



MARTHA KYAK

## Teaching Inuktitut to Young Adults at Nunavut Sivuniksavut

I took on the role of Inuktitut and Inuit History instructor at Nunavut Sivuniksavut in August 2010. Becoming involved with Inuit college students was a whole new experience for me. I moved from a tiny community with a population of 1,300 to a big city, which was a major adjustment. I was excited and eager to start my job and to meet the students. The students came from all over Nunavut, and I could see in them the same excitement and uncertainty that I was feeling.

My teaching assignment for the Inuktitut class was to work with a small group of nine students with minimal Inuktitut proficiency. I will explain some of my methods and techniques in teaching Inuktitut, and how students gained significant language skills in a relatively short period of time.

There were a number of challenges for me as an instructor, as I had no course outline to follow and the students all had varying levels of both spoken and written abilities in Inuktitut. The first thing I did was to talk about the importance of our language, and how integral it is to our culture. I informed them that having two languages was very important for their intellectual development. Having participated in Jim Cummings' workshop on being bilingual, I was able to share this knowledge with the

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students. Jim Cummings is a professor at the University of Toronto. He has written several books on bilingualism. For my course, I used the bicycle model that Jim Cummings developed to help students visualize how important being bilingual is. This model is explained below.



Visualize a bicycle with two equally pumped tires. That would be the bilingual student who has attained language proficiency, both BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). That is our goal. Now imagine that the bicycle has one tire that is lower than the other. That would indicate that one dimension of language is not as fully developed as the other. This bicycle won't move steadily. Finally, imagine that both tires are flat. This bicycle, similar to a student who has not sufficiently developed BICS and CALP will neither move forward nor backward.

I wanted them to understand that they needed to have the passion to learn and continually practice speaking Inuktitut. I explained that to become proficient in Inuktitut the language must be used daily in everything they do. To achieve their goal they must not be afraid of making mistakes, and must practice their new skills regularly.

The second thing I did was to create a safe learning environment for students to feel comfortable speaking without feeling put down. I informed them that it is important to be able to laugh at mistakes and continue. Creating a positive relationship with the students was key to making them comfortable in testing their new language skills. I let them know that I believed in each one of them, and that I would be their greatest supporter and a cheerleader. The classroom had to be a safe place to make mistakes: it

is in this specific human environment that students would be able to progress in a significant way throughout the year.

I realized fairly early on in the year that the students did indeed have a basic knowledge of Inuktitut grammar, but they were timid: they understood the rules, but didn't speak. I had to become creative to get them to begin speaking. For the students who didn't have even the basics of grammar, I met with them individually and taught them some basic rules and word patterns that are used on a daily basis.

So the journey of acquiring the language began. No pencils, no papers, just speaking Inuktitut. It was very different from what the students were used to. Every time our classes started we would go

around the table and I would ask how their week went and they started with that simple tool. At first they were very shy and I would continually help them with the terms and how to properly express themselves. As the year went by they became used to speaking and they had no problem sharing events in our language. They would laugh at their mistakes but continue trying.

I also had to come up with ways to make learning Inuktitut fun, so we started making videos in Inuktitut. We started with a Pepsi commercial, which we did as a whole group. After different shoots, I wanted to make it like a real commercial, so I played around with the music, added text to the commercial and the students were thrilled to see what they produced. I could see the eagerness and pride they had in what they were doing. After this, they did other small group commercials.

After the Christmas holidays, I reviewed once more with the students the history of our language and how our writing system came to be, and how it has evolved. Having already experienced the enthusiasm that students had producing commercials, I decided to become slightly more ambitious with them, and have them produce a skit and record this on video. They brainstormed their ideas, prepared their script, practiced their lines, and came up with amazing three short video pieces. The videos are now featured on Youtube.

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As I look back, what came out of the videos is that they were able to see themselves over and over again speaking in Inuktitut. That was one of the best reflections of them engaging in Inuktitut and being more comfortable with it.

These efforts culminated at the graduation, where one of the highlights for me was one student who came to our school not knowing Inuktitut at all at the beginning of the year, standing up in front of everyone, giving her speech in Inuktitut.

To give the reader a better sense of how the process unfolded and what it all meant to the students, I asked them to write a short letter in which they would describe how it was to grow up with Inuktitut at home, at school and now at NS. They have written the letters in English, since they can express more freely in that language at the present time.

I asked this question: "When you were growing up, did you hear Inuktitut anywhere at home or school? How was it learning Inuktitut in school? How is it learning Inuktitut at NS and how does that process work for you?"

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### *Amilia, from Rankin Inlet*

In my household I heard Inuktitut mainly from my adopted parents who are my grandmother and grandfather. I occasionally heard it from my mom, aunt and uncles.

So Inuktitut was used as our first language in my adopted parents' home and English was the first language in my biological parents' home. I was able to understand most of what was said in Inuktitut, but I was very limited in my speaking. I only knew simple words. When we watched television it was mainly English, but when we watched shows at my adopted parents home it was mainly in Inuktitut on Igalaq (CBC news in Inuktitut), but because I could only pick up some words, I wasn't really interested in watching. When we heard radio we listened to local radio, there was a lot of Inuktitut spoken. A lot of elders go on the radio and when adults went on the radio they used Inuktitut first and translated it into English.

At my adopted parents' home, I tried to pay attention to what they were saying, to understand what was being said by their body language. I'd be able to figure out bits and pieces of it, and

try my best to memorize it. I found Inuktitut hard to learn, and my hopes would just go down the drain, so I went back to English. I was surrounded by Inuktitut with my grandparents, the radio, and occasionally hear it from my aunts, uncles but I would just give up.

I would hear some Inuktitut rap or gospel songs, and picked up some words from the songs too. I continued to speak in English because it's easier for me to understand and quicker. My friends weren't able to speak much Inuktitut too. It just wasn't being practiced. Yet we wanted to.

Two different languages surrounded me: Inuktitut and English. Since I use the Internet a lot, where there is very limited Inuktitut, I was practicing English much more than Inuktitut. Songs, schools, stores, just things in the everyday life barred me from deepening my Inuktitut.

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In high school, I learned how to use syllabics but when it was over I didn't feel the need to keep using it. So I eventually forgot how to use syllabics. I felt I didn't need to keep using the syllabics anymore because I didn't see a lot of it being used around the community and felt I would not benefit enough from it. Using a lot of syllabics in my high school Inuktitut class was the easiest to learn. In class work students would be given a word to find definitions, do quizzes about Inuktitut words, find out where the sounds came from in our throat when we spoke Inuktitut, interact with elders, listen to stories of the past and occasionally get a chance to go with elders on the land.

That was it, it was like if we knew how to write, that was great, but being able to speak it is better in my opinion because the Inuktitut writing system is fairly easy to get a hang of. There is more to language than just being able to write. I feel I didn't get the full potential to speak in Inuktitut but the writing was good just for those three years, then I lost it. Without being able to speak Inuktitut I think it is easier to lose it. The key is to keep it as a habit and needing to use it.

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At Nunavut Sivuniksavut, I think I learned so much Inuktitut here because it was being taught orally. During the first semester we did little games like, blind-folding your team partner and directing them in which ways to go in just Inuktitut; it was challenging. We chose a song in English and translated it into Inuktitut. Those are the two things I remember. In the second semester students were challenged even harder. We recorded videos, and were taught a lot of new words. Some of the words we were taught I didn't even know they existed. We made more Inuktitut videos. I think it's great that we also did weekly quizzes now because I'm getting the hang of the writing system again.

NS helped me learn so much Inuktitut, because I was surrounded with students who are capable of speaking Inuktitut. In Inuktitut class there is a lot of oral speaking and figuring out how to use Inuktitut words properly using everyday words and conversations. Our Inuktitut class made a video that had everything in Inuktitut and that helped me learn a lot of different words and hear different dialects. This helped me stretch my speaking and now I am more comfortable talking in Inuktitut with others and my parents.

A lot of my classmates knew how to speak Inuktitut although they have different dialects so I learned new dialects too. They helped me so much by having the patience to teach me too. I asked a classmate how to say some things in Inuktitut. She wrote them down in syllabics, which is harder for me to understand, but she got me to say them to her. The words she taught me are the words I use daily so I speak them more often. She speaks a different dialect but she also knows my dialect so she was able to help teach me my dialect. The songs we do in performances are teaching me too because now I know what the songs mean. Being able to go back to Nunavut speaking in Inuktitut gives me pride because now I can speak in Inuktitut with my adopted parents with less struggle.

How will I continue to practice my language when I go home? My mom and dad (Anaanaa, Ataataa / ᐱᐱᐱᐱ, ᐱᐱᐱᐱ) speak a lot of Inuktitut. I want to be able to further my Inuktitut speaking skills by asking questions. When I hear new words, I can ask my parents as well as another student from NS their meaning as well as how to pronounce them correctly. I am going to push myself to read the newspaper, signs, articles, and slogans, then discuss what

they mean with people who understand Inuktitut well. I want to surround myself (uvanga/ᐅᑦᑦᓴ) with people (Inuit/ᐃᐅᐃᑦ) who know a lot of Inuktitut. A lot of my friends do not know Inuktitut or do not use it regularly, so I want (pijumajunga/ᐱᑦᐱᑦᓴ) to teach them (tiakua/ᐱᐅᐅᐅ) at least the basics of Inuktitut rather than me switching back constantly to speaking in English. Being able to teach my friends Inuktitut would give me more confidence to speak it, that would force me to keep speaking in Inuktitut everyday. Elders appreciate when the youth come to them for help. I want to interact with the elders (utuqqait/ᐅᐅᑦᑦᐅᑦ), go on the land (nuna/ᐅᐅ) with them, help (ikajuq/ᐃᐅᑦᑦ) them and while I'm doing that, they can also help me speak and better understand or learn (iliniarumajunga/ᐃᑦᑦᐅᐅᐅᐅᑦᑦ) Inuktitut. I would be able to pick up new words like what they call packing up the traditional sled (qamutik/ᑦᐅᐅ).

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### ***Becky, from Rankin Inlet***

Growing up as a child in Nunavut, Inuktitut was my first language. Only Inuktitut was spoken to me and my sister and we respond in Inuktitut, so that's how we were strong in our mother tongue. My mother is an Inuktitut teacher at the elementary school so she had helped me a lot with Inuktitut and it was a strong language at home. My father had worked for the CBC radio, local radio, IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation) and as a youth coordinator so my dad helped keep Inuktitut strong in our household growing up.

We would make yearly trips to visit my grandparents and Inuktitut is always spoken in their community so I would also be exposed to our language and it gave me chances to expand my Inuktitut and understand it more. As a little child I used to watch children's TV shows such as *Takuginai* which is a show for Inuit children like a kid's educational show on the APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Televisions Network) and other Inuktitut shows. I also used to watch shows like *Sesame Street*, *Barney*, and cartoons which were in English.

I only started to speak English when I started school. I had a choice to take kindergarten in Inuktitut or English and I had

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chosen English just to try something new and different for me. I had some practice writing and speaking English before I went to school so I was a little bit fluent in English. My English had expanded and I was like any other child in school down South always speaking English.

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Over the years I slowly started using Inuktitut to communicate with my fellow Inuit so that's when I noticed I was losing my mother tongue, something that should be kept alive, something we should cherish because it's the language our ancestors used.

In school there are Inuktitut classes maybe twice a week and we learnt basic Inuktitut and some

more challenging courses. Inuktitut classes were my favourite because all the students would learn to use it more and expand their knowledge of Inuktitut. I was an A+ student, not to brag, but I'm so proud of myself. In Inuktitut classes we worked on work books that were made and translated by my Inuit elders and Inuktitut teachers. We also learned about Inuit legends, taboos, shamanism, and everything about Inuit history. We had quizzes every now and then and mid-term exams and also final exams in Inuktitut. Every year we have year-end award ceremonies and they gave awards for sportsmanship, math and science, and other classes. Every year throughout my junior high school years I would get the Inuktitut award and the honourable mention awards. I was encouraged by my parents, relatives and high school teacher to keep my Inuktitut as a part of my everyday life. He said I was a very devoted student, I was so proud and felt so encouraged and inspired. Growing up I wanted to become an Inuktitut teacher like my mom, or an art teacher either in fine arts or industrial arts. After I graduated from high school in 2009, I took a year off and subbed at the schools as Inuktitut teacher or SSA (Student Support Assistant) and this gave me the job experience of teaching students.



I then decided to take Nunavut Sivuniksavut and we started this course back in September (2010). NS classes were interesting: Inuktitut in particular because it gave me more time and more experience in Inuktitut. In that class, there were two groups. I was in the more challenging group for the first semester, but I didn't have enough confidence in myself even if I had won Inuktitut awards in my past. I was so good at Inuktitut but then I lacked it because my peers hardly ever spoke Inuktitut: English is the main language we all could understand so I chose Inuktitut first to respond when people speak to me. I could still speak Inuktitut and everything but it's just the lack of experience my peers had. So I kind of lost my confidence in that but I regained that confidence later on with my classmates and my peers. Here I am like one of the heads of my group or that's what I've been told, so I try to be the leader to encourage my peers in speaking more Inuktitut. In this semester I joined the other group, the group I am more comfortable with. We are learning in a fun way, something we all take part in. It gets us all excited and very confident with Inuktitut and we get very creative. We did some videos, quizzes and more. I am regaining my mother tongue, and that, I am proud of and confident in.

I could go on and on but who wants to read something this long? Maybe you because it's something very informative and important. Thank you for this opportunity. It has given me more to think of and more thoughts. I can say I am proud to be an Inuk (we don't like to be called Eskimos because anyone who eats raw meat is an eskimo and not only Inuit eat raw meat). I say, keep your mother tongue strong in you and your future generations, you'd be sorry if you didn't. haha 😊

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### ***Chelsea, from Kugluktuk***

Growing up as a child in Kugluktuk, my family would speak Inuinnaqtun and most of the times it was often to my grandparents. I am not fluent in Inuinnaqtun but I do know a lot of basic words and their meanings. Granny Kinaviak and Grampa Anablak always spoke Inuinnaqtun to their ingutaks (grandchildren). My cousins and I would always help each other out with new Inuinnaqtun words, sentences and their meanings.

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When my parents were having a conversation which they didn't want us to know about, they would speak in Inuinaqtun to each other; I was always curious as to what they were talking about.

As a child, my granny and grampa always took me and my angayuk (older sister/ᐱᓐᓂᓂ) camping with them. I always enjoyed my camping trips with my granny and grampa to the cabin at the Second Point or at Reid Island in the spring and summer season. Hearing a lot of Inuinaqtun being spoken by my granny and grampa helped me with the understanding of the language. It also gave me practice time.

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My granny and grampa always spoke Inuinaqtun to their ingutak (grandchildren/ᐱᓐᓂᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂ). Especially when they told us stories about their childhood and growing up with their families in outpost camps in Victoria Island or Reid Island. They talked about how life is different nowadays, from living in outpost camps and the things they had to do on their own in the camps. My granny and grampa found it very differ-

ent moving into the community from living in an outpost camp with their families, and how it became easier living in matchbox houses with running water and sewer outtake.

Later in my life, learning Inuinaqtun in elementary school and in high school was always fun. In grade school, we would learn Inuinaqtun words then transcribe them into English in our notebook. Students were always encouraged to speak Inuinaqtun in sentences all the time to our teacher. One of the phrases often spoken was "Imiriaqturniaqtunga?" (Can I go for a drink of water/ᐱᓐᓂᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂ) and "Quijaqturnunnaqtunga?" (May I please go to the bathroom/ᐱᓐᓂᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂᐱᓂ). In Inuinaqtun class in high school, we learned Inuinaqtun words, did volunteer work at an elders' house during class time, completed family trees from both sides

of our families, and we also hosted the Elders Christmas Feast and bingo in the high school.

Being an NS student, I have learned a lot of Inuktitut from our instructor Martha and my classmates. I have learned so much Inuktitut words, and I am continuing to learn how to speak Inuktitut in full sentences. At the beginning of our first semester last year, I was a bit ashamed for not knowing very much Inuinnaqtun because all my classmates were very fluent in Inuktitut. That feeling has evaporated because I have learned so much from our instructors and my classmates; I fed off the Inuktitut language from everybody at NS. I am more and more ambitious, and encouraged about speaking Inuktitut because I believe it is important to preserve our language.

Inuktitut class was a great course at NS because it has proven me that we are all capable of learning our language; it is never too late to learn how to speak.

When I return home to Kugluktuk I plan to continue speaking Inuinnaqtun in several different ways:

- The first step to continue speaking Inuinnaqtun when I get home is to speak a lot of Inuinnaqtun conversations with my parents and granny and grampa.
- Keep in contact with my classmates and Inuktitut instructor, who are fluent in Inuktitut. Continue learning words and sentences from them.
- Converse with elders in the community to continue learning Inuinnaqtun to enhance my speaking fluency.
- Keep a log book of new Inuinnaqtun words and sentences, and figuring out the proper way of speaking words in a sentence.
- Ask my great granny to help me with making a pair of mukluks, and ask her to speak to me only in Inuinnaqtun to me while she is helping me sew together the pair of mukluks. This will help me a lot with speaking the language because we are interacting with each other, and I also get to learn from her while she is only speaking Inuinnaqtun to me.

And last but not least, to become more involved with elders projects in the community, to gain more Inuinnaqtun words and

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sentences from the elders while I can. Interacting and working with the elders will give me the opportunity to enhance and improve my Inuinnaqtun vocabulary and grammar.

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### *Caitlin, from Kugluktuk*

Here is my life story of growing up with Inuinnaqtun. As a little girl I was taught English; that's what my parents mostly spoke. The way I saw Inuinnaqtun as a child was confusing, and impossible to learn. I wanted to understand it, because my grandmother would tell stories. I would always have a translator, and I was so embarrassed to have one. I was not taught much Inuinnaqtun in my home, it was just the basics. I was taught simple words like Koana (thank you/<sup>ᶜ</sup>ᵈᵗᵒ), Ilalii (your welcome/<sup>ᵈ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗ), Havak (work/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ), Ublakut (good morning/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ). My parents weren't speaking it all the time but when they did I wouldn't understand. I wasn't concerned about it but as I grew up it was a big deal for me.

When I started school we were being taught same basic words, but some were a bit different like kuyatuqtaktunga (can I go to the washroom?/<sup>ᶜ</sup>ᵈᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ), imiqtuktaktunga (can I go have water?/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ). Also we were taught how to sew, I fell in love with it. My first thing that I sewed was a pair of mukluks (caribou boots/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ). Ever since I started sewing I never stopped. I would sew pualuks (mitts/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ), atiigis (parkas/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ)... anything, you name it. And then I got into cross-stitching when I was nine. When I got to Junior High it was the same learning system, I was bored because I wanted to learn more not just the same words I was taught in ilihagvik (elementary school/<sup>ᵗ</sup>ᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗᵒᵗ) and then we started sewing more pauluks and mukluks, it was fun until it was the same old routine every year.

When I came to NS I didn't expect to learn more of my language, I thought I was just here to learn about the Inuit history. But Mata my Inuktitut teacher taught me basic grammar. Most of my classmates were really good Inuktitut speakers. That's when I felt that I needed to learn the language. I felt so left out and out of place. But my classmates taught me sentences and phrases in Inuktitut., and now I feel like I can teach the language to my friends. I am still in the process of

learning my language. Today I can say I understand more. But not quite: I still have to learn to speak the language. I am in the process in getting my language back. Once I can speak it I am going to teach my nieces and nephews, so they can keep the language alive. Also so they can teach their kids. I think NS is the fastest and best way of learning the Inuit language. It helped me a lot.

How am I going to keep my language alive? My plan is to practice the Inuinnaqtun language, make it useful in my life. By picking up an Inuinnaqtun book and practicing it everyday, to go and visit my auntie and grandpa everyday and sit down, drink tea and have bannock and tell them to speak Inuinnaqtun to me the whole way, after I learn my language I am going to teach the language to all youth and adults who can't speak it. I would start a program that is open all year round, and I would try expanding the language across the western part of Nunavut. How am I going to expand the language? I would get help from other youth and leaders. I was thinking that the easiest way to expand the language is to make commercials and CDs for learning the language.

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**Martha Kyak** is originally from Pond Inlet, Nunavut but now lives in Ottawa, Ontario. She has been actively involved in Nunavut education for many years and is currently teaching at Nunavut Sivuniksaut. She has worked as a classroom teacher, as a Principal at Ulaajuk School in Pond Inlet, as a Superintendent of Schools at Qikiqtani School Operations, and also as Manager of Teaching and Learning Centre for Nunavut. Martha loves doing graphic arts and is passionate about maintaining the Inuktitut language.

Amilia Ipkornerk, Becky Okatsiak, Chelsea Adjun and Caitlin Pangon are recent NS graduates.