Developing Blackfoot language teaching in collaboration[*]

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This paper presents our experience to develop an effective Blackfoot language curriculum. We, a collaborative team of a Blackfoot native speaker and linguist, have been collaborating to develop a Blackfoot language course and encountering various challenges that are conditions common in indigenous language education. The challenges include lack of language teaching materials, lack of a standard dialect used as a prescriptive grammar, existence of multiple writing systems, and a lack of academic degrees and training in Indigenous language teaching. As part of the discussion, we identify the teaching materials and pedagogical linguistic references for the Blackfoot language that are available, and what are still needed. Finally, we present our successes and plans for improving the course content for the future.

1   Introduction

The University of Montana began offering elementary Blackfoot courses starting in the fall of 2007. The first three semesters of instruction used a video-conferencing system, and the instructor at the Blackfeet Community College simultaneously taught students at the Blackfeet Community College and the University of Montana. In January 2009, it was decided that the format of the course be changed to face-to-face instruction, starting in the spring of 2009.

In order to pursue this goal, our collaborative team, consisting of a native speaker and a linguist, were commissioned by the university to work together to develop the course. This was a challenging task since we had only a limited amount of time for curriculum development and had no experience teaching Blackfoot. Nonetheless, we consider that this is a good opportunity for both of us, and took the responsibility to develop and teach the course.

In this paper, we would like to share some of our experiences. We also hope to encourage native speakers of indigenous languages and linguists to work together in developing language materials since these are lacking in many language communities. This paper is organized as follows: In section 2, we outline our background. In section 3, we identify some challenges and solutions that we faced with this project. In section 4, we outline what we accomplished

during the term. In the concluding section, we share what we learned, and present our plans for course improvement.

2   Background: Member Backgrounds

We are a collaborative team consisting of a Blackfoot native speaker and a linguist and are both employees at the University of Montana-Missoula, United States. The second author, Annabelle Chatsis, is a native Blackfoot speaker from Kainai (the Blood reserve) in Alberta, Canada. She grew up speaking Blackfoot until she entered an elementary school at age five. Currently, she uses Blackfoot with her elderly family members only, and does not use it with younger members.   She has no opportunity to speak Blackfoot outside of home. She has never taught her language, nor studied it objectively. She recognizes that being a native speaker is an advantage for teaching because of her native pronunciation, expressions, and culturally valuable pragmatics that can be incorporated in classrooms. However, as one may know, being a native speaker of Blackfoot is not a sufficient condition for being a skilled teacher of the language. For this reason, she agreed to take the job under the condition that she would receive help in developing teaching materials from the first author, Mizuki Miyashita.

The first author, then, was called to contribute to this project. She earned a Ph.D. degree in Linguistics in 2002, and was appointed in the Linguistics Program at the University of Montana in 2003 and began to study Blackfoot in 2006. As part of her research activities, she has been recording Blackfoot speech for linguistics research. In addition, she has some background in indigenous language education, and experience in creating supplemental materials for *A Tohono O'odham Grammar* (Zepeda 1983).[1] However, developing Blackfoot teaching materials is a challenging task since the structure of the language is completely distinct from the languages she was familiar with. Also, a pedagogical grammar of the language is not available, which is usually helpful for creating teaching material if it exists. In short, neither of the team members has experience in teaching Blackfoot.

3   Challenges identified

Our task is to train ourselves in teaching and to develop Blackfoot teaching materials. Immediately after we agreed to do the work, we faced difficulties that are common to indigenous language education: (i) lack of language teaching materials, (ii) lack of a standard dialect used as a prescriptive grammar, (iii) lack of a unified writing systems, and (iv) lack of academic degrees in Indigenous language teaching. In this section, we will consider these challenges, while comparing our situation to other similar cases involving commonly taught languages.

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[1] Tohono O'odham is a Uto-Aztecan language, spoken in Southwestern Arizona and Northern Sonora, Mexico.

3.1 Challenges – Teaching Materials

There are abundant resources such as textbooks, dictionaries, CDs, and DVDs that are available for commonly taught languages. For example, a quick and random internet search of Spanish textbook returned more than 1100 items on one site (textbook.com). On the other hand, the same site returned only 9 items for Blackfoot, and none of them were about language. Currently, we have very few Blackfoot teaching materials available to us. To name a few, however: (i) Siksika language materials – designed for elementary students by the Siksika tribe,[2] (ii) Lena Russell's (1997) Blackfoot materials for the Kainai tribe, and (iii) notes with CDs and a DVD by Marvin Weatherwax (2007) for the Blackfeet Community College. The first two sets are published but only the second one is still available to public. The third one is a set of teaching materials created by the instructor at the Blackfeet Community College and sold only at the bookstore of the same institution. These materials tend to be organized by topics and usually introduce some useful phrases according to the topics or situations. They do not refer to the grammatical components of the language. The Teacher's guide for Lena Russell's materials contains some grammatical information. However, they are not necessarily the same as how they appear in the descriptive grammar by Frantz (1991). Such information may be difficult to apply for a course taught by a new teacher, without first obtaining some linguistic background. If we were to use these materials, we feared that we could only ever teach phrases as chunks for memorization and never be able to teach Blackfoot so that learners would produce novel sentences. In addition, we found information about other teaching materials (Esther 1993, Lanning 1882, Lewis 1978), and some we heard from people that their relatives had written lists of words. These materials tend to be word-lists and are not very accessible. There seem to be more materials that are made by native speakers and learners who are interested in the language, but these can only be obtained via interpersonal connections on the reserves (or reservation). As a result of our informal research in Blackfoot teaching materials, we came to the conclusion that we had to create our own materials for this course.

3.2 Challenges – Language Variation

Most commonly taught languages have their standardized language variation. This standard variant is so-called because it has a long history of being written, and is the variant used in prescriptive grammars for education and administrative use. The prescriptive grammar has also been studied by number of language teaches, and made into pedagogical grammars to teach it as second language. These pedagogical materials are then revised multiple times, and the quality of these materials keeps improving. For example, new and or revised

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[2] There are four tribes in the Blackfoot Confederacy. Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Apatohsipikani (North Piegan), and Amsskaapipikani (South Puegan). The first three are in Alberta, Canada, and the last tribe is in Montana, United States.

Spanish textbooks are published every year. On the other hand, Blackfoot has no standardized dialect.

This makes Blackfoot language education challenging. For example, a word for coffee is *siksikimi* in the US, while it is *niitá'psiskikimi* or *niitá'paisiksikimi* in Canada. Many of our students are from the US side, while the instructor (second author) is from Canada. Some often insist that their grandparents say it the correct way. It took a while for them to understand that there is more than one correct version of the word.

We believe that it is a good practice to teach word variations, but for the sake of planning lessons, we realize that it is helpful for us to use only one version of any word, generally speaking. Blackfoot has been described by few linguists in works such as the following: Uhlenbeck (1938) *A Concise Blackfoot Grammar*, Taylor (1969) *A Grammar of Blackfoot*, and Frantz (1991) *Blackfoot Grammar*. We consulted all these references, and we decided to use the last one, mostly because of its content and accessibility: The contents are organized by grammatical information such as gender and verb types, and all sections are presented with examples; not to mention the fact that it is still in print and available to public. We mainly used the forms appearing in the book for class, but supplemented these with other examples when appropriate.

3.3   Challenges – Unified Orthography

Having a standard orthography seems commonsense for speakers of commonly taught languages. Blackfoot, however, has been a written language for only a century, and users of the orthography are mainly linguists and handful of teachers, not native speakers. A different writing system was created every time someone described a language. As a result, multiple orthographies now exist.

A version that is widely used today was developed by Donald Frantz (1978). Many Blackfoot language teachers in Canada now use this system. There are two other versions used by smaller number of people in the US. Jack Holterman[3] developed a system that is slightly different from Frantz's orthography. For example, an affricate *ts* is represented by one symbol *z*, and likewise *ks* by *x*. Some long vowels and glottal stops are omitted. Weatherwax uses his own writing system for his teaching. This latter system has breaks between syllables.[4] Differences among these systems are shown in the examples in table 1 below.[5]

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[3] Jack Holterman is an amatur linguist who lived in Browning, Montana. He studied the Blackfoot language and developled language lessons with the Piegan Institute.

[4] The term syllable here is used for its convenience. The way words are written may not be by syllables. It seems that it is written to help learners pronounce words by breaking down by sound chunk.

[5] It is unknown why Holterman and Weatherwax decided to make their systems different from Frantz. However, in my opinion, it is probably because the timing issue for Holterman. Fantz' grammar book became available to public in 1991, but Holterman had been collecting Blackfoot information by himself years before that.

Among these systems, we choose Frantz's system for our class since it was developed based on a phonemic analysis of the language (Frantz 1978); the other orthographies are not. Phonemic analysis is commonly used in developing orthographies in general. Since the Blackfoot grammar book (Frantz 1991) and the dictionary (Frantz and Russell 1995) use this system, it is helpful for learners to be able to look up words in a dictionary that uses the same orthography we are teaching.

Phrases	Frantz	Holterman	Weatherwax
I know it	nitssksiniipa	nizxinipa	NII TS SKI NII PA
you will go home	kitáakahkayi	kitakahkayi	KII TAK KAI
come here	pohsapoot	pohsapot	POH TSA PO TA

Table 1. Various Writing systems in Blackfoot

In addition, in commonly taught languages, phonological variations due to dialectal differences are ignored in writing, although often recognized by speakers. By way of a famous example, the English word written as *pen* is described to be pronounced [pen] in Standard American English (SAE), but the same word is pronounced [pɪn] in the Southern dialect (Fromkin et al. 2007). These differences are not an issue for the English writing system, and speakers write these words the same way. However, Blackfoot tends to write the same word in multiple ways, according to orthographic variations. For instance, the word for potato is *mataki* in Canada, and *pataki* in the US. Thus, we represent sound variations in written forms as well as pronunciations.

3.4 Challenges – Instructor Training

Various training opportunities are available for teachers of commonly taught languages. Since there are graduate degrees in these languages, if those graduate programs support students by offering teaching assistantships or instructorships, then these students can receive teaching experience and training. For example, there are special language teaching training programs such as TESL for Teaching English as Second Languages. As for Blackfoot, there is no graduate program in Blackfoot Studies, and, therefore, no program can provide graduate students with Blackfoot teaching experience. There are several special intensive programs for Native American language teachers such as AILDI (American Indian Language Development Institute) and CILLDI (Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Development Institute). However, they are for Native American/First Nations languages in general, and not for one specific language. Thus, we are having to develop our own instructor training program.

## 4	What We Did

Our task was to offer a Blackfoot language class, which involves studying the Blackfoot language structure and orthography, and building curriculum. That is, we were expected to develop a syllabus, objectives, and lesson plans. However we were facing a major time constraint: we had only one week for preparation. This fact allowed us no time to explore the opportunity of self-training in teaching methodologies and to explore different learning styles. In the one week before the semester started, we only had time to develop syllabus and lecture notes for just the first week. For the rest of semester, we spent our time every week making lecture notes, recording example phrases, and creating homework assignments. Quizzes and exams were also developed a week before each event.

Towards the middle of the semester, we discovered that students were more motivated to learn the content when we presented sample conversations as shown in Table 2 below.

A:	kitáíkihpa?	*What are you doing?*
B:	nitáíssá'tsim miistaki	*I am looking at the mountain.*
A:	issapít!	*Look!*
B:	ha?	*What?*
A:	issámmis oma!	*Look at that!*
B:	tsistapi! (tsa anistapiiw!)	*What is it?*
A:	issámmis oma piitaawa!	*Look at that eagle!*
B:	ho'aa!	*Oh!*

Table 2. Sample conversation

Some students expressed to us that it was helpful for them to see a paradigm of each verb. A sample paradigm is shown in (3).

nitsísina'si	*I am busy*	nitsísina'sihpinnaana	*we are busy*
kitsísna'si	*you (sg.) are busy*	kitsísina'sihpoaawa	*you all are busy*
		isina'sio'pa	*you and I are busy*
isina'siwa	*he/she is busy*	i'sina'siaawa	*they are busy*

Table 3.   Conjugation of an animate intransitive verb "busy."

During the first month of the semester, we also visited Russian 202 and Japanese 102 classes to observe how other languages were taught. We chose these classes, among the many other language classes, offered because these languages are considered uncommonly taught languages in many institutions. Visiting these sections was beneficial for us, since we received a sense of what a language class should look like in terms of college education.

Yet, we found that they are only "uncommonly taught" compared to languages such as Spanish and French. Russian and Japanese are still more

commonly taught than indigenous languages, and they also have a long tradition and history of descriptive linguistics, research, and teaching. Abundant materials and textbooks are available, a standard variant of the language has been selected for education, and teacher training is available, usually through graduate programs. Unlike indigenous languages like Blackfoot, Japanese has approximately 121 million speakers and Russian 116 million speakers (ethnologue.com). Grenoble (2009) states that "there are special needs in language revitalization that are simply not found in other second language programs." It is important to define what the special needs for these languages are.

5   Conclusion

We learned several important things from this experience. First, an instructor of an indigenous language should know: (i) how the language works from a linguistic standpoint, (ii) how to develop effective teaching materials, (iii) how to use these materials, and (iii) how students learn best. Therefore, being a native speaker is not an absolute requirement for being a language instructor. Second, the above conditions (i) - (iii) can be improved by self-training and collaborating with others, such as linguists. Third, it has also made us learn about ourselves. It made Annabelle think about what means to be a fluent, native speaker. It also made Mizuki think about how linguistics training can contribute to language education. Fourth, we learned that teaching indigenous languages challenges students' preconception about language in general. For example, students learned that not all languages have a standard variation and official writing or spelling system. The truth is that there is no standard variant or one correct spelling in Blackfoot. Based on this experience, we are now setting new goals for our future courses. We would like to (i) create effective pedagogical materials for Blackfoot which are organized by grammatical information, (ii) create lists of vocabulary and phrases including various example expressions, (iii) provide more sample sound files, and (iv) encourage students to use Blackfoot in their everyday life.

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