



Question and Answer Summary

Learning SENĆOŦEN Through our Worldview with MENEŦIYE

December 4, 2024

Q: What are some of the family terms that you would recommend people look for first?

Oh yeah, so *WELEQSE SEN, E ƦE NE, ÍY SDÁLNEW* has been one of the first ones, which is 'I wrap you in my good medicine'. For greetings in SENĆOŦEN, we say *ÍY SƦÁĆEL* and *ÍY ƦEĆIL* and *ÍY SNÁT* which just means 'good morning, good day, good evening'. But again, you can hear that it is English phrasing translated into SENĆOŦEN. When we were working with our Elders at the time and I'd walk in in the morning, say *ÍY SƦÁĆEL* and they say no, it's not a good day. The sky is cloudy and rainy outside. So when you say that when you say *ÍY SƦÁĆEL*, 'good day', you're talking about the sky. Our real greetings would be O *SIÁM* or *TÁĆEL SW*, which is one of our real greetings. If you say *TÁĆEL SW* it means 'you've arrived' and the response to that would be *HÁ, E TÁĆEL SEN* 'Yeah, I've arrived'. So those are our greetings in SENĆOŦEN. Maybe just to start with those greetings and ways of giving thanks.

Q: I'd love to know how the transition was from a learner to a teacher. We're a little team of three in the Mentor Apprentice Program. For the last six months we have been preparing for stronger programs in 2025 and have been learning as much as we can. We're excited and nervous and terrified. We're curious if you had any words of advice or just what that was like for you as you move through it.

I felt like I was going to pass out. My anxiety was just through the roof on that very first day of me teaching in a SENĆOŦEN immersion program and I really knew that I had a long way to go. If I was to go back and give some advice to me when I was just starting out my teaching journey, I would just say it's going to be OK. You know, *ĆOƦES Ʀ EN, STOLNEW*, 'use the language that you know' and don't break into English.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



You can get by in a foreign country without knowing their language with body language, with your facial expressions. Leading the children, use the language that you know but don't break out of the language because that allows a big open door for English to get into the classroom. So I would say start off your program that way. We're not going to speak any English. What else can we do besides speak English? Can use our body language, put posters up on the wall that you can refer to.

Something that you're going to have to do is get the students to line up, so put a poster on your wall that is a picture of students lined up and what your expectations are. If you're flustered for words in that moment, you can point to the picture. And every day when you're going to have to say, *DENESET SW HÁLE*, 'Everybody line up straight', you'll have that poster to refer to for your own language learning. Put things around your classroom that are going to help you stay in the language. As well, don't leave a crack open for English because it'll take over.

I really would just say, take that big deep breath and the kids are going to have fun. You have those activities, go outside. They're not going to be thinking "Well, they don't know that language." Just use what you know and always offer a little time, an hour, for language learning everyday because that consistency matters. If I was to go back in time, all that anxiety was just a waste for me because I was like that for years. But I would just say it's all going to be OK, and put prompts around your room. Think about things that will help you with your own language learning.

Participant shares how it's been interesting to work with adults as opposed to school systems and shared about incorporating wellness into the learning space.

MENETIYE responds: I was telling my high school students recently, using myself for an example, that I've been going to the gym and when you sign up for a gym, you get a free one-on-one session. The guy had me lifting really heavy weights that I would have never chosen for myself.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



He was saying if you want to build strength, you have to lift heavy. He kept saying “You're stronger than you think you are. Pick up the heavier ones.” I've never lifted weights like this, ever, and he was saying there's from zero to 10 with 0 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest. You have to be between 8 and 10 to build strength.

So I was telling my high school students that that's a really good analogy for the language. You have to be between 8 and 10, where you're a little bit uncomfortable and it's getting hard, to have that real space for growth. You have to be in that range, challenge yourself into those anxieties that you feel and that's your growth space.

So sometimes when we feel exhausted, we say it's just like training with heavy weights. Let's stick between 8 and 10 because we don't want to just stay in one place, we want to grow. That's what I think about when you were talking about how it does get hard. Those anxieties are just saying that this is something new. It's giving us butterflies. But that's our growth space.

Q: I really loved the story you shared from your mentor talking about how the stars of the big dipper share what's happening for the salmon in the Strait. If you magically had extra time and energy is there anything you'd like to do with teachings like that?

Yes. Because I've heard a lot of stories, lots of *SXĪÁM*, about people that were out in the ocean that knew the tides well, I would like to spend more time on the water. I'm fortunate I get to spend a lot of time on the land with our students because it's an outdoor education program, but I feel like I've heard a lot of stories that you need to be out on the water to really understand the way that the ocean moves. We've heard stories about our grandparents and their parents waiting for the right tide. You could jump on the right tide, and it would bring you down to Lummi [Island]. Sometimes they would even wait until the middle of the night to jump on the right tide, so they weren't fighting the tide.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



There's a whole realm of language there too. With my Uncle I have a bunch of recordings of him talking about the different language for different kinds of tides. Now I have them down on paper but if I was on the water, I don't know if I could put that SENĆOŦEN word to that tide. I want to actually go out into the water and live it and put the language to those different tides and the star constellations the way the sky moves. I know it on paper, but I haven't actually lived it and spent a whole bunch of time there. If I had some kind of magical power or more time like you said that's what I would do is because I really feel bad that yes, I have this language that's been taught to me, but you need to live some of those scenarios. For us saltwater people, we have a bunch of different language about the intertidal zone and being out in the water and I would spend more time doing that.

Q: You mentioned how you go between plateauing and then realizing there's so much more to learn and then feeling like you've plateaued again. How do you transition between feeling plateaued and then finding more things that you want to be working on and learning?

That's a good question. I don't know if you've ever read [Bringing our languages home by Leanne Hinton](#), but she's reached out to many different people that have tried to bring language into their home to hear their own stories, their own process of trying to put language into their home. One of the stories, one of the authors, says that he tried to say everything in his language first before English, even if the listener didn't understand his language, because then he could figure out what he knew how to say in his language, and what he didn't know how to say.

So when I'm going into a new realm or a new language domain, trying to use my language and then finding out what I don't know how to say, if I don't know how to say it, I'll think about what are my resources that I have to help me learn how to say that. Sometimes that has been really helpful. You find a new language domain and you don't even realize you don't know until you get there sometimes. It just sneaks up on you.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



Oh my goodness. I'm in this community and in a new place and I don't know how to talk about it at all. But trying to communicate in your language first before English or even just doing it in your head so you can figure out what it is that you don't you have.

Also, sometimes new resources will pop up that have a huge new realm of language and just studying them, spending time with them helps to grow. I think you just never really know. I think that I know I'm going to get by fine, that I know the language well and I'm doing good, then something happens. You're like "Nope. I have a long way to go."

I don't think it's ever really planned or that I've realized, "hey, I've plateaued. I need to move forward." It just kind of sneaks up on you. So, even though I'm so many years in - I'm 16-17 years learning language - I know that they're going to continuously come out in the next 20 years. I'm still going to be learning.

Q: On the flip side of plateaus - is there something you do to celebrate your progress in this never-ending journey of language learning?

One of the ways that we celebrate is at the end of the year, for our *LE, NONET SCUL, ÁUTW* students every year, we really throw a big party for all of them. The language learning that they're gaining through the immersion program, it brings us to happy tears so often over and over again. Whenever a little one is shy to use language and then they get out and they introduce themselves or one of them gets out and they can belt out a beautiful song and we celebrate them. Them speaking or singing and them being able to tell the story or to open an event, that's celebration for us. Every year we really build them up and acknowledge them for the hard work that they do. They have a really big job and us celebrating them is a lot of fun for us.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



We're going to have our first Grade 12 graduates next year and we're already planning that big party for them. By celebrating them, we're celebrating everything that we've gained over the last 20 years. You know, it's been a long road to their Grade 12 graduation, the first cohort graduate graduating. So that's I think how we celebrate.

Q: How did you first take the leap and overcome? I'm feeling with my own language loss with my family, who speak Arabic, that I have no one to speak with anymore. I do have family members that I could approach and I feel shame or embarrassment for not knowing anything or enough. What is that first step like? How do I just jump in and find the courage to try to be a part of it again?

That's a really good question. I really had a big need for it in my life. I really did ache for it as a teenager, I realize now that I'm older, looking back, that it was making me really emotional because I wanted the language, and it was hard for me to think about the ways that it was taken away. My grandparents went to Residential School and hearing those stories made me really emotional. There was sadness and there was anger.

But you know, realizing how much my Elders wanted the language for us, they guided us towards the language. I remember just feeling for a year or two the language just balled up right here in my throat. I felt like I couldn't get it out and every time I tried to talk, it would give me a little bit of anxiety because I didn't want to say it wrong.

Learning languages as an adult, it's that way. I don't want to say this wrong and I don't want anybody to make fun of me because these sounds are very different from the language that I'm using now. It wasn't something that happened really quick. I could say all small words, but then to string sentences together was hard for me.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



Like I said in the presentation, my teachers at the time were so gentle and encouraging with me. They understood that I was speaking like a baby and guided me and helped me along the way and we celebrated a small celebration.

But I also had relatives that were in the same spot as me and I think that helped as well. There were six people that were hired at the same time, and we all had the same amount of language. We just encouraged each other to try, and we talked about the language attitude we carry. Knowing that it was sensitive since some people when they tried to speak, somebody made fun of them, and they didn't speak for 20 years after that because it really hurt them. So we talked about our language attitude that we're going to build each other up. Even if we're saying it wrong, we're going to say it anyway and really just had fun with it.

In the beginning, when we first start learning language, we decided that there are so few places where we can go to be away from English that we would go into the Islands, and we would camp together for a week and say "no English at all." We had to get away from English, we had to just cut it off so we could focus on our language. We'd go out into the Islands with our Elder speakers and the six of us young ones. Some of them, some of my cousins, already had young families. We'd go out into the islands, camp, do activities together in the language and create a little language bubble for ourselves. That really worked. When I talk about not letting English in, it is because English can take over really quick. So sometimes we're out in the Islands camping and there'd be hikers that would come through and they were trying to speak English to us. They knew that we could speak English, but we didn't respond to them in English. It was frustrating for them, but we'd continuously just respond in the language because we didn't want to let any English in. We had to step away from it. We had to get away from English and that's how we did it.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE



So talking about that language attitude with our language family that we're working together was really important. What is our goal? We want to be able to speak and let's not wait until we're perfect. Let's do it now. Let's just use the language that we know and our Elders at the time would say that too. *ĆOŁES Ć EN,STOLNEW* 'Use what you have'. If you know how to say 5 words, don't use those words in English, use them in the language. You only know 10 words? Use those 10 words. If you know them in *SENĆOŦEN*, there's no excuse, don't use it in English. Use it in the language. It's *ĆOŁES Ć EN,STOLNEW* 'Use what you know'.

That's what we talked about in the early years but I understand that feeling, and sometimes it's just time. We were always guided towards praying in the language. Giving thanks for all of the gifts that *XÁLS* has given us here. Praying, talking to *XÁLS* and giving thanks for the trees and the medicines and the birds and the fish. We always were guided towards praying and that's where we started as well, speaking in our prayers. Like I said, going up to the mountains and speaking to the trees and the medicines. If we're not comfortable speaking to anybody else to speak to the trees first. So those are some of the things that we did in the earlier times.

COMMITTED TO THE REVITALIZATION OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES, ARTS, CULTURES AND HERITAGE