

Using Gesture to Teach Seneca in a Language Nest School

Melissa Elayne Borgia
Edinboro University

Seneca elder Sandy Dowdy and her granddaughter Autumn Crouse direct a language nest school for children aged two to five years in a small longhouse-shaped building, *Ganöhsesge:kha:' Hë:nödeyë:sta'*, or the Faithkeepers School, on the Seneca Allegany Territory in upstate New York. They practice immersion teaching and use forms of gesturing to teach the children both conversational and spiritual functions of Seneca, capitalizing on the belief that the use of gesturing is an effective tool for teaching children, especially those in the toddler range. Gesturing is useful because language and gesture are positively linked, signing links concepts to verbal learning, gesture helps aid memory, and incorporating gesture while learning a language encourages active learning. Gesturing also helps children learn complex concepts, which is ideal for teaching Seneca since the children are learning the *Ganö:nyök*, literally, 'let it be used for expressing thanks' and otherwise known as the Thanksgiving Address, a daily recitation that expresses thankfulness for all of creation.

1. INTRODUCTION. In terms of language endangerment in the United States and Alaska, of the approximately 300 Indigenous languages, only 175 are still spoken; 135 to 155 of those are moribund (Crawford 1996; McCarty 2008; Pease-Pretty On Top n.d.). Only 20 are still transmitted to children (Hornberger 1998). McCarty (2008) indicates that in 2000, 72 percent of Indigenous children under five years of age spoke only English at home. Although the statistics are dire, there is still cause for hope as some languages, such as Hawaiian, are making a comeback from endangerment. Often, the people who possess the fluency and cultural and historical knowledge are tribal elders: "To succeed, language renewal projects require not only good intentions but enormous practical efforts ... As a result, these projects must draw on cultural resources available on reservations, relying especially on elders, the true experts in these languages" (Crawford 1996: 8-9). Many Seneca people are currently struggling to preserve their heritage language. Although estimates vary, people who speak Seneca may number less than 50. On the eight-stage Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale to measure language endangerment developed by Joshua Fishman (1991), 1 represents the least endangered while 8 represents the most. Seneca may represent Stage 7, where nearly all fluent speakers are beyond childbearing age. A language in that position is seriously endangered.

In 2009, Seneca elder Sandy Dowdy began a Seneca language nest school with little more than sheer determination and the support of her husband, Dar. Some ten years earlier, the Dowdys co-founded *Ganöhsesge:kha' Hë:nödeyë:sta'*, or the Faithkeepers School, a private Seneca language and cultural survival school in upstate New York. The Dowdys were acutely aware that the Seneca language was facing endangerment while the culture and spiritual customs were also threatening to disappear, perhaps during their lifetimes.

During those foundational years starting in 1998, the school had undergone several changes in makeup, for example, from educating school-aged children to elders, but their

mission, stated on the school's website, stayed the same: "to re-establish our identity as traditional Allegany Senecas by preserving our language, culture, and customs as specified in our spiritual guide—the *Gaiwi:yo:h*".¹ Gradually, the Dowdys received various sources of support, but they had conducted much of the initial work themselves, receiving community support after establishing their initial endeavors. Before the era of the preschool language nest, children aged seven to 14 had attended the Dowdys' private school for several years, but many had decided to leave for the local public school district for different reasons, so the Dowdys struggled to maintain a steady school-aged student body.

Then Sandy Dowdy had an idea. She was inspired by the language nest method — teaching toddlers through immersion in a daycare setting — which was gaining ground in New Zealand and Hawai'i. Dowdy was a perfect candidate to run a nest: she had extensive training in early childhood education, experience running her own school, and she is arguably one of the youngest fluent speakers of Seneca. She began with only four three-year-olds. At times, she conducted the nest in her granddaughter's home instead of the Faithkeepers School, which was located over ten miles outside the city of Salamanca, due to transportation obstacles. She was able to get the support of a cook and cleaner, Reggie Redeye, to relieve herself from cooking lunch during the school day. As she reached her stride and stabilized a regular schedule, she moved the nest back to the Faithkeepers School, employing Redeye full-time and using the school van for transportation. Tragically, Dar Dowdy passed away in July of 2011, but despite that devastating loss, Sandy has been able to garner more support from the community for the nest.

For the 2011-12 school year, Dowdy and Crouse taught ten children in the nest. Five two- to three-year-olds always begin the day with breakfast. They learn to say an abbreviated version of the *Ganö:nyök*, or the Thanksgiving Address which offers thanks to the Creator for all living and spiritual things, in Seneca. They are given time for free play, and then they take part in structured immersion activities incorporating conversational language. At lunch time, they are joined by five four- to five-year-olds who are transported from other academic-based learning centers. Two of these children are Dowdy's great-granddaughters who have learned enough Seneca to model for the younger children by utilizing their prior knowledge of Seneca and capitalizing on their enthusiasm to teach and model for the younger children. In just two years, the nest has grown to include 18 children, with nine two-to three-year-olds and nine four-to five-year-olds. Since Dowdy has additional apprentice teachers, her role has changed from lead nest teacher to more of an elder master teacher for the apprentices, following Hinton's (2002) model.

This transition gave Dowdy time to realize one more dream: To learn American Sign Language and adapt it, using her own system of gestures as a means of enhancing the children's learning of Seneca. Again, Dowdy had inspiration from the popular 'baby signing' movement in early childhood education (cf. Doherty-Sneddon 2008).

2. RATIONALE FOR GESTURING. In the English-speaking population, although gesturing for language development in hearing children is often debated, there are several benefits that coincide with the challenges of teaching of an endangered language. Nicoladis, Mayberry, & Genesee note that gesture development "is tightly related to development

¹ *The good words*; message from the Creator to Handsome Lake (*Ganyodaiyo*'), which became the Code of Handsome Lake, or, rituals honoring the Creator.

in language” (1999: 524). Likewise, Goodwyn, Acredolo, & Brown claim that there is “strong evidence that symbolic gesturing does not hamper verbal development and may even facilitate it” (2000: 81).

Gesturing in a preschool setting offers many relevant advantages for Dowdy’s nest environment. Since Dowdy is teaching Seneca as a second language, she wants to decrease dependence on English. Using gestures helps to eliminate much translation into English. Aiming for total immersion is encouraged by Hinton, who advises speaking in the endangered language as much as possible:

If parents try to do something like spend “equal time” on the two languages, it is the endangered language that will suffer, for unlike the mainstream language, the endangered language receives little or no reinforcement outside the home. Since children do a great deal of language learning outside the home, the parents, if their goal is bilingualism for their children, should spend relatively little time on the language that is dominant in the general environment and concentrate instead on speaking in the endangered language ... if the parent is fluent, then that must be the language of communication between the parent and child, either at all times or during a significant amount of time ... for a person in danger of dying, the first job of medics is to get the heart beating again. For an endangered language, the first job is to get the native speakers speaking it again. (2001:13)

Gestures help to avoid translation into English, and serve as a scaffolding tool linking conceptual learning to verbal learning, with the possible results that “misconceptions are corrected, concepts are honed, and everything is set for the verbal equivalent to slip right in as a label when it does become available. Without symbolic gestures, much of this conceptual work would be delayed, thus slowing down the whole language learning enterprise” (Goodwyn, Acredolo, & Brown, 2000: 100).

Dowdy certainly understands these advantages. In her estimation, using gestures for Seneca learning “helps the children to internalize concepts of naming items or even using it for actions so that we can help them understand what we’re wanting to make them do, or what we’re asking them.” Crouse has noted that the children seem to really like using gestures. She observes, “They really enjoy imitating and doing the movements of sign language, too, which is kind of cool, kind of keeps them intrigued in what we’re talking about. It’s a way to keep them participating.”

Since these children are new learners for the most part, they are expanding their Seneca vocabularies quite rapidly, gradually building on previously-mastered concepts to increase their communicative repertoire. Combining this rapid learning with gesture may increase the children’s memory for the new vocabulary. “Gesture helps speakers retrieve words from memory” and may “increase resources available to the speaker, perhaps by shifting the burden from verbal to spatial memory” and help them to “access new thoughts” (Goldin-Meadow 1999: 427). This memory advantage of gesture has been observed more than once, including times when nest learners who cannot remember the Seneca word for an object or concept will suddenly retrieve the word and speak it once a teacher shows the children the sign. Dowdy explains, “because sometimes we can sign something and then the students can say it verbally, will remember it verbally ... and either way, it lets us

know that they understand what we're talking about. And it's fun." Crouse agrees, adding that using gestures enables the children to be active learners and the teachers to deliver more interesting lessons, since some of the ritualistic language is used in the same format repeated every day.

3. EFFECTS OF GESTURING IN THE NEST. Using gestures in the nest may also facilitate the learning of complex ideas expressed in the *Ganö:nyök*, *Gátwi:yo:h*, and other ceremonial and conversational language that at times may be accompanied by intricate linguistic structures (Chafe 1993). Dowdy comments on the complex nature of Seneca, explaining that "with our language and trying to get children to understand language, we use a lot of hand motions anyway, and a lot of miming and a lot of facial expression, and we use it as much as we can to guide them to what we want them to understand." Crouse makes the same observation:

I guess we've noticed that using sign language to supplement what we're using with our Seneca language really kind of helps the kids to understand a little bit better, like if they get stuck, and need to know what a word is or need to understand what we're saying, if we do the sign, they're like, "Oh!" and they get it, so it really is helpful that way.

Gesturing naturally assists the children's understanding of some of the nuances in Seneca that are not present in English. Dowdy explains that gesturing assists the teachers because:

... it can be adapted when there is no English or gesturing equivalent, since any sign potentially "goes together with the term, with the Seneca term along with the sign, and we try to match it up as much as we can with American Sign Language. But some of it, we do on our own ... sometimes the children will come up with their own signs for something and so we'll adapt those.

Crouse also notes that if the teachers in the nest would enroll in gesturing classes, they would have to keep the idea of adapting it for local use in their minds:

If we ... took a class for ourselves, and went in there with our own perception of what we want to learn. ... [we would need to do this] because some words we might not even use here at our school, but if we go in there with an ... idea of the things we use every single day, all day, we could pick up on most things and I think it would be easier ... I think putting Seneca to it might make us remember it a little bit better, remember the sign for it anyway.

Gesture may enable such young learners to access these structures as they are developing linguistic skills, since one purpose of iconic gesturing "is to express aspects of complex concepts that cannot be expressed in speech and hence are co-expressed cross-modally with it" (Nicoladis, Mayberry, & Genesee 1999: 524).

The teachers in Dowdy's nest all use the same gestures for each element in the *Ganö:nyök*, which seems to facilitate the children's learning and memorization of a speech

that may take as long as 15 minutes. Davis has illustrated that indigenous sign systems have certain functions or “discourse purposes” such as “ritual practices” (2006: 7). Crouse asserts that the very nature of using gestures for learning Seneca helps young learners to make the transition from complex, ritualistic functions of language to everyday, conversational uses. She recalls a certain lesson when using gestures helped the children retrieve a concept and remember the speech:

We were doing *Ganö:nyök*, and sometimes when we do it, I’ll say the beginning part, and when we get to the element of the word, I’ll have them say it, say what’s next, either using the picture or just signing it for them and then they’ll say the words. Well, I can remember one time, we were saying it, and I was going right along saying the first beginning part of it, and we didn’t have a picture for that particular element, so they were looking at me like, “Where’s the picture?” So they were kind of searching in their minds for what element was next in the rotation, and so I signed it, and they caught it. That was kind of real cool.

Crouse has seen similar gains in the children’s ability to use conversational, everyday language. She recalls a lesson when signing helped one student transition from being a listener to a speaker:

Another instance was when we were talking about the weather, because I talk about the weather with them every day. It was at a time when ... because originally, I would say ... I’d ask them what was happening outside in Seneca, and then I’d go through the list of different weather conditions that we might be working on, and all they would answer was “*Hëh’ëh*” [no] or “*E:h*” [yes]. So we went from that part of using the language, just listening, to actually, now they can tell me, and so when we were transitioning from them being able to tell me, now I can ask them what’s happening outside, and they can tell me in Seneca what’s happening. But when I first started doing that, I think I did the sign for ‘It’s raining,’ and they got it ... [One child], the tough one, was able to tell me that it’s raining because I did the sign, and it was like a little light bulb clicked on in his head. I think it just really helped him out. So it’s cool; it’s neat.

Since some words and phrases overlap from everyday to ceremonial and ritual language functions in Seneca, Crouse has noticed that signing helps the children make these complicated connections and notice the co-occurrences of the same words and phrases across functions:

I think they’re making that connection, too, like, in *Ganö:nyök*, we say things like *sedwaji endekha gahkwa*. *Sedwaji* means ‘our older brother’ and so when we sign it, we sign it in *Ganö:nyök* but we also will sign it in songs that we sing, too, so they’re making that connection, that relationship between *Ganö:nyök* and everyday use of the language and so it’s kind of creating this relationship kind of feeling, too. If we say *etisod soekha gahkwa*, we’re talking about our Grandmother the moon, and so we sign *etisod* and then when we’re singing our songs,

too, they're seeing that same sign and doing that same sign, too, so it's really helpful to make that connection between the relationship of those elements and being related to each other and things in nature as well.

Gesturing in a language nest is also ideal since, as many baby signing proponents charge, it helps facilitate language learning for children precisely in the toddler age range. As Mayberry and Nicoladis indicate, "Iconic gestures may be a central feature in the development of languages;" young children start to use new gestures once they "produce sentencelike utterances" (2000: 195). Several of the younger children in the Seneca nest are specifically at this stage of linguistic development, and it is evident that, as Nicoladis, Mayberry, and Genesee (1999) argue, gesturing with speech is well-developed in two-year-olds. Goldin-Meadow agrees: "Gesture allows speakers to convey thoughts that may not easily fit into the categorical system that their spoken language offers" and may offer "prelinguistic children with a vehicle for expressing thoughts they do not yet have words for" (1999: 422). The youngest child in the Seneca nest is two years old, who, according to Dowdy, is already taking advantage of the benefits of gestures. She notes:

He was not verbal at all yet because he was only two ... and so he was just kind of, listening, which is really an important part, but ... We started having him use signs so that he could follow along and see where he was at. He had his favorite ones that he liked to do, and anything that he does ... would help us to understand that he was actually understanding what we're saying. It's the same sign every time and he was able to recognize and match up a picture, a visual with a sign, and it kind of just grew from there.

Crouse made the same observations of the youngest student in the nest: "He doesn't say a whole lot of anything. He's actually kind of shy or just quiet. I think with sign language, the more we use it, the more he can have a way of ... and of course we put Seneca words behind it, but the more we use it the more he will be able to communicate with us too, a little bit more."

The use of gesture with these children may be the precursor to expressing thoughts solely with speech (1999: 423). Often the categorical systems between their known language, English, and the language they are learning, Seneca, do not have convenient cross-linguistic translations, so gesture appears to be enabling this transition between systems for these very young learners. Gesturing may also assist the teachers in assessing the children's understanding, since "[s]ymbolic gestures reveal abilities that would otherwise go undetected" (Goodwyn, Acredolo, & Brown 2000: 91). If a child cannot answer a question or engage in other conversational skills verbally, knowing and displaying the gesture shows the teachers that the concept is understood in the target language.

For the slightly older children, the benefits of gesture in learning Seneca do not disappear; they may be evolving. Goodwyn, Acredolo, & Brown propose that a gain in gesturing for communication "has been found during the 3- to 5-year-old period" (2000: 82). Gesturing can aid these children who "may be months away from the fine motor coordination necessary to say the relevant words" (83). Seneca words often involve sounds that are not present in English, so this gesturing process may help fill the gaps between words that they

are able to pronounce and words they cannot yet pronounce, enabling speakers to engage in entire conversations before they are able to enunciate all the words. Doherty-Sneddon has found similar advantages for enabling gradually more complex conversational skills combined with gesture, noting that “[c]hanges towards a more complex adult structure occur around two and a half to three years of age, probably reflecting the increasing linguistic skills of the child” (2008: 303).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS. The ultimate goal of using gesturing in the Seneca language nest, besides the obvious one of facilitating the children’s learning of Seneca as a second language, is for these children to transmit it upward to the older siblings’ and parents’ generations, and also to their future children’s and grandchildren’s generations, since intergenerational transmission is one of the hallmarks of successful language revitalization programs (cf. Hinton 2001). This goal requires future research since the nest is still in its beginning stages. Gesture may help strengthen the likelihood that this transmission will take place. Although very few researchers and indigenous language practitioners are publishing research on using gesture to assist language revitalization efforts, some have begun to note its efficacy as a teaching tool. Gesturing while learning an indigenous second language “is about language acquisition skill-building and the merits of students experiencing success in language utilization in varied forms, including the teaching of sign language into the format further increases student language acquisition skills, and is a tactile form of instruction capable of internalizing language for long-term recall” (Kipp 2007:109-110). Dowdy and the other teachers at *Ganöhsesge:kha’ Hë:nödeyë:sta’* plan to conduct many more observations of their use of gestures in order to gauge its viability, but in the meantime, the teaching tool is creating a buzz among the teachers, learners, and parents, and it is generating curiosity and excitement in the wider community about the school’s initiatives. Such enthusiasm is just the impetus that this endangered language needs at this critical time during its revival.

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Melissa Elayne Borgia
mborgia@edinboro.edu