



Nehirowitewin ~ Pedagogical guide

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Nehirowitewin (of *nehiro*, that signifies 'amérindien' and *itewin*, which means 'word'), is a series of language activities in the language of atikamekw for children four years of age and that their mother tongue is atikamekw** and who also live in an urban context. But these activities should also be pertinent in the context of the communities.

* The term «program» is synonymous with the structured activities here, nothing more.

** Note on the term NEHIROWIMOWIN

In the remainder of this text, we will use the term *nehirowimowin* more than qu'*atikamekw*. Those in French or in English are formally called *Atikamekws* who refer to themselves in their own language as *Nehirowimowina*. In a language program, it makes sense to focus on the terms used by the speakers themselves.

Nehirowimowin : Prononce as nehiro-wi-mwin

Nehirowimowina plural: Prononce as nehiro-wim-wina

To facilitate the reading, we write nehiro.wimowin and nehiro.witewin with the point to distinguish the two parts of the words.

• Objectives

The general objective is to develop the vocabulary and oral language capacities of four year old children in nehiro.wimowin.

- 1 To acquire or consolidate basic vocabulary of about 350 words presented in the context of a narrative and included in structured activities.
- 2 Develop the understanding of stories about the life of the child, the characters and the animals in the nehiro.wimowin culture.
- 3 Stimulate metaphonological capacity (recognition of speech sounds) taking into account the possibilities inherent at this age.

• Overview of the content

There are seven activity blocks, centered on a story:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Maskocic | Bear |
| • Notcinaniwon | The Picnic |
| • Awesisa opimetak | The Animals on the Wall |
| • Ka wisinakositcik irinicik | The Strange People |
| • Pakatamowok awesisak | The Animals are Thirsty |
| • Cockwatahawikamikw | At the Skating Rink |
| • Wapococak kirika mahikan | The Wolf and the Baby Rabbits |

Supporting Materials:

Each story comes with illustrations; and we can find puppet patterns that may be assembled alone on Premier Pas Childcare Centre's website (www.cpepremierpas.com). The website also contains an audio version in nehiro.wimowin that is accompanied by animations and text describing the story. Speakers who do not read or only partially read some of the language can also still follow.

Contents of an activity block		
Vocabulary list of the story classified by conceptuel categories	STORY + Illustrations + Puppets + Oral recordings and web animations	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension questions • Free recall 	
	Pre-Narrative activity LEXICAL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ryhmes • Lexical routines 	Extension activities METAPHONOLOGICAL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabacation • Metamorphological routine • Phonological games

The Vocabulary

At the beginning of each block is a list of the vocabulary for the story. Words have linguistic aspects and conceptual content. Without vocabulary, not only do we not understand the language, but we do not acquire the corresponding concepts, vocabulary allows us to name things, but also to organize the world around us. To highlight the conceptual aspect of learning lexical words, they are grouped into semantic categories; terms of movement, position, action, location, etc.

All blocks contain rhymes and lexical routines that review the thematic vocabulary. The difference between the two is that the routines especially exploit the semantic oppositions (ex: to get up – to go to bed) since the rhymes do not have this constraint.

Pre-Narrative – Story Narration – Extension

The story itself is accompanied by illustrations and puppets. This is followed by a list of questions to which the educator can draw on to check the understanding and to stimulate recall episodes of the story, with the help of the illustrations.

Besides the story, each block has a pre-narrative, ex: a communication activity that serves as preparation for the story with one aspect of the theme that introduces some keywords, and one that extends the operation of the theme and vocabulary.

The Metalinguistic

At four years of age, the so-called metalinguistic skills begin to develop. Meta means «beyond» and is used in the sense of 'general abstraction'. Metalinguistic skills refer to the general capacities that are at the base of the competency to understand and produce language, first and foremost the ability to distinguish the sounds of the language. (This ability is a prerequisite for further learning the essentials of code writing.)

Two types of exercises are used for the discrimination of the sound units:

- The syllabication or the way we say a word by separating the syllables.
Ex. : ne-hi-ro-wi-te-win

In a language such as nehiro.wimowin where the words can be long, this exercise is clearly indicated.

The phonological game; which consists of various tasks of perception or manipulation (different from one block to another).

- Ex. :
- find the hidden sounds in the words,
 - add a syllable in front of a word,
 - add a syllable after a word,
 - words that are the same or not the same
(here we use imaginary words so that the task is really about the sound, not the meaning, as would be the case with real words)

Within the metalinguistic plan some blocks contain a certain exercise called the 'morphological routine', which draws attention to systematic variations in words in relation to their meaning, for example, the opposition between a regular shaped masko (bear) and his diminutive maskocic (bear cub). Understanding of this opposition is based on the ability to distinguish the two forms.

• The linguistic situation of the nehirowimowina in an urban setting

The Children

The large majority of nehiro.wimowina children who attend Premier Pas childcare centre in La Tuque (in 2012) come from families who still speak the language. We do not know to what extent it is actually spoken at home and used with their children. However, until proven otherwise, the nehiro.wimowin language can be considered as their mother tongue, but acquired in the context of a bilingual French-native Atikamekw. Living in a francophone environment, children learn both languages at the same time with a greater tendency towards the French language because of their context. For example, the Premier Pas Childcare Centre for which the program was developed operates in French. This suggests that for many of these children, nehiro.wimowin is halfway between their mother tongue and a second language.

This is essentially the same situation in other urban centers where we find groups of nehirowimowina families in areas such as Joliette, St-Félicien and Roberval.

As a matter of fact, in communities such as (Wemotaci, Manawan Opitciwan) nehirowimowin is still the language of everyday use. Young children are truly nehirowimowino-speaking natives. But bilingualism is French-nehirowimowin increasingly, especially amongst teenagers.

The Adults

The large majority of Nehiro.wimowina adults that live in the city are born and grow up in the community (although the number of young adults who grew up in the city is increasing). They are therefore the speakers of the language. Amongst those who have done part of their schooling in nehirowimowin know how to read and write in their own language, the others do not. Therefore, a number of parents can read in nehirowimowin.

The educators in the child care centre

The childcare educators are not all familiar with the written form of their language. Not only is the written body quite small in nehirowimowin, but until now there is very little educational material in this language at the preschool level.

The activities of Nehiro.wimowin have been designed taking into account this situation. So the communication activities suggested are very small scenarios that are literally given to the educator with the instructions and the comments to say or the questions to ask so that these descriptions also serve as the linguistic model. This language tool should give them the necessary confidence to carry out activities without having to search for their words and - what is really important - is to enjoy them. They can then elaborate on others themselves.

• The spirit of the program

Play

Pre-school is not school and should not become one. Everything that is suggested in the program must be done in a fun way, including the metalinguistic exercises. For example, the syllabification is a rhythming game: we could have a big parade and fun syllable movements!

This is not because the exercise will be repeated later on in a school context that the school should have the monopoly of syllabification.

The Pool of the nehirowimowin

Since most of the activities are accompanied by movements or gestures, basically we could execute them by limiting the parts on the language. But Nehiro.wimowin is a stimulating verbal program. The way to achieve the objectives of the program is to expose the child to a pool of language (at least during the course of the activities). This is especially important for children living in a Francophone setting. In a bilingual context, a child that possesses the vocabulary in their language could then translate it into their second language.

Therefore we need to maximize the use of the language, do not hesitate, for example; to verbally describe what is being done, even if it goes against our habits in real life.

Movement and Repetition

The language activities will only be effective if the child's attention focuses on what is being said. In practice, this is achieved by the frequent use of gestures and repetition.

The association between gestures, words and phrases is a powerful learning tool under the old pedagogical principle that we learn with all of our senses. This principle was recently illustrated in an unprecedented way by the appearance of a second methodological language that was spectacular and apparently effective, it was based on the systematic association between movements or gestures and statements that we express to the point that it may sometimes evoke sessions of rhythmic gymnastics; it works even for adults. It is suggested to anchor the memory of language in the memory of the body. It reinforces the neural circuits for language, by basically amplifying traces (and more than articulation).

The gestures are all the more important here, for some children; nehirowimowin probably tends to become a second language rather than their mother tongue. If the activities are not animated by the gestures and movements suggested, they may not achieve their full learning potential. They may also appear to be too difficult.

Repetition is part of this dynamic. Certainly, we do not learn a language by repeating and memorizing phrases (and we do not become musicians by simply doing all of the ranges), but by listening and by conversational exchanges – to which are added, school age, reading and writing. However, we can memorize rhymes, repeating verbal instructions and routines (Ex : *I get up, I clap my hands, I lift my arms, I lift my leg, and I sit down*). Repetition directs and maintains the attention of the child, developing the auditory memory and it is also an exercise in articulation and language production.

Experiments

We wanted to provide abundant of material, both to diversify and to show how far interventions can be pushed to exploit themes and vocabulary. The educator will determine the quantity and duration of the activities suggested and it is not obliged to do what is proposed in the pre-narrative phase, the extension phase or cover the entire vocabulary.

Therefore, before concluding that such activity is too long, too difficult or uninteresting, it would be good to try it at least once, making sure to be well prepared, even if the activity was not all optimal. Sometimes we have surprises. Even at four years of age, children can follow a structured activity very well and overcome learning challenges: if everything is too easy, the interest disappears. The preoccupation for children with developmental delays should not penalize those who can learn faster. However, those who know and learn faster can have a positive ripple effect on others.

• The nature of the activities and the principles of learning

Why Stories?

The language activities are structured around interests and consist of stories. A story is a type of discourse characterized by the presence of a narrative (progression in time), often accompanied by a simple plot. Events occur and succeed based on this plot, according to a temporal order. For children 3 to 6 years of age, understanding the logic of events is a cognitive challenge: the temporal organization of a narrative is not «spontaneous.»

[This is demonstrated by the classical task of listening to a story and then classifying a series of images depicting the events of the story in chronological order: for children this age, this presents a challenge.]

The understanding of the stories is the result of a mental construct based on linguistic knowledge of words (and sentences) and on the cognitive ability to pay attention, to establish links between logical and chronological, to remember the events and to use their referential knowledge, ex: the ability to understand, organize and retain information and associate them with their own life experience. This is why stories are stimulating.

With the biological maturation of the brain, cognitive abilities evolve by themselves, to some extent, and the understanding of stories as well. But the lexical richness and exposure to different sentence structures depends mainly on the sociolinguistic environment of the child, as the experience of things and situations are related to their living conditions. Stories are an excellent way to enhance the language skills and knowledge of life situations.

The Comprehension of Stories		
Linguistic Aspect	Cognitif Aspect	Affective Aspect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the vocabulary the sentences (provide contextual use of the words) verbal memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attention (attentive listening) logical and temporal links memory of events referential knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identification of the characters emotions and feelings about events told

The Illustrations

The illustrations have a support role, to realize the places and characters but the story remains the central point. The educator should not simply rely on the images to make the story interesting. She must animate the narration.

The Comprehension Questions

The suggested questions at the end of each story are there to feed the educator and to help the children to remember. This is why there is a task reminder. We should not expect that all children respond to everything, far from that. They will retain the outline of the story, not the details.

The questions serve as a starting point in a conversation, bringing the children on to the grounds of their actual lives, their feelings and their expressions, which may also benefit children with language skills that are still too reduced to be expressed. They will learn by listening.

The Spontaneous Recall

With the aid of illustrations, we try to tell the story to children as spontaneously as possible, only giving them minimal clues to get started, when they seem stuck. This step will probably give better results if it is done after directed questioning, but it is not a rule, it is for the educator to experiment. This is an opportunity to have children freely verbalize. Some can even recite or paraphrase the story by heart.

Preparation and Extension Activities

So that stories influence language and conceptual intelligence, we must first understand. A story that we would not even know half the words, for example, would not have a large impact learning. Given the history of Nehiro.witewin it contains 40 to 60 important words, you have to make sure that the children already know at least some prior to the narrative, or the pre-narrative.

To hear a word once is not enough to retain it or even fully understand the purpose: it must be exposed several times and ideally in several linguistic contexts. The pre-narrative, history and extension provide the child with the opportunity to learn vocabulary in different verbal contexts.

The pre-narrative and the extension of the story differ in that they are communication activities: skits, word games, simulations. The educator continually seeks the participation of the child, verbally and physically.

Preparation and extension activities are complete by themselves. Their main justification is that they allow for learning, so that even without the story, they would not be less interesting. But the link with the story allows fuller exploitation of linguistic material and enrichment topics. For example, in MASKOCIC (The Bear), pre-narrative works on three sub-themes:

- 1 play together
- 2 to move, do movements
- 3 solitude, and extension
- 4 counting (the number of animals).

Note that this is not a good idea to use the illustrations that accompanies the stories with the preparatory activities. This ruins the element of surprise and the discoveries that the story must inspire. This also reveals that the pre-narrative was not sufficiently prepared, because there are distinct materials and animation suggestions that are planned for this phase. Educators should really mentally vision how they will conduct their animation

Metalinguistic Capacity

As we have mentioned, the metalinguistic ability appears at 4 years of age. The metaphonological exercises are designed to stimulate this ability. They focus on the cutting and handling of syllables, because it is the first level where this ability manifests: distinguishing three syllables is easier to distinguish at the beginning than distinguishing the fact that a word can be formed with three different sounds.

Since we realized that children who have difficulty learning to decode - and therefore reading, are precisely those who discriminate sounds in language poorly, we attach great importance to the metaphonological development. The period between 4-5 years of age is conducive to the stimulation.

In Nehiro.witewin, at the beginning we should not expect that children succeed with these exercises, if only partially. But they will learn by listening and repeating them systematically. The educator should not give up. But as this program is still in an experimental stage, we do not know how fast it will happen with our children.

In the exercises identified as «morphology», these activities are based on a similar principle: the recognition of the elements of a word, but this time in terms of the meaning (see examples above). It would be important to practice to better distinguish or differentiate - intuitively - what varies in a word. This process is natural and if it did not exist, children would never learn language. What we do here is to stimulate the natural ability to be directed towards specific language targets.

The role of the parents

The parents can support the work of the educators with Nehoro.witewin by listening and viewing the stories on the Premier Pas childcare website and talking with him / her. They can also make the puppets which we can find the patterns (very simple) on the site to create moments of funny dialogue.

Suggestions for them will be added later, but they can already get a good idea of the program by reading the activities, equally on the site, they can obtain a better idea of what it means to actually stimulate and enrich the language of their child.