

## **Communicative language: getting language outside the classroom**

Naatosi Fish

Hello, my name is Naatosi Fish. I've been a Blackfoot language instructor for about five years. I've taught in various levels of capacity ranging from university to little kids and one-off lessons. And this talk is really about some of the lessons that I've learned interacting with other teachers and also my own experience in the classroom.

First, a little bit about me. I'm a Cuts Wood alumni. Nizipowahsin is the Blackfeet Immersion School in Browning started by Darrell Kipp. I attended from fourth through eighth grade and got to work with Iitsoyohkomi (echoing over the water), who was a Kaina language speaker. I am a speaker of Blackfoot, although I'm not very confident on where my fluency falls. I'll talk more about exactly how I define fluency later. And then, as I said, I've been teaching for about about five years, and I have lots of experience working with other teachers and professors like Dr. Miyashita and Dr. Hirata-Eds.

Okay, so to start, I'm going to tell you about my, my approach, how I view teaching. I call it a communicative language approach. And then I'm going to talk about, like, what do we teach to get language outside the classroom how do we teach to get language outside the classroom? And then finally, kind of a distillation of all of those thoughts into into what getting the language outside the classroom looks like. And then at the end we'll have time for questions.

Okay, so first off, my approach: what is communicative language? Communicative language is really having a focus on using language as a tool for communication and expressing thoughts and interacting with each other as opposed to having words for all of the things in the world. So all of my activities include meaningful tasks and interactions. I do a lot of task based learning, which means that which is that the tasks are really trying to emulate what's going on outside of the classroom and in the spaces that we want our students to use our language. The language is highly relevant and high use. And so, focusing on places where we're going to be using language the most often such as the home, in the car, the grocery store. And this changes depending on who your students are. But I found that, I found that trying to focus on things that are relevant and students can have lots of use in their environments has been the most successful. It's not linguistic focused.

So not focusing on things like semantics and syntax and phonology. But rather, making a safe space for students to make mistakes, to use the language in a way that they're, you know, they're beginners, they're learners, and their language going to express that. So not expecting them to produce perfect phonology or perfect grammar right out the door. I don't do a lot of corrections of mistakes. I try to give indirect feedback. And I only really do things like correcting pronunciation, correcting grammar, if the student asks for help. And again, I mean they're learning, right? And they're trying to put all these pieces together in their head. And I think it's important to give them the space to do that.

And so, indirect feedback: let's focus on speaking right but having some redirection. So talking about like, "Oh, did you mean, like, are you trying to talk about this instead?" and letting them run with it. Or recast right? So like repeating back what they said in a way that that is grammatically correct but not not telling them that was wrong. Just saying what I think they're trying to say and you know saying like is this where you're trying to go with that?

And then finally extension: so trying to expand on thoughts that they've already had. Right, if they say the cat is blue, then I'm going to try to expand on that and say, "Oh, is the cat also big? Is the cat soft?" So extending out the thoughts they were trying to do to give them more more language or more tools to express that thought.

Next: an emphasis on language that can be used outside the classroom. I'm going to talk about that more next. Practice things through conversation and listening. So, like, really trying to get the speaking ability going, not sitting there going through flashcards, not sitting there pointing at vocabulary on the board and having students repeat after you. Really, really trying to center the classroom around conversation and listening, and role playing, and interacting with each other.

And then: fluency as an ability to express thoughts. So not, you are fluent or you are not fluent. I really hate that black and white distinction. Fluency, you know, is your is your ability to be able to express yourself in your language. So if I can talk about how much I like the weather and whether I'm going to go outside today, like that, that falls me on a specific part of the spectrum. And another way I like to measure it is with age. So I like to say that I speak Blackfoot like a seven year old. And like, if I say I speak Blackfeet like an elder, that means that I'm, you know, 100% fluent. I can communicate any thoughts that I want to communicate in my language. But if I say speak back to like a seven year old, well, that kind of gives you an idea or some of the pieces that I'm missing, some of the pieces of grammar that I maybe don't understand yet. My students in my classroom, I tell them, you guys kind of speak like three year olds. Simple nouns and verbs. They don't really have a grasp on what grammar looks like yet. And so yeah, just kind of harping on that, fluency is a spectrum. It's a continuum. It's not a black and white distinction.

Another another piece that's really important for that is if we think of it as a spectrum or a continuum, then we're thinking in terms of growth and not in terms of failure. Right. So, saying, "You're not fluent" is telling a student that, you know, they didn't achieve that goal. Whereas if you're thinking in terms of a spectrum, it means there is always room to grow. There's always room to to get better.

Okay, so what do we teach in a communicative approach? First off, and this might be controversial: stop teaching animals, colors and numbers. It's not valuable. Students do not speak in simple nouns and verbs. And I'll go outside, I don't say, "One dog blue." Right? How often do you actually talk about deer or elk? So high relevant, high use. There are other ways to simplify. A lot of the arguments I hear is that, "Well, those are the basics. Those are simple." We can start there and build on it, but often we never get beyond the simple animals, numbers, and colors.

So there are other ways to simplify language: chunks. What is a chunk? It's a piece of language that you just give them as a whole piece. So you can use like chunks of conversation, you can use entire phrases, right? "I like the weather today." That's a chunk. You can give them that that one little phrase. You don't have to explain what every single word means. You don't have to explain all the pieces of grammar in it. Just give them that chunk and tell them. What it means is "I like the weather today." That's something they can go outside and they can use immediately. That's high relevance, high use. I can say that regardless of what the weather is whether I actually like the weather or not. So practice the individual words later.

I've had a few students in my classrooms that went to the immersion school with me and then took the class with me afterward. And of course, they're at my level. They're beyond all of my other students. But because they already had a lot of the acquisition, because they already understood a lot of the chunks that I was teaching in my class, I was able to then break those out and then they could then focus their attention on understanding the individual pieces.

Practice the complex grammar later. You don't have to explain to your students, "Oh, this is a durative subjunctive phrase." Wait until they actually can say the phrase, use it in context, and understand what that phrase means, and then you can break it down.

Another piece of this that I'm talking about is called attentional resources. And I forgot my cup today. That's okay. If you imagine you have a cup of water, the water in that cup is all of the attention you have to give it to any one task at a time. And if you imagine, if you think about when you were first learning how to drive, it took your entire cup of water just to operate the gas pedal, the brakes, and the steering wheel. When I was learning how to drive and we were doing our our final driving test up on the highway, I was like white-knuckling the steering wheel. And I asked my my driving instructor, "Can you please turn down the heat? It's too hot in here." He said, "Well, why can't you do it?" Well I don't have any attention to resources left, right? And of course like here I'm like reaching over and shaking trying to turn it down and it's because I didn't have any more resource. That's the same way language works, where they don't have the resources for this stuff yet. All they have the resources for are the individual phrases and their meanings. And so after they get better at driving, once they can operate the gas pedal and steering wheel, then you can ask them to turn down the heat, turn on the radio. And that's when you get into the more complex stuff.

Okay, so what is high relevant high use language? The home, right? Every single day all of us get up in the morning, we go to bed we go to the bathroom, hopefully you brush your teeth. So, like places in the home. There's a bathroom, right? Driving. All of my students are college kids they all drive to school. So what kinds of conversations can we have in those spaces? As far as like the animals go, it's like well how do we talk about things in the third person? Right here, right? Everybody has a dad, everybody has a mom. Most people have siblings. If you're Indian you all have cousins, right?

Okay, so how do we teach the things that are high relevant high use? First, ask yourself these questions. How is the language going to be used in the world? Who is it going to be used with? That's important, right? Who's your audience? What is the student's goal in using it? What thoughts are they trying to communicate? What are they trying to express when they use this piece of language?

And then after you ask yourself those questions, then we can take something like driving and we say, what kind of conversations can we have about even this one picture? I mean, I could probably spend a month just having a conversation about this picture. What is the weather? What color are the mountains? How does this make you feel? Is it hot, is it cold? Where are you going, where did you come from? Those are all things we can have a conversation about, but we have to think about what's going to be useful in this moment, what's going to be relevant to the student in this moment. Okay, what about this? Right? What kind of conversation can we have about this? Every single summer, we have a giant thunderstorm in Browning that takes down teepees and pelts everybody with golf ball sized hail. And of course everybody talks about it for months afterward. Well that's highly relevant. So what do they talk about when they talk about this thunderstorm? Give them the chunks to express those thoughts.

Okay, and here's some activities that I've used in my classroom. I love role play. And I love role play because it takes the students and it puts them into the environment that they're going to be using the language and helps them to practice, and then when they get into that space they're like, "Hey, we did this in Naatosi's class."

Things I like to do. I like to pretend to have a little market. And I think I did this with one of my students here. Where it was an accumulation of talking about money, talking about trading, talking about food. And then I asked half the class to be vendors, asked the other half of the class to be buyers. And then I told them, go out, you can't use any English. It doesn't matter if you make mistakes, just like try to get your thoughts across. Here's your budget. Go buy some stuff. Now when they get in the grocery store, they've already practiced. Okay, cooking a meal, that one's self-explanatory. Getting ready for bed, again, like, I am brushing my teeth. I am combing my hair. Did you brush your teeth? Did you comb your hair?

Filling in the blank. So here's another way to make something simple and make it more complicated as you go on, right? You have something like a script with an entirely new language except for, I don't know, "Hello my name is." "Oki, niistó nitáánikko." Well, we practice that. They can fill in that blank and then they have support for the rest of it. And as they learn, as they get better at it, you start taking away those supports. Pictures with blanks. Right? At first you can have a description of this picture and then just ask them to fill in the word for blue. Ask them to fill in the word for big. And then as they get better, you can ask them to fill in more.

And then finally comics. So having them have like a panel of things that are happening. And I've watched Dr. Miyashita do this with a storybook. And then asking them to talk about what's happening in the comic. And it doesn't have to be complicated. They don't have to use the complex

grammar. They can just say, "There is a frog." That's okay, right? That's communicating the thought. All right, description of pictures. What can you say about this picture? How many phrases have we practiced that are relevant to this?

Copying or Simon Says. I'm sure everybody here already knows what TPR is, it's used everywhere. Modeling. This one is, I think, one of my favorites. One of my teachers one time took a picture and said like four or five things about this picture and then asked me to get up in front of the class and repeat after her. Of course, I couldn't say everything. But I still remember the phrases that I was able to regurgitate because she kind of put some pressure on me to remember in the moment. Right? That's what modeling is.

I'm going to move on because I'm running out of time. Okay. Getting language outside the classroom. Let's distill it down. So we have to talk about barriers. What are some barriers to why students don't use language outside of the class? Well when I ask my students, "How come you're in the grocery the other day, we didn't have a conversation?" "Well I didn't know what to talk about." There's so much in there they have something called choice saturation. There's so much in there that they can't think about the one little thing that they do know.

Fear of failure. Well I don't want to look stupid, I don't want people to make fun of me. And that's really common, right? When you make a mistake, a speaker laughs at you. Scared to make mistakes. That's kind of the same thing but they don't want to say the wrong thing, and then get laughed at because they actually said a dirty word and were trying to say a clean word.

And then no support. They get out there and there's all this stuff and they can't remember any of the stuff we actually talked about in the classroom.

Here's the solutions that I found. What do I talk about? Well, that's why we do the highly relevant language. Fear of failure. Create a safe space in the classroom for them to make mistakes and to fail. Tell them it's okay to make mistakes here, that's how you learn. I want you to make mistakes. And that makes the safe space for them to then do the failures in the classroom and then when they get out and they're uncomfortable, they can do the things they're good at. They're scared to make mistakes. Well you practice over and over and over. Repetition. And there's no support. Use prompts and guidance.

And I'm going to show you what that is here next. Okay, so support outside the classroom. I like two things that I found to be the most successful. Of course, there are others. Language tables. What I ask my students to do is to get into a group of three or less. I tell them 10 minutes, 15 minutes, that's realistic, right? The rules are there's no English, and they can't just read a script we did in class. I tell them to gather pictures, gather food, gather, you know, all the things that we did. Maybe go for a walk, sit in the car, and actually take a drive. And they have to record themselves, and then I tell them, all right, for those 10 minutes you have to try to stay entirely in Blackfeet. I'm not grading you on whether or not you do it perfectly, I'm grading you on the fact that you actually attempted to stay in Blackfeet the entire time.

And you have to do this more than once. The first time I did it all my students were like, oh my god like this is too hard, I can't do it. After the fifth time, they were experts. And also practice this in class. Tell them today we're going to do a language table, sit down for five minutes and practice.

And finally domains of use. So where is the highly relevant language going to be used? Put a poster on the window with weather terms. Now every time they look out that window, they can read those weather terms. They have the support to practice. Write on the window. Draw an arrow to a tree and have a little conversation about the tree. Every time they look out the window they can practice. Repetition over and over and over.

And finally prayer. Prayer is really powerful. Tell them to say a prayer every morning when they get up, whenever they eat. And you can put language specific to those things in the prayer.

Alright. Finally, finally, teacher support. There's so much pressure on the teacher to come up with all of these things. I shamelessly tell you to copy things on Google, to go out and find stuff other people have done. To ask your students, "What do you want to learn? Was that successful?" Right? You give them the space to make mistakes, give yourself the same space to make mistakes. And finally collaboration. Talk to each other. The experts for teaching are in this room already teaching. Go talk to them. Go talk to Aspen who's been doing it forever. Go talk to Mizuki who's got a ton of resources. Go talk to Tracy who's been working with the Myaamia and has been mentoring people to do the teaching. There's the people. Collaborate.

I'm going to share this with people. This is an activity doc that I've put all of my teaching activities in. I tell people please add to it. Nobody ever has. I'm telling you please add to it. Add your stuff. Let's collaborate. Let's share what we're doing.

Thank you.