

Revitalizing the Michif Language

Erin's Story

Erin Laliberte was thrilled when she landed a job in her home community of Île-à-la-Crosse immediately after receiving her teaching degree. Île-à-la-Crosse is the second oldest community in Saskatchewan, established as a trading post during the fur trade. Historically, most of the community spoke Michif, a mix of Cree and French, with some English. While the community continues to pride itself on its rich culture and heritage, each generation has been seeing a steady decline in the number of fluent Michif speakers. Laliberte is one of six Michif teachers at Rossignol Elementary Community School determined to change that. Together, they're working to revitalize the Michif language with the school's 240 PreK-6 students. They're using an accelerated oral instruction method to teach, which helps students learn and retain the language more quickly. She and the other teachers are hopeful their efforts to revive the language will start with these young people and spread throughout the community.

[View Erin's #theteacherproject video.](#)

Read more about Erin's passion for Michif and what she and the other teachers are doing to revitalize the language at their school.

1. Why are you so passionate about revitalizing the Michif language and how did you become a Michif teacher?

We don't have as many Michif speakers as we used to in the past. That's why we're working so hard to revitalize the language in our community and school. There are lots of people who don't think this is possible. They think learning needs to start at home, not at school. But when I teach Michif to my kindergarten students, they're taking it home and teaching their parents. That's pretty exciting so I don't think it's impossible.

I had applied for a job in a number of places and just happened to graduate at the same time someone was on a maternity leave here. I graduated on a Saturday, moved back home on Sunday and started teaching that Monday. I was happy to be back home because this is where I wanted to be. When I first started, they asked me if I understood the language and if I could speak it. I told them I wasn't a fluent speaker, but that I understood it enough to teach.

This is my 15th year teaching now. I really started getting serious about the language about 10 years ago, and then even more so when I was taking my masters in curriculum and instruction at NORTEP in 2012 through the University of Regina. I always knew language was important, but it wasn't until I started researching languages that I realized how passionate I am. Up until then, I was one of those people who thought revitalizing the language was impossible. But through my research, I learned there are many cultures that have been able to successfully revitalize their language. If we work hard in our community, we can do it too.

2. Tell me about Rossignol and the Michif program.

We have an Elder who works at the school. We do a lot of cultural activities, which is very interesting for the students. It opens their minds to new things. We have a Cultural Week at the beginning of the school year. We put up one of those big, white canvas prospector tents down by the lake. Each class has a designated time to be outside. We do bannock on a stick. We get to sit with the Elders and have tea. We also do cultural activities in the school. We have community people that come teach the students things, like beading or jigging. We also have our Michif Festival in our school gym every March. Each class performs. It could be a song, a dance or a poem in Michif. This year, someone's doing a Michif game show. We usually get a lot of parents who come watch because they're so proud that their child is able to do all these things in Michif.

When I started teaching, we didn't have a Michif program. I was teaching Grade 7 and taught my own Michif. Now, I teach Michif to kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 6. My homeroom is kindergarten. We have some teachers who don't speak Michif, so the teachers will switch off to cover each other. I'll go teach Michif in their class and they come teach another subject in my class.

In kindergarten and Grade 1, we focus on words and terms, not too many sentences. We do a lot of actions. I'm trying to get them to remember that nâpêw is a man and iskwêw is a woman. We do a lot of songs and nursery rhymes, like Jack ekwa Jill (Jack and Jill). I teach it in Michif and try not to translate it into English because I want them to make the connection between the words. In Grade 6, we focus more on phrases and sentences, conversations and some writing.

This year, we have three or four teachers who are teaching Michif to their own classes for the first time. They understand the language but they've never taught it before. It's a test run to see how comfortable they are. We've got three fluent speakers, four, if you count me. In total, we have seven Michif teachers.

At the beginning of the year, we're given our assignments and we find out which classes we will be teaching. The Michif teachers get together with the non-Michif teachers at the beginning of the year to create a plan for switching classes that works with everyone's schedules; we teach Michif in their class and they teach our class a different subject. This year, we've been having more meetings because we're revamping our program. We have a Michif consultant; she's a retired teacher from our school and a fluent Michif speaker. When she comes in next, we're going to create assessments and rubrics for each grade level to make grading easier.

3. Why do you focus on teaching Michif orally?

The program we use follows the [Dr. Greymorning Accelerated Second Language Acquisition](#) method. Dr. Neyooxet Greymorning is an Arapaho Elder and a Professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies at the University of Montana. He doesn't do many workshops but the Lac La Ronge Indian Band invited him in a few years ago, and a few teachers from Île-à-la-Crosse went. He teaches people who have never spoken a language before, at an accelerated pace. And he does it all orally. Last April, I attended a workshop with him in Saskatoon hosted by the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. It was so good. In the workshop, someone asked him, "Why do you focus on oral? What's wrong with writing?" He said that once people understand the pronunciation key and what each macron and symbol means, he can teach people to write in a half-hour. For my Grade 6 students, when they want to write, I teach them the pronunciation key for our Michif language. I show them that a macron over an î makes an "ee" sound. We don't use all the letters in the alphabet. Speaking orally is still the main focus. That's how they'll learn, by speaking it and continuing to speak it.

4. What are some of the biggest challenges in teaching Michif and how do you overcome these?

I don't consider myself to be fluent. When I started, I worried that I shouldn't be teaching this, that I wouldn't do it justice. I didn't feel confident. I almost quit because I didn't want to do a disservice to my students. But I always tell my students, "If you don't know something, ask. If I don't know it, we'll learn together." Even though I'm a teacher, I'm still learning myself. I learn something new about Michif all the time. The students are teaching me as much as I'm teaching them. And they think it's pretty cool that we can learn together.

Another challenge is that there aren't enough parents who can speak the language at home, so students are only hearing it at school. That's why it's so exciting for the kindergarten students to learn the language. They take it home and teach their moms, dads and grandparents. As the students get older, it gets harder to engage them in the language and the culture. We've been coming up with different ways to keep them interested. For example, we've been putting a lot of videos up on the Rossignol Elementary Community School Facebook page.

It was really tough when I started. There weren't a lot of resources. The lack of resources was one of the reasons I didn't feel confident. We have a Michif dictionary our high school principal created. I also use Cree dictionaries and apps online. And when I was doing my Masters, I created a lot of my own resources which I'm willing to share with other teachers, they can email me at elaliberte@icsd.ca.

5. What does success look like for you?

I feel so accomplished when I see the students retain what they're learning. My kindergarteners and Grade 1's make me so proud. With the Grade 6's, they're at that age where it's harder to keep them interested. It's a struggle to get them excited. But when I do something fun and they retain the information, it makes me feel so accomplished, like I'm doing something right. We play Michif bingo. When we do it, I don't show them the picture card. The students were upset with me the first time we played because they expected me to show them the cards and explain it. I told them, "No. I'll say it in Michif. You have to find it on your card. You have to listen." They'd have to decode what I was saying. It made me feel so good to see that the kids I didn't think were getting it, were the ones helping other students. I love seeing them high five each other and smile when they get it. It makes me really happy.

6. What does it mean to your grandparents and the Elders in the community that there are younger generations working to preserve the language?

My Moshôm is my teacher. He's pretty excited and happy about all this. He speaks Michif to me all the time. When I don't understand, he explains. My mom helps me a lot too. The Elders are so excited and helpful. Ruby, our Michif consultant this year, she'll do whatever it takes to help the Michif teachers. My personal opinion is that language is so important. To preserve our culture, our way of life and our heritage as Métis, Cree or Dene people, language is part of that. It's part of your identity. When you lose your language, you lose your stories. I'm going to do my best to do whatever I can to revitalize the language and preserve our culture.