

# Teaching Reading Through Culture

## **Historical Context of Reading in Alaska:**

Learning the mechanics of reading is an extremely important life skill. Alaska has some of the lowest reading scores in the country and a correspondingly large achievement gap. Significant factors that contribute to our literacy situation includes lack of access to reading materials and historical trauma. Access to books is a problem for many families, especially those living in small, multi-generational homes. There is often insufficient space for adequately storing bulky fragile items, like books. Limited availability of culturally relevant reading materials compounds these literacy barriers for many students.

Historical trauma is woven through many aspects of the literacy landscape in Alaska. It manifests itself in different ways, such as modeling reading behavior, valuing literacy, and identity. The federal termination era followed by the boarding school era forced English-only learning in Alaska. This created a deep-seated resentment and hostility towards English based learning, especially reading. For many Alaska Native people, the topic of reading conjures painful memories and serves as an emblem of language loss and forced assimilation. As a result, many communities place a different value on reading and some see it as a form of betrayal, if a person is good at reading or speaking in English.

Alaska Native peoples are predominantly oral societies. Prior to contact, there was no widespread writing system; orthographies for each language were mostly developed and refined during the last forty years, with varying amounts of input from the Alaska Native language communities themselves. There is still debate within the language families as to whether language should be taught through writing because it is not “our” way. This is perhaps the biggest obstacle that affects literacy in Alaska, but it also provides an equally significant avenue and means by which to create positive change.

There are substantial linguistic differences between the English language and Alaska Native languages that affect how and when to teach and evaluate student literacy skill sets. There is a need to create and promote a culturally accurate scope and sequence for teaching literacy that is developed specifically by and for Alaska Native languages. This would answer the question, ‘What does it look like to read at a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level in an Alaska Native language?’

## **What is language? Where does language come from?**

Language is inherently rooted in space and place. Math, physics, and the arts all have their own “dialect languages” that operate in their respective disciplines. Landscape or place also shapes language. Language is a way of communicating between at least two entities. It is an expression of a way of thinking, viewing, and experiencing the surrounding world. Humans are greatly skilled at learning and creating languages. Languages provide a way for us to be able to communicate with each other and categorize our surrounding world to create understanding.

Language can be written, spoken, numerical, symbols, music, dance, visual and more. All with sub-categories. Language is not static, it evolves, moves, and changes through time. Language gives us a way to code and de-code our experiences as we move through life.

### **Written and Spoken Language and Literacy:**

Each language has its own set of rules. In written and spoken language we call this grammar. When we hear a sentence that sounds a little off or not quite right often it is because the underlying mutually understood grammar rules are not being followed.

Some categories that languages are divided into include Analytic/Isolating, Synthetic (inflecting), Polysynthetic, Agglutinating, and Fusional. English is partially an analytic, inflecting, and agglutinating language with shallow highly free morphology, and a complex deep orthography. This allows for English learner speakers to be understood even when they don't speak with correct grammar when learning to speak. However, it creates a high degree of difficulty for learners who try to learn to read and write. English is noun based.

In contrast Alaska Native languages are polysynthetic, with shallow orthography, and varying degrees of complex highly bound morphology. This makes the mechanics of learning to read easier than English, but they provide a higher degree of difficulty in gaining comprehension because context is so important. Alaska Native languages are relational in nature and are more verb based.

Understanding that language is more than just spoken or written words combined with an understanding of the contrasts and comparisons between Alaska Native languages and English we can approach education from a multi-lingual learning approach. Education is fundamentally teaching students to code and decode information in different contexts. Teaching multi-literacy helps students learn to observe new systems and other discipline specific jargon.

### **Words and Morphemes:**

Perhaps the largest difference between English and Alaska Native languages is the use of morphemes and words. Words have two components to their definition. Words reflect linguistically analyzed units and in writing are separated by a space on either side. Morphemes are different than words in that they are the smallest meaningful units of language, they can be alone or partnered and are affixes. Words are made up of at least one or more morphemes.

English words generally are formed from relatively few parts of speech. Each word can be thought of as a part of speech such as an adverb, noun, verb and adjective. English requires at least two words to make a sentence, subject and verb. A learner really only needs to know these two pieces of information in order to make a sentence. Also, because English words are independent, they are easy to isolate out of context and still understand what they mean.

In contrast Alaskan Native languages can have a single word be a complete sentence because the words are made up of multiple morphemes that are different parts of speech all in one word.

### **Bi-literacy: Improving Reading Outcomes**

One of the most profound forms of identity for students and communities is Language. Students perform better when they see themselves reflected in their educational environment. Language can become a powerful tool for promoting and fostering healthy identity and using that strength to build better reading outcomes for students.

English is relatively easy language to learn to speak because of the flexible syntax structure and simple morphology. However, English is one of the most difficult languages to learn to read and write in because of the complex opaque orthography. In contrast to English, Alaska Native languages have extremely shallow orthographies, but their morphology is more complex. Alaska's linguistic landscape creates the perfect environment to use bi-literacy reading strategies to improve student learning outcomes. By using a bi-literacy approach to teaching reading, students have a wider range of tools at their disposal to use when learning how to read. Using this research-based approach for learning to read fosters higher levels of English reading proficiency by starting with a target non-English language.

Learning phonics is easily taught in Alaska Native languages and is also critical to teach early on in human develop so that students are primed for developing an "ear" for non-English sounds. Teaching phonemic awareness skill development through Alaska Native languages serves as a rapid jumping off point for learning to spell and read text because these languages have shallow orthographies. These two key learning objectives are more rapidly acquired in Alaska Native target languages. As a result students can more quickly advance to other reading skills like fluency, comprehension, along with learning through techniques like orthographic mapping.

Alaska Native languages are primed for teaching orthographic mapping. Most words are comprised of bound morphemes so naturally mapping out the words is a key part of teaching comprehension. Because students can more quickly get to this stage of learning they have more time to master this more difficult component of learning to read.

Learning a second language provides the underling opportunity for learning by mirroring. An English first language student learns more about how the English language functions by having to translate and learn a new thought system expressed through non-English grammar. Fostering this metacognition is one of the key components for why bi-literacy is effective. Students are equipped to express their thoughts and learn to communicate more effectively when they have to think about how they would express themselves in another language. They also may find that they have words in one language for a concept or feeling that do not exist in a direct translation in English, but the bi-literacy approach allows students to articulate what

they are feeling more effectively because they have greater access to expressing themselves. This can result in lowered behavioral issues and less classroom disruptions.

### **The Science of Reading Defined:**

The Science of Reading is an ongoing field of study that examines the last fifty years of research to determine the most effective way to teach reading. A scientific approach to reading instruction includes explicit, systematic, instruction in phonological awareness (sounds), phonics, fluency (ability to read accurately and at an appropriate rate), vocabulary, and comprehension.

**Alaska Native Language Reading use evidence-based reading practices and employee science of reading principles.** (Phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension)

**Phonemic Awareness:** *(Language is made up of sounds. These sounds can be analyzed as whole units of sound and isolated speech sounds.)*

AK Native language words are made up of many smaller morphemes. An example of an Indigenous way of teaching phonemes is the use of vocables in songs. Some of the distinctions between the languages include: the use of tone, use of glottal stops as a consonant, and additional sounds that are not made in English.

**Phonics:** *(Letters correspond to sounds, letters have names)*

Alaska Native Language use letters and graphemes to write words. The various languages across the state have different orthographies that are used to write each language. Not all languages have an orthography that is universally used by all linguists and every Tribal group in that language family, however each language does have its own writing system. The authority to set the writing system resides with the Indigenous people who speak that language.

It is important to note that Alaska Native languages may use the letters and graphemes interchangeable as terms by users of the language. In order to keep a relatively standard typing convention Alaska Native languages will frequently use double letter graphemes to express a single phoneme. Part of this function is that these graphemes have morphological meaning as well. These letters and graphemes do have names although each language family might title their graphemes with different names.

**Vocabulary:** *(words or unit of speech/writing that carry whole meaning, inventory of the language)*

English vocabulary is often thought about within the context of knowing words. For Alaska Native languages vocabulary can be measured in or thought about as the knowledge of whole words but also the individual morphemes. This is one of the differences or considerations that must be accounted for when looking at polysynthetic languages that depend heavily on contextualized morphology.

**Fluency:** *(The rate of reading taking into account accuracy)*

Fluency is considered the speed or rate at which the text can be read out loud taking into account the amount of accuracy or errors that are generated in reading out loud. This is no different in Alaska Native languages than it is in English.

**Comprehension:** *(understanding the text)*

Comprehension is something that can seem straight forward for measuring, students either know it or they don't. However, there is a range of comprehension that students can demonstrate. They may understand parts of a word, sentence, or passage. This could be considered partial comprehension. It serves as a gauge to learn what the student has command over and what they may further assistance with learning.

Often comprehension is related to reading grade levels, considering what a student should be able to understand in each grade. How comprehension is measured in Alaska Native languages looks different than English. Because Alaska Native languages words are frequently the equivalent to a whole English sentence. Evaluating difficulty or skill level and partial comprehension has to be established for each language.

**\*Writing Systems:** *Alaska Native languages do not all have set orthographies; some are still actively being refined. This includes rules for word divisions, spelling conventions especially relating to vowels, punctuation rules, and capitalization conventions. In practice, letters and graphemes are used to represent alphabets. This results in more "letters" in Alaska Native alphabets than English in some of the languages.*