker than some of our native children.

This brings to mind something that happened to me when I began to learn my heritage language. One day while studying, I noticed that I was feeling very uncomfortable in my mind. I felt as though something was holding me back. So, I took time to meditate on my feeling. Why was I feeling this way? Where did the feeling come from? I was enjoying learning our language, yet was feeling so uneasy.



After thinking on this for some time, I recognized that I was feeling guilty. Why guilty? Then I thought back to my childhood and the fact that our parents did not speak Tahltan in our home. Also, they did not teach our language to us.

As I have said before, my parents did not speak our language in our home because the ministers, priests, and the Indian Agent advised them to teach us only English. My mother told me that they were told that learning Tältān would “ruin our English.” Wanting the best for us, my parents followed this advice strictly, so rarely spoke our language in our home. It came to me that my child-brain interpreted their actions as: *I shouldn't be learning our language because my parents didn't want me to learn it. If they wanted me to learn it, they would have spoken Tältān in our home.* With this understanding, I asked myself if this was true. I recalled the fact that our mother did teach us when we asked. She taught us how to count, for example. My unease disappeared and I was able to resume my studying with a clear heart and mind.

This anecdote illustrates a simple blockage to learning my language. It also gave me insight into what children whose parents were punished for speaking their heritage must feel. It also gives me some idea of why so many of our People are silent speakers. Silent speakers understand their heritage language, but are unable to speak it for some reason.

e. *What can teachers/mentors do to help traumatized students?*

We have learned several very important lessons about the brain's response to trauma:

- The brain can change. We call this neuroplasticity, meaning that the brain can learn ways of dealing with stress/trauma.
- Traumatized students do not respond well to change. Change is viewed as being unfamiliar, and therefore the reaction is a stress-response.
- For a traumatized person, trauma affects every part of a her or his life because their sympathetic system is always active to some degree. The traumatized person always feels unsafe.
- People who have been loved and nurtured usually have the resiliency to return to normal relatively quickly. Resiliency permits us to suffer through stressful, even traumatic events, and return to normal.

Elder David Rattray, who has extensive experience teaching and counseling Indigenous students, maintains that in order for students to learn, they must have a *sense of belonging* and *feel safe*. (Rattray, private conversation, 2018)

Elder David teaches us that if a person is traumatized, they can only learn “up to their knees.” Without trauma, they can learn “up to their head.” He says that the webbing of those who are traumatized results in a limited viewpoint. We understand this because we have learned that those who are in a traumatized state are using their energy on their own safety. They have little energy to spend on thinking about what they are studying.

As a group, teachers are not usually competent in handling trauma. What can teachers do to support their students? Elder David says that the way teachers deal with trauma [stress], such as those listed above, is by creating a safe learning environment in which students feel respected. By doing so, the students' parasympathetic system becomes active, and students have energy to use for learning. He also says that teachers need a toolbox of strategies they can use to calm down those whose fears have been stimulated. (See MindUp Curriculum in the Bibliography for suggestions.)

From Elder David's experience, *goal-orientated activities* also activate the parasympathetic system. Presenting lessons in a routine and structured way helped students because they know what to expect. Therefore, no surprises and no stress. For example, when learning our heritage language, lots of practice with language vocabulary leads to learning without stress. He suggests learning language vocabulary all week, and on Friday, use the language in an activity, such as making bannock.

If we take Elder David's advice, then the best way to teach language is to create a safe, nurturing environment, one that does not engage a stress-response. (Personal communication.) From my personal experience, learning a language is both *stressful* and *risky*. Risky, especially if the goal is to teach a person to *speak* the language. It is a given that when a person is learning to speak a language they will make mistakes—and everyone present will hear that mistake.

How we handle mistakes in pronunciation, for instance, will determine whether the student will learn the language or not. If students feel unsafe in class, they drop-out. Young students cannot leave the scene of trauma-through-learning. But they can, and do, opt out by misbehaving or simply 'zoning out.'

The question is: How do we handle the errors we all make in learning a language without activating the fight-or-flight response? In our adult language class, we agreed that we would accept the fact that we will all make mistakes. It was as if we gave ourselves permission to make mistakes. So, correct the mistakes and move on. I came to view being corrected as being 'cared for' because someone cared enough to help me learn. Over time, we still continue to make mistakes, but they are, hopefully, different from those we made earlier on as we continue to learn.

*f. How does culturally relevant learning material fit into learning an Indigenous language?*

We have seen how information that is familiar and safe, will not activate a stress-response. No stress-response means that the student's brain has energy available to be spent on learning.

Heritage language lessons using culturally relevant material will be both familiar and safe. Therefore, it does not engage the fight, flight, or freeze system. Materials might be adapted by simply choosing pictures of clothing worn in their area, for example, rather than clothing from fashion magazines. If the teacher/mentor has created an environment in which students feel at home, as if they be-

long, then a student's brain would be in a relaxed state, ready for learning. Hopefully, using materials they relate to will result in students focusing longer on the lessons. The end result will be students who learn to speak their heritage language.

## **2. Research into Learning**

From research throughout my teaching career, I learned many theories of how our First Nations people learned best. We learned about right-left brain theories, for instance. This theory taught that Indigenous people tended to be right-brain dominant. Therefore, teachers expected that First Nations students were more likely to do poorly on written work, for example. This type of overgeneralization leads to stereotyping, expecting all First Nations people to be tagged as right-brain learners. This theory and more were used to teach our First Nations children, but still our children are not successful in schools based on mainstream assessments (like standardized tests, for example). Our children are intelligent, so what is hindering their learning?

When considering how Indigenous people learn, we must remember that not all Indigenous people learn the same way. To believe that is to use stereotypical thinking resulting in the conclusion that Indigenous people seem to be simple, like paper dolls. With that in mind, the following descriptions of how Indigenous people learn, is a sketch that might be helpful in planning ways to teach our Indigenous students. I think of these descriptions as tendencies, they might be true or not. They are simply likely to be true.

Current research shows that one of the main reasons our children have difficulty learning is that there is a difference between the way our children learn and the way teachers present lessons. (Hogue, 2016; Marchant, 2009) Our children tend to learn best when they see the whole then focus on the parts. Our teachers usually work from parts to the whole. In other words, Indigenous people (and, possibly most people) need to see the 'whole picture' before we fully understand the significance of the part we are studying.

To illustrate this point, think of putting together a toy. The instructions say to put part A and part D together first. We might look at the parts and think that there is no reason to do it in this order. So, we might attach part A and part B together first. Then, when we begin to work on the next step, the instructions show the reason we needed to do A and D first. I, personally, like the instructions that say, "Attach A to D first because..." This instruction gives me a bigger picture. When people understand the connections between parts, they learn the importance of the parts.

When we look at the traditional way our First Nations children were taught, they worked alongside the person performing a task. They observed, then participated. They saw the whole process but were expected to do only what they were able to. For example, when a woman was making cut-out cookies, her child might work with her, placing the cookies onto the baking sheet. He or she might

even put the cookie sheet into the oven, depending on the age and height of the child.

By being part of the working crew, if you will, the child saw all of the steps, the order of the steps, and the purpose behind each. Then the child would be taught individual steps as they had learned enough to perform them, such as cutting up stew meat, or, grinding fat or hamburger meat as beginner stages.

If we consider how our Indigenous students were taught, we see several points of interest relating to how these students tend to learn:

- When children watch what is happening, we might conclude that *visual learning* is important. Students use their eyes to learn what is happening, with listening being a secondary learning system. How is this different in our schools?
- As children take part in activities, they are *learning-by-doing*. The only way to learn how to handle a knife is by using one, after all.
- *Hands-on-learning* is another way of saying learning-by-doing. I believe that hands-on-learning also means that I can see what I am studying. It is as if thinking was happening where I could see it, rather than thinking being only inside my brain.
- Students who are expected to engage in everyday activities that might be considered dangerous (such as grinding meat when they are 5), develop a belief in their judgement and in their abilities.
- In planning, perhaps students would enjoy activities and games where they have visual prompts. In a Bingo-type game, for example, they see the graphic of the word that is being called as a visual reminder.

In closing this section, I would like to leave you with a message from the late John B. Edzerza, former Minister of Education for the Yukon. (Private conversation)

He said, "*The teacher's job is to support the spirit of the children; to nurture the spirit of his or her students.*"

"How?" I asked.

*"By treating them like people you like,"* he replied.

## Final Thoughts

The results of my research into approaches and methods for teaching Tältän gave me much to think about while I was creating the study booklets. The idea that teachers should consider the nature of the language when choosing methods was intriguing. It made sense, then, to teach the meaning of morphemes when teaching our language because Tältän is a polysynthetic language. My research also showed me that in order for me to become a fluent speaker, I must practice my speaking.

I agree with Elder David Rattray who maintains that for people to learn they must have a *sense of belonging* and *feel safe*. These two qualities are well within the teacher's control. But do teachers have the knowledge and /or developed the skill to create a learning environment with these characteristics? The teacher in me believes that teaching students how to be resilient should be mandatory for all teachers. It is a foundational skill, one that must be in place before real learning can happen.

I must admit that when my letter of approval came to me only a short time before the date to submit my project, my initial reaction was one of hopelessness and depression. How could I collect the information I needed to complete my Tahltan verb classification charts in that short a time? I saw that everything to do with this part of my research would be time-consuming; even creating the charts took a significant amount of time. The people who did agree to work with me would probably not be able to spend much time with me.

In addition to time, distance was a factor, also. I knew where at least one fluent speaker was living; she would have enjoyed working with me. However, she was living at least a nine-hour drive from Dease Lake where I was staying while doing my research. Would she be well enough to work with me? What are the winter road conditions? What should I do? I felt cornered with no place to turn.

So, I looked carefully at my situation. I knew that I would have good data to enter into the charts from the speakers who agreed to work with me. I had entered the vocabulary gathered from our class lessons and unearthed a few more word-phrases. By looking back at my experiences in our language classes and in being present while conversations were being carried on, I understood that I had learned a lot about these verb classifiers. I also took part in informal chats with fluent speakers. These chats were enlightening. What did I conclude from my research regarding Tahltan verb classifiers?

1. The articles that I read about this subject were relatively short. Is this an indication of how often classificatory verbs are used? Do some Dene languages use them more constantly than others?
2. Since this topic was one that I had studied, I was aware of how often I heard Tahltan verb classifiers used. I heard individuals ask to pass something, like *pass the salt*. I heard people talk about bringing food, including lots of some food item. But I never heard anyone say a sentence with a more complicated word-phrase such as, *they gave it to them*. Or *we will give it to them*. Thinking back to recordings, I heard only a few word-phrases that fit this category because researchers did not ask about them.
3. Tahltans seem to have difficulty saying a simple no to a request. Instead, a person might say, "I'm not well." Or "I have too much to do just now." I read these responses to my request as a reluctance to participate. Casual conversations came back to me as I thought about their reluctance. I recall in more than one instance when I heard a fluent speaker say that he/she "didn't use those words." Or, "I never learned those

words,” when referring to the samples given here.

From these observations, I am beginning to think that the vocabulary for the more difficult word-phrases might fade away from non-use. This thought caused me to wonder about other vocabulary that might be fading away as well. At that point, I saw bleakness before me, a bleakness in which words were simply fading away, and understood at that moment the importance of collecting vocabulary if our language is to thrive.

4. The final lessons I learned from my research is that when doing research, the researcher does not always find the answers. In fact, they might find more questions. Or, they might find what they were not looking for. That certainly happened for me.

I now understand that my ‘incomplete’ charts are a metaphor for the survival of our language. The only way that those charts will be completed is if we all work together. Our language will thrive only when we work together as a team. Which raised questions for me: Who are the members of our team? Are we making the best use of the talents and skills of each?

My final lesson was to accept those things over which I have no control, such as the timing of the letter of approval. I believe that every project has a life of its own. Once the project is ‘in progress,’ it will develop almost on its own. So, this project was fraught with disappointments that, for me, turned out to be ‘good things.’ One example is that I was planning my study booklet based on a pattern I had recognized. Before I received my letter, I was enrolled in my final language courses. Hotseta was our instructor for one of the sessions. He began to describe pronoun *Patterns A, B, and C*. I was thrilled to realize that these were the patterns I was beginning to see in my word list but did not fully understand. My project became more meaningful by using these pronoun patterns. Also, the time-factor from this project resulted in the *Glossary* morphing into a *works-in-progress*, becoming a project for our language team.

#### Suggestions for further research

- The first thing that comes to mind is that vocabulary for the charts must be collected before the word-phrases fade. This suggestion is a practical one because our older Tahltan speakers are slowly moving to the spirit world.
- Closely related to this suggestion is that other word-phrases in this category need to be collected as well.
- One of the difficulties I had when eliciting vocabulary was that I could not always tell what was being said. I wonder whether using the PRAAT program would help. Maybe we could *see* the words that we cannot *hear* clearly.
- A Level 3 booklet could be created with showing more detail of other grammatical elements that can help us to better understand the structure of this grammatical feature. One aspect that I did not pursue was whether or not dual-plurals were part of this grammatical feature. A dual-plural is *only two of you*. We have this grammatical feature in other words in Tältān.

This project has been interesting. It has given me the privilege of working in my language. It has also given me new insight into the future of our endangered Tältān language. The fact that we are graduating our first class of new speakers is a ray of hope.

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I am indebted to the following fluent speakers, knowledge holders, and knowledge keepers for their patience with me as a new Tàltàn language speaker, and for their generosity in sharing their knowledge. I have been conscientious in my efforts to interpret and to follow their teachings with accuracy. Therefore, any errors in this document are mine, and mine alone. I will apologize now, in advance, if I have misunderstood their teachings.

James Dennis, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Jenny Quock, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Regina Louie, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Gerald Edzerza, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Bourquin, Erma, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Ed Asp, Tahltan Elder  
Pat Etzerza, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Theresa Etzerza, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker  
Angela Dennis, Tahltan, Tahltan speaker from birth  
Hotseta (Oscar Dennis) MA, Tahltan, and fluent speaker  
Linda McDonald, Kaska speaker  
Odelia Dennis, Tahltan, and fluent speaker, MA candidate, language instructor  
Amber Blenkiron, MA (Linguist), learning to speak Tahltan

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- Hotseta (Oscar Dennis) MA, Tahltan, and fluent speaker. Iskut, 2019.
- Odelia Dennis, teaching the Revitalization of Tahltan courses in Dease Lake, 2016-2019.
- Robert Dennis, Tahltan, Tahltan speaker from birth. Iskut, 2019.
- Bourquin, Erma, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Iskut, 2019.
- Louise Carlick, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Iskut, 2019.
- Gerald Edzerza, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. by telephone, Watson Lake, 2019.
- Theresa Etzerza, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Dease Lake and Iskut, 2019.
- Regina Louie, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Iskut, 2019.
- Mary Quock, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Iskut, 2019.
- Edna Quock, Tahltan Elder and fluent speaker. Dease Lake, 2019.

### Other Interviews and/or Discussions:

- Anvita Abbi, PhD. Professor at Simon Fraser University. Professor for Research Methods in Field Studies, July 2017.
- Trish Rosborough, PhD. Professor, University of Victoria.
- Angela Dennis taught the Revitalization of Tahltan in Dease Lake, 2016-2018.
- Odelia Dennis is teaching the Revitalization of Tahltan in Dease Lake, 2016-2019.
- Elder Edzerza, John B. (deceased), formerly Minister of Education, Yukon. Private conversations over many years.
- Elder David Rattray, Tahltan, retired Teacher, Principal, District Principal, Counselor. Private conversations over many years, the latest, February 2019.
- Poser, William, PhD. Linguist. Private conversations.
- Sandra Wrightman, Counsellor, Coach, Healing Practitioner

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*Tahltan Verb Classifiers and How to Use Them* is a series of study booklets written to serve as a reference and study material for students of the Tahltan language. There are four booklets in the series:

- *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: Introduction*

This booklet was written to share my research with fellow students. It contains linguistic research, approaches and methods to teaching a language containing morphemes, and research into teaching First Nations students.

- *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: The Basics*

This was the first booklet created. It contains an introduction to Tahltan verb classifiers. It also includes practice exercises, activities, and templates.

- *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: Level 2*

This study booklet contains more advanced study into Tahltan verb classifiers. These are presented with the goal of explaining the morphemes and their meanings. Sample practice activities are included.

- *Tahltan Verb Classifiers: Glossary.*

This is a works-in-progress. It contains Tahltan verb classifiers that we studied in our language classes. These are in chart form with some information completed. These incomplete charts are a challenge to anyone who has the knowledge to help complete these charts,



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