



Saskatchewan First Nation  
Speaking Project  
[www.allanadam.com](http://www.allanadam.com)



## First Nation Language Speaking Circles

### Language Circles

#### What are they?

#### Two kinds of Participants

1. **Language Givers** are volunteers in the community who already speak a First Nation language fluently. In Regina we have a dozen volunteer fluent speakers who attend our speaking circle sessions. In addition, we include Elders from rural communities who speak less common languages by recording their lessons electronically so we can include all languages in the program even if a fluent speaker is not able to attend.
2. **Language Learners** are willing motivated learners who wish to learn to speak their ancestral language, wish to speak to First Nations people and even First Nations fluent speakers who wish to learn a second First Nations language. We have teachers who are also students!

**Language Circles** are a gathering of both **language givers** and **language learners** where the goal is speaking ability versus other methods which may focus on reading, writing, grammar and short-term memorization of vocabulary. Language circles focus exclusively on speaking ability.

Language circles can be comprised several **language tables**. Each **language table** focuses on one language or dialect. We use small group teaching methods at each table. Tables are usually between 6-8 participants to enable everyone to listen and speak most effectively. We can have several **language tables** of the same language running at once with each table focusing on a different language or dialect. This way it is possible to practice speaking more than one language at a time at one **speaking circle**.

When a learner attends the speaking circle, they join others at a .language table. which includes at least one fluent speaker who guides them through speaking exercises to develop skills in order to both understand and speak First Nations language phrases. You can even add a **digital media table** for languages if you do not have a fluent speaker who can attend. Audio lessons can be played on a CD player do that learners can learn any language they have recordings of.

#### Focus on speaking NOT reading and writing!

Reading and writing is actually discouraged during a speaking circle! While reading and writing are useful skills, in order to learn to speak using this method, it is most effective if learners are focusing all of their energy on listening to the sounds of words and phrases and being able to understand their meaning. Language after all is far more than just grammar, it is sound, inflection, tone and rhythm etc. It is a lot like learning to sing a song from a book, a nearly impossible task unless a person is already very proficient at reading music!

Speaking circles allow learners to tune their ears to easily recognize and respond to fluent speakers and retain meanings of words and phrases because they are used in conversations.

### Overcoming Fear of Speaking

The number one barrier to moving to fluency is fear of speaking the language with fluent speakers. Speaking circles are a safe way for new language learners to overcome that fear! Learners are also able to get used to listening and repeating phrases and words until they are more proficient.

### **Using Technology to Teach Oral Skills**

After a speaking circle session is completed, students can listen to recorded phrases from the web site [www.allanadam.com](http://www.allanadam.com) for their daily practice.

### **Inclusive of Elders!**

By not requiring reading and writing skills, speaking circles are inclusive of all fluent speakers! Many of our Elders from the community are more than happy to participate in passing along languages to learners despite not being able to read or write the languages in a standard form.

### **Teaching Basic Conversation is the Goal**

Speaking circles focus on learning to speak whole phrases and sentences of common usage. We find that if a student use the phrase often, they will practice more often. By practicing and using the words frequently, they can learn them well.

### **Gaining Oral Fluency**

The goal of the speaking circle is to assist learners to acquire the ability to understand and speak a base vocabulary of 100-300 common phrases, they are already engaging in basic conversations! Once at this level, a person can continue to learn to improve their speaking ability and perhaps take courses and learn to read and write in the language if they would also like to be literate in the language.

### **What Resources are needed to run a Speaking Circle?**

Learners only need to attend and be motivated to learn, there are no materials required. Online learners will need access to high speed internet. Fluent speakers do not have to follow a specified curriculum as our lessons are determined by useful and common phrases all speakers use. Word lists are online at [www.allanadam.com](http://www.allanadam.com) with the online downloadable audio files. Currently we have most First Nation languages on this website. Any place to meet will work as long as there is enough room for the number of people who are in the sessions First Nations language.

### **Speaking Circle Learning Methods**

We recommend two basic methods:

Note: Do these exercises in pairs or groups of up to 6 or 8 people (larger groups do not work because people will not get enough practice and it is also too noisy – create sub-groups if needed) Practice 3 or 4 sets of phrases per session. Do not do more than two hours in one session as you cannot absorb more than a 3 or 4 sets of phrases in one session. Work on one set for a time, take a break and then continue with the second set. Continue this with more pairs or sets of phrases.

Select group leaders to lead each exercise.

**Question and answer dialogues** Q and A dialogues are comprised of a question followed by an answer or a number of possible answers by learners.

Example:

Q. “What is your name?” Leader

A. "My name is Joe."

Q. "Where are you Joe?" Leader

A. "I am at the library. "

Rotate the leader role with each member of your group so they can both ask and answer questions so everyone has practice doing both.

**Command exercises** – An exercise where learners listen to commands given by the leader which instruct a person to do an action. Learners must either do or act out the command

Example:

Command said one speaker "Go to sleep."

(Learner pretends to go to sleep)

Note: These methods can adapted for daily use in the classroom setting for 10-15 minutes with students. By doing this daily, students will remember phrases. You can add new phrases as students learn phrases well. In time student daily sessions will turn into conversations!!! It works!

*By Cathy Wheaton 2009*

**Start a Speaking Circle in your school or community, ask us how!**

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