

Gwich'in Language Gathering 2018

The Gwich'in Tribal Council hosted the four day Gwich'in Language Gathering in Fort McPherson between Thursday October 4th to Sunday the 7th. The Reason for the gathering was to bring together community members, youth, Elders, teachers, learners, language activists and coordinators. Together we would learn about

- Research & programs currently happening in our Gwich'in communities;
- Revitalization efforts in other language communities;
- New ways of teaching; and
- Community discussions about language loss and where to go from here.



Mable English opens with a prayer

All four days were very well attended by over 50 delegates from all four communities. Youth, Elders, teachers and community members were ferried over from Aklavik to join the Inuvik delegates on a bus trip to Fort McPherson. Tsiigehtchic delegates were shuttled in every day. And of course, members from Fort McPherson were there. We had 15 Elders and some younger speakers, over 15 youth, and many adult learners, some coming from as far away as Edmonton.

Day One (Thursday) of the conference was just a half day with travel. First, everyone introduced themselves. Community language coordinators gave overviews of their programs and how the various projects underway, and in the planning stages, fit within their language plans. We also spent



Tsiigehtchic drummers

time talking about all the amazing work that has been done for language revitalization over the past years and decades: all of the documentation, translations, the dictionary, the development of programs, the pressuring of government to change language policy, and all the work to access funding. And of course all the administrators, teachers and learners who have remained dedicated to language in our schools and communities over so many years. It is only because of their efforts that we have access to the knowledge and recourses that Gwich'in has today. Mahsi' choo.

Then the youth from the Tsiigehtchic school gave a presentation of a drum song in Gwichya Gwich'in, which was a perfect way to set the mood for the gathering.

Day Two (Friday)

focused on classroom learning and school programs. The day began with a presentation from our Keynote speaker, Kathryn Michel. Kathryn began a Secwepmetsin language nest in Adam's Lake near Chase BC in the 1980's. She began with three children, and has since grown her program into one of the very few language immersion schools in the country. She talked about her own journey and shared valuable information and resources about teaching in an immersion setting. It has been found that teaching language through immersion is the most effective and fastest way to teach language.



Velma Illasiak, Kennedi Greenland, & Marrence Cardinal



Kathryn Michel shares her work with language nests in BC



Gladys Alexie shares her work on the new curriculum

In the afternoon, Gladys Alexie talked about the new BDEC Our Languages curriculum she piloted last year. With the help of Mary Effie Snowshoe and Hannah Alexie she has been working to create a Gwich'in version of it. This is very exciting because the curriculum supports teachers to provide an immersion style program.

Then we had a presentation of a song by the Aklavik school. They did a wonderful job.



Irene Kendo shares a song about skinning rabbits

Day Three (Saturday) began with presentations from the Mentor Apprentice teams. The GTC has been funding a Mentor Apprentice program for 300 hours of one-on-one language immersion. The teams represent people teaching and learning both dialects of Teetl'it and Gwichya Gwich'in. They shared about their process of keeping themselves immersed in their language throughout their sessions together, and gave a short presentation of what a typical session looks like.

The group was also treated to many Elders sharing stories about their youth and thoughts on their hopes for the language. Mary Effie Snowshoe gave a presentation on how Gwich'in culture has changed since the time of the missions. How colonial history has shaped Gwich'in culture over the last 200 years, and what needs to be done to strengthen culture today; to learn all the valuable knowledge that empowers Gwich'in to be self sufficient and proud.

Andrew Cienski of the GTC gave a presentation on immersion teaching. He explained why and how it works, and how it helps with learning. There was a demonstration of the approach, then all the delegates broke up into small groups with at least one fluent speaker per group. Each group was given a plate, a cup, and cutlery to talk about. This technique is loosely based on one used by the Where Are Your Keys (WAYK) approach to language learning. It is a very student centred approach where the learner has to seek out from the speaker how to describe what is happening (the cup is on the plate, the plate is on the cup, the spoon is in the cup, etc.). The groups spent the rest of the afternoon immersed in the language. Afterwards, everyone shared what they had learned and their reactions to the process. People were very excited by how much they had learned in such a short time, and asked if we could do it again the following day.



Mentor Apprentice team of Grace Martin and Mary Effie Snowshoe chat in Gwich'in



An immersion team working hard

Day Four (Sunday) was a short day. We met for a short while, then broke for church, then reconvened. Because of the success of the previous day's immersion session, we ran another like it. This one was structured differently, however. Whereas the first session had been around using physical objects, this time we talked about pictures, using full sentences. Again, a student centred approach in full immersion was encouraged. The room filled with the sound of Gwich'in being spoken, and laughter and clapping of hands.

Finally, many Elders shared their thoughts and reactions (often in Gwich'in) to what they had seen and experienced over the last four days. It was repeatedly stated that the community needs to gather more often to share and encourage language in our communities.

One of the goals of the gathering was that people would feel this was their meeting. Not that it was brought to them. The gathering was an opportunity to speak directly to each other; to share knowledge, pain and hopes. Another goal was to fill the air with Gwich'in. When Elders and learners spoke to each other and laughed in the language for hours, and during our breaks, when Elders continued to speak in Gwich'in, this was a wonderful thing.



Renie Koe leads her group in a song



Rosalie Ross, Wade Vineltsi and Emma Kay listen on



Dorothy Alexie and Agnes Mitchell discuss



Thomas Kendo and Ruby McDonald listen as John Norbert shares his thoughts

In summary, during the four days of the Gwich'in Language Gathering, over fifty participants from all four communities gathered to talk about language teaching, learning, and revitalization. We learned about past and current work in the communities. We were treated to a talk by Kathryn Michel who gave insights into how to develop a language nest and how to grow a language movement within the community. She also shared some very useful resources we are already applying, to develop curriculum for our community programs. Finally, we heard from our teachers, learners, and Elders about the importance of language, and of access to programs that will move them forward in their learning. It was a great time to gather and learn from each other and to be reminded that we are all working together towards the same goal of strengthening Gwich'in.



Agnes Mitchell speaking with her grandson Dallas