Becoming a Highly Proficient Ojibwe Speaker

For the Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network (MIIN)

Introduction

The Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network (MIIN) partnered with Wilder Research to learn more about how people learn to speak Ojibwemowin and, more specifically, how people go from being intermediate learners to highly proficient speakers. Most research on adult language learning has focused on languages that are still spoken by millions of people in certain parts of the world. Learning Ojibwemowin is different: Since so few people speak Ojibwemowin fluently in any one community (with rare exceptions), there is a lack of whole-day, long-term immersion environments for learners. This research focused on learning from individuals who have been able to attain advanced skills in Ojibwemowin despite these limitations.

In winter 2025, MIIN identified and Wilder interviewed 11 highly proficient Ojibwe second language speakers. While few had been formally assessed, the interview respondents identified their fluency as ranging from intermediate to advanced or even superior. This report summarizes key themes and lessons learned from these interviews. We hope this information will be useful for other Indigenous language warriors and advocates, Tribal nations, funders, supporters, and policymakers to learn more about what it will take to revitalize the Ojibwe language (and other endangered Indigenous languages) and how everyone can play a part.

Ojibwemowin is a Central Algonquin language spoken in North America and parts of Canada by the Anishinaabe peoples. It is endangered despite emerging revitalization efforts (TPT, 2020). Ojibwemowin reflects and incorporates the worldview of the Anishinaabe, including values, beliefs, and practices (Chiblow & Meighan, 2021).[1] Many ceremonies, stories, and traditional teachings can only be passed on in Ojibwe, and the language is a connection to spirituality.

"[Learning Ojibwe] helps you form your own identity and expands who you are as an individual within the communal space. It's worth it! I have yet to meet somebody who invested so much time in learning Ojibwe that regrets their career choice or lifestyle. It takes time, but you can summit that plateau!"

[1] Twin Cities Public Television (TPT). (December 22, 2020). Preserving and Restoring the Ojibwe Language: First Speakers. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RooWZc4lLok
Chiblow, S., & Meighan, P. J. (2021). Language is land, land is language: The importance of Indigenous languages. Human Geography, 15(2), 206-210. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786211022899

Starting the journey to learn Ojibwemowin

Most respondents were minimally exposed to the Ojibwe language in daily life, if at all, when they were children. Their first exposure to learning Ojibwemowin varied. A few respondents were exposed to some basic vocabulary words like numbers, animals, and colors in elementary school. Others met First Speakers, who had a significant impact on the language learning of the respondents as young adults. (In the context of Indigenous languages, a "First Speaker" is an elder or individual who is fluent in the language and is a native speaker who learned their Indigenous language as their first language.) A couple of respondents mentioned that healers or elders taught them Ojibwe along with providing spiritual guidance as part of a healing journey to maintain or regain their sobriety and/or to feel a sense of belonging or cultural identity. Finally, several respondents formally started learning more Ojibwemowin vocabulary and grammar as part of college courses.

> **A lot of those lessons and words I learned as a kid stuck with me. I was more cognizant of things and more motivated than other kids. It was important to me, even as a teenager. I noticed that I knew more Ojibwe than my peers; I just paid attention to that kind of stuff. I grew up in a time when it was cool to bring your kid back to ceremonies, and my mom and grandma did that with me, during the Anishinaabe renaissance.**

Becoming proficient

Respondents mentioned a number of specific resources and strategies they used to go from being a beginner to being proficient.

Working with First Speakers and other proficient speakers of the Ojibwe language

Nearly all respondents spent significant time with First Speakers, and, in many cases, the respondents served in formal or informal "helper" or "apprentice" roles for these Elders while they were teaching the language to others and/or facilitating ceremonies. This attention and patience they received from these Elders enabled them to ask questions and work harder to learn the language. This experience was especially valuable when these First Speakers were also familiar with how to teach language to adults (compared to First Speakers who have no language teaching experience). However, not all people who are First Speakers are fluent or understand the grammar of the language.

> **I very first approached Lee Staples (Obizan-iban), an elder, for spiritual guidance and healing…. [I got] a job to take care of Lee Staples. He was doing funerals and Midewewin…. He told me he was going to teach me how to speak Ojibwe. I was committed to him as an elder, so I took what he told me to do and ran with it. I said "OK I'll learn Ojibwe!" …. I continued working with Lee Staples full time until 2020, so 13 years straight. I was with him almost**

daily. Well over 40 hours a week. And he just spoke Ojibwe to me, to the point that we only conversate in Ojibwe.

Having peers who are advanced second language speakers to practice with is also important for the advanced language speakers who we interviewed. In one case, the respondent lives with others who are also advanced Ojibwe language speakers, and other respondents described how they are trying to speak Ojibwemowin exclusively to their children. In these cases, there's daily speaking, which increases fluency more quickly and across a broader range of topic areas and subjects.

My biggest resource is people who know more than me!

Finally, ceremonies and other community events can also help language learners become proficient in Ojibwemowin, both in terms of getting more exposure to First Speakers and learning the protocols from them and also being requested to perform these ceremonies, often before they felt ready. For example, one respondent shared that an Elder taught him the language and important ceremonies and stories that go along with the language, which increased this respondent's motivation to learn Ojibwemowin.

I was in the intermediate zone for a long time. A lot of people are content there … but I had the demand of ceremony and spiritual stuff, to do feasts and bundles and stuff. Often there wasn't a more qualified person present to do it, so out of necessity people would ask me. I had a growing reputation. I got tobacco to talk for a feast, the lady who offered it to me said I didn't need to answer right away if I wanted to do it because she knew if I agreed to do it then the tobacco will never stop. People will seek you out to do ceremonies once they know you can and will do it.

Participating in adult immersion programs or language tables

Most respondents had participated in adult immersion programs (Ojibwemotaadidaa Omaa Gidakiiminaang was the most frequently mentioned), typically as instructors or helpers. These experiences were tremendously important in helping them advance their Ojibwe language skills because these sessions strictly stay in the Ojibwe language except for quick one-on-one check-ins, so participants are forced to communicate about all of the happenings during the experience in Ojibwemowin.

Several respondents also participated in community language tables, either as participants or as leaders. Community language tables can be effective at helping people increase their Ojibwe language skills if the participants are disciplined about only speaking Ojibwe, and if there are enough people in the group with a high enough proficiency to maintain this standard.

[Community language tables] create safe language learning spaces for people of all levels. It can be a first point of contact for people to get their fire lit. But it's difficult when people who only know one word and people who are intermediate, and usually most language tables do not have discipline to stay in Ojibwe the

whole time. It ends up shifting to the well-developed speakers sharing what they know with the beginning speakers. If there is no criteria or rules of keeping it in Ojibwe, then it helps beginning speakers getting excited, but not as much intermediate breaking thru to advanced … However, if you did have a language table with a rule 'we will only speak Ojibwe' that would be meaningful for intermediate speakers to break through. You could have a separate table for beginners to maintain the discipline of only using Ojibwe among the intermediate speakers.

Working at early childhood and K-12 immersion programs

Several respondents had worked at early childhood and/or K-12 immersion programs, and had opportunities through their employment to learn from First Speakers and other teachers. Being in an immersive environment with First Speakers and other proficient speakers helped them progress quickly into being a proficient speaker themselves, as they were forced to speak Ojibwemowin daily.

Once the English crutch is gone, the second language learner has to have the desire and perseverance to stay uncomfortable, to problem-solve in the language.

Attending college classes

Most respondents had some experience with college-level Ojibwe language classes, including at Bemidji State, University of Minnesota, Fond du Lac Community College, and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University. Many of these classes are dependent on finding advanced speakers who can instruct and, ideally, are Ojibwe themselves (though non-Ojibwe linguist John Nichols is admired by several of the respondents). In some cases, classes may be discontinued when the instructor moves on or passes away (as in the case with Elder speakers). In addition, college can be a barrier for Indigenous students, due to the cost, poor academic preparation, transportation, and responsibilities that keep them at home.

Accessing written and audio recordings and other tools

Respondents used both published and self-created audio and written recordings and apps to support their language learning. They listened to audio recordings over and over again to cement learning. By creating their own recordings, they were able to practice transcribing and translating. Specifically, they mentioned the following resources that were helpful to them in their independent learning process:

- Oshkaabewis Native Journal
- Ojibwe People's Dictionary
- Rosetta Stone
- John Nichols' Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe
- Pocket Ojibwe: A Phrasebook for Nearly All Occasions by Patricia Ningewance
- Wadookodaading preschool book (unpublished?)

- Searching online (Wikipedia, etc.)
- Ojiig Corbiere's The Language podcast
- Audio and printed resources from Rick Greczyck

> **We've been working on Ojibwe language revitalization for some decades now, and there are tools that did not exit years ago that we have now. Use everything that's been done. At the beginning level, do Rosetta Stone. If you are intermediate trying to break through, listen to Oshkaabewis Journal and try to transcribe it and then check against what was already transcribed.**

Motivations and strategies to learn the Ojibwe language

All respondents spoke about their internal drive ("a fire in my belly") to learn and their ability to create a self-defined approach to learning the Ojibwe language, either because they were passionate about language learning or that the Ojibwe language aligns with their worldviews and values. Some were motivated because their peers were also learning the language, or missed hearing the language from First Speakers. To truly become proficient, they really had to increase their time and effort to learning the language.

> **I was a language student first and I mean language pulled me through college; it was the only thing I really cared about and loved to do. So I was fortunate to live at a time when we still had First Speakers around for ceremony. I went there because I missed the language and I wanted to get better. I don't know why, but I always wanted to learn more. It agreed with the way I thought, listening to my dad and grandpa. Being drawn to the language because of the way you think about things in Ojibwe.**
>
> **There are all kinds of people with different motivations for wanting to speak a language that dictate their devotion and commitment to becoming proficient. Some people want to be in a spiritual place, some are more academic or scientific about linguistics.**

Trauma-informed considerations

There is trauma associated with speaking the language from boarding school era that leads to shame and guilt for some when they don't know the language AND feelings of insecurity when trying to learn it. It's hard to learn anything, including the Ojibwe language, when you have experienced a lot of trauma. Some respondents have observed that people have been shamed when they are trying to learn the language or told they are doing it wrong. This trauma is a lot to overcome and it requires a conscious effort and supportive environment. Therefore, anyone teaching Ojibwe language or anything else needs to keep in mind trauma-informed teaching and learning approaches. Being in an immersive environment can be very stressful, so people also need to practice self-care and take breaks when needed.

> **We have baggage and trauma and hell we've been through, so it's challenging to acquire Ojibwe as an adult if we're not nurtured in a safe environment.**

That said, learning Ojibwemowin can be healing. Respondents have found a supportive language learning environment among Ojibwe language warriors.

> **I have never once in my life heard a First Speaker or a leader in language learning scoff at or demean or not appreciate any question from an Ojibwe learner. It is cherished when somebody puts in the work. No one will be mad at someone for not knowing. The more upsetting idea is that people don't ask questions, are afraid of negative reactions. We [all of us language warriors] work around the clock our whole lives to get people to go after language more.**

Supporting Ojibwe language learning

Respondents were asked what they would tell Ojibwe language learners about increasing their proficiency. We also asked respondents what the state can and should do to support the language revitalization ecosystem.

Advice for other Ojibwe language learners

When asked what they would tell other Ojibwe language learners, interviewees offered the following guidance and advice:

- Be confident in speaking Ojibwemowin, even if you feel self-conscious.
- Learn the linguistics and grammar, along with the vocabulary.
- Go to ceremony or find other ways to listen to First Speakers and be immersed in the language.
- Use games or self-challenges to help maintain discipline, such as owing the other person a quarter every time you use English.
- Listen to audio recordings of First Speakers.
- Write stuff down, such as phrases to practice the morphemes, stories about your day, and transcriptions of audio tapes of First Speakers.
- Practice every day by only speaking Ojibwe to your kids, or carving out 15 minutes a day.
- Apply any skills from learning other languages, if applicable.

> **Be a daily speaker – use it every day. Even if you are saying it wrong… Talk to a friend, talk to yourself, narrate what's going on as you move through your day.**

Advice for the state and other supporters of the language revitalization ecosystem

When asked what advice they would give to state and other partners in the ecosystem, interviewees had the following recommendations:

- Support the development of a clearinghouse of audio and visual recordings (recordings of First Speakers plus movies, skits, radio, etc.), as well as other materials/resources that's accessible across urban and rural and reservation communities.
- Pay people to learn Ojibwe because it's a full-time job to learn it fully and quickly. Ojibwe is an endangered language that, to be restored, needs people who are dedicated full-time to sustaining and revitalizing the language. Also, being a teacher is a low paying, demanding job, and it is unfair to expect people who are working full-time as teachers to become proficient in Ojibwe on their own time. To offer more true immersion environments for children, more focused efforts are needed to create enough proficient adult speakers to work as teachers in immersion classrooms.
- Create more opportunities for people to learn Ojibwe outside of college classes, such as cohorts of learners supported by Tribal nations to focus on language learning, paired up with First Speakers. For example, the Cherokee Language Master Apprentice Program.
- Consider how we could implement other models for supporting Indigenous language learning. For example, adult immersion programs like the Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa Mohawk Adult Immersion program, or in Menominee in Wisconsin. The government relations and treaties that exist with Indigenous nations in the Pacific Ocean, such as Hawaii and Maori, provide funding to those communities to support their culture.
- Support an ecosystem of programming and supports for parents who want to raise their children in Ojibwe.

> **We didn't talk about treaties and policy. These are huge areas that are connected to language. Language isn't just about school programming. No! If you look at the experience of Maori and Hawaii – treaties and government relations is a massive component that drives their funding and trickles to workforce development, schools, all of it. Cherokee has a huge language department; their budget is like $18 million per year. They have programs for babies, children, and Elders; workforce development; getting speakers involved [at all ages]. They have a food truck, a video development wing, musicians, and artists. They also have people working in federal and state government who are pushing to change things to support language.**

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