

# Formative Research for Cree Children's Television: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** This case study describes how an extensive formative evaluation was conducted in the development stage of *Wachay Wachay*, the first children's television series in the Cree language. The series is intended to strengthen native identity and foster language use among native children. The formative research effort examined the responses of children, parents, community elders, and native-language educators to a test tape. Interviews, questionnaires, and observation were used in screening sessions held in four Cree communities in Northern Ontario. Comparisons were made among children of different ages, between those who have Cree as a first and second language, and between speakers of different Cree dialects. The production and writing team used the findings in developing the series' format and characters, identifying key issues of content and language level, and testing the appeal and comprehension of program segments among its target audience.

**Résumé:** l'étude de cas décrit une évaluation formative menée lors du développement de *Wachay Wachay*, la première série télévisée en langue Cree destinée à des enfants. La série vise à renforcer chez les enfants autochtones un sentiment d'identité et à promouvoir parmi eux l'usage de la langue Cree. La recherche formative a examiné les réactions d'enfants, de parents, de membres aînés de la communauté et d'enseignants de langues autochtones à un montage vidéo. Dans quatre communautés Cree du Nord de l'Ontario, les chercheurs ont fait des entrevues et des observations et administré des questionnaires. Des comparaisons ont été faites entre les résultats recueillis chez des enfants de différents groupes d'âge, chez des enfants possédant le Cree comme langue première et comme langue seconde et chez des enfants parlant différents dialectes Cree. L'équipe de production et de scénarisation a utilisé les résultats de l'étude pour développer le format et les personnages de la série, pour cerner des problèmes importants de contenu et de niveau de langue et pour vérifier l'attrait et la compréhension de certains segments de la série avec le public cible.

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An ambitious educational television project for Cree and Ojibway children has been underway in Northern Ontario. Wawatay Native Communications Society and The Ojibway and Cree Cultural Center formed a Children's Television Unit in 1989 to produce *Wachay Wachay*, a television series for

primary school children that promotes native language and culture<sup>1</sup>. As part of the series development process, formative research was conducted with children, parents, community elders, and native-language educators in four Cree communities. The findings were used by the Children's Television Unit in establishing the series' format, identifying key issues of content and language level, and in writing the first six scripts. This case study, describing the research process and some key findings, is an example of how formative evaluation can contribute to the early stages of program development<sup>2</sup>.

The series has challenging goals and a broad target audience. Native language and culture in Northern Ontario are threatened by the extension of transportation, schooling and communications, such as the the recent growth of satellite television (Axtell, 1990). *Wachay Wachay*<sup>3</sup> aims to strengthen native identity and to increase language use among native children - both Native First Language and Native Second Language speaking children. Can a television series reach, entertain and ultimately promote language use among children across this continuum? And how do differences in dialect and age affect children's responses to the series? These are the questions that motivated the research project conducted in early 1990 and described in this paper.

In the series, puppets and adult performers are used as vehicles to teach authentic and accurate use of the Cree language. The program also strives to strengthen the pride and identities of native children by presenting positive role models, and to nurture aboriginal traditions, values and beliefs. The series provides native children with a culturally sensitive alternative to southern programming.\*

### ***Formative Evaluation***

The Cree Children's Television series began with a strong commitment to incorporating formative evaluation at key stages in the project. The series development plan was based, in part, on the experience of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and their successful Inuktitut series *Takuginai*, which involved several research projects (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, 1986, 1987). The formative evaluation of *Wachay Wachay* was in the research tradition of

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<sup>2</sup>The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Children's Television Unit, Wawatay Native Communications Society, or the Ojibway and Cree Cultural Center. I would like to thank Doris Linklater, John Cheechoo, Bertha Metat and Denis Austin of the Children's Television Unit in Timmins; Tom Axtell; and at TVOntario, Olga Kuplowska, Danielle Constantin, and especially, Pat Parsons. Any errors and omissions are my own.

<sup>3</sup>*Wachay* is a term of greeting, meaning both hello and goodbye.

\*The series is being broadcast to native communities across Ontario, and videotape distribution to native language teachers is planned. In the first phase of the project, programs are being produced in Cree, for Cree communities. Ojibway pro is being addressed in the second phase.

the Children's Television Workshop and TVOntario (Axtell, 1990; Mielke, 1990; Parsons & Lemire, 1986). The research was intended to gain information from a sample of the intended audience and to expose the Wachay Wachay producers directly to their audience's reactions in a systematic manner. Several complementary research methods were used to illuminate viewers' responses to the characters, program style and language.

The writing and production staff were directly involved in conducting the formative research effort -from design to implementation. Their "hands-on" participation ensured that results and insights were shared in an ongoing, interactive manner and that the findings had real meaning and impact. Results and recommendations were reviewed in a series development workshop held at the end of the February 1990 and summarized in a final report (Children's Television Unit, 1990).\*

**Purpose.** The evaluation was designed to contribute to the development process by examining the reactions to the series' characters and concept of three groups - children, parents and elders, and native language teachers. The primary focus of the research was on children's responses to the program format, series concept, and language used. The major issues the study examined were: the appeal and comprehension of each of the program's types of segments; the appeal of the puppets, their humour and how well they were understood; reactions to a scene which portrayed puppets as children and actors as adults; and feelings about two stylistically different versions of a dramatic scene. Comparisons were made between children of different ages, and between those who have Cree as a first and as a second language.

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the research and in the tradition of native communities, discussion sessions were held with parents and elders of the communities to hear their feelings about the suitability and appeal of the segments, about the language spoken in the program, and the Cree syllabics, or writing, that appear on screen. These adults were also expected to be an important secondary audience for the program, and to be likely co-viewers with children. Research sessions were also held with native language educators on their reaction to: the program format and a sample story outline; the appropriateness of the program for different ages and grade levels; their opinions on the use of Cree dialects and syllabics; their needs as language teachers; and their suggestions for the development of the series.

## THE STUDY

### **Research Method**

**The test tape.** Because the series was in the early stages of development, an 18 minute working tape was used in the study screening sessions. This "test tape" introduced the series' puppet characters and examples of each of the

\*A subsequent formative research project was completed in 1991; it examined the first six programs in the series (Gillis, 1991).

major program styles – including puppet drama, puppet-human scene, music, story-telling, and vocabulary – in separate segments. Two versions of the dramatic scene were included, using two different narrative techniques. The vocabulary segments introduced three Cree words – their pronunciation, meaning and syllabic representation<sup>1</sup>. The words were **wani-ikan** (trap), **nipaw** (sleep), **shashipiw** (stretch).

**Evaluation session.** Interview, questionnaire, and (in the case of children) observational data were gathered at pre-arranged screening sessions. Each session lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. The research team conducted group interviews and discussions after showing each segment of the development tape, and a questionnaire was administered after the whole tape was viewed. For the children's sessions, three researchers observed and recorded the children's attention and behaviour during the different segments. The researchers, their teachers and teaching assistants helped each of the children complete a questionnaire after viewing. Where possible, the screening sessions involved eight to ten children, but some groups were larger. Translators assisted in the discussions with adults, and the questionnaire for parents and elders was available both in Cree and in English.

### The Sample

Evaluation sessions were conducted in four communities with eleven groups of children (n=118); four groups of parents and elders (n=40); and two meetings of native language teachers (n=29).

The communities, Peawanuk, Attawapiskat, Moosonee, and Moose Factory<sup>2</sup>, were chosen to reflect differences in size and type of community and in predominant dialects<sup>3</sup>. The study focused on two dialects of Western Cree – Swampy Cree or "N" dialect and Moose Cree or "L" dialect. The test tape used the "N" dialect\*. Peawanuk and Attawapiskat are small native communities on the west coast of James and Hudson Bays where people speak the "N" dialect. Moose Factory and Moosonee are larger communities at the mouth of the Moose River on James Bay where the "L" dialect (or Moose Cree) is predominant. The latter two communities are very mixed linguistically. They have attracted people from both "L" and "N" dialect areas, as well as from eastern James Bay coastal communities, and the Cree spoken there has been influenced by this migration and, to some degree, by English.

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<sup>1</sup>The writing system used for Cree (and those for other native languages) is commonly called "syllabics" as it uses geometric shapes to show consonant and vowel sounds (Burnaby, 1984, Rhodes and Todd, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Fort Albany had also been selected for research, but the sessions there had to be cancelled due to bad weather. The sessions in Attawapiskat included respondents from Rashechewan.

<sup>3</sup>There are many Cree and Ojibway dialects which are more or less mutually intelligible. Cree is spoken in six major dialects over an enormous area stretching from Alberta to Quebec. (Burnaby, 1994; Rhodes & Todd, 1981.)

\*The dialect differences between Moose ("N") and Swampy Cree ("L") include phonological variations, such as the contrastive use of /n/ and /l/, other linguistic differences have also been noted (Rhodes & Todd, 1981).

In all, 118 children participated in the study<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 (see page 209) describes the sample by age, grade, language and type of school. The variety of school types and language backgrounds is indicative of the mixed audience a program such as *Wachay Wachay* must address in Northern Ontario. Cree was classified as the first language for approximately 40 percent of the children<sup>2</sup>. More boys than girls were in the sample (57 percent boys, 43 percent girls). Most of the respondents (71 percent) were six- to eight-year-olds, 26 percent were nine years and older. A small number of five-year-olds also participated<sup>3</sup>.

The children were asked to indicate on the questionnaire if they understood Cree. They were told to say yes even if they spoke only "a little." Sixty-seven percent said they did understand it. Asked if their parents spoke Cree to them, 74 percent said they did. These figures do not give us a measure of how knowledge of Cree is distributed among these children, but they do show that a large proportion are familiar with the language and hear it in their homes.

Table 1  
Children's Sample

	Number	%	Grades	Ages	Cree Language	School
Peawanuk	26	23	K-7	5-14	first	federal
Attawapiskat	9	8	K-1	5-7	first	federal
Moose Factory	37	32	2-3	7-9	second	provincial
Moosonee 1	23	20	1-6	6-12	first/second	separate
Moosonee 2	20	17	1-2	6-11	second	provincial

**Note: Cree as a first or second language indicates the status of Cree for the majority of children in each group.**

Table 2  
Parents' and Elders' Sample

	Number	Western Cree dialect
Peawanuk	10	Swampy Cree, "N"
Attawapiskat	10	Swampy Cree, "N"
Moose Factory	5	Moose Cree, "L"
Moosonee	15	Moose Cree, "L" and some Swampy Cree, "N"

<sup>1</sup>Not all children completed questionnaires. The total number of children who participated in screening and discussing the test tape was 118. The number of completed questionnaires was 115, and all statistics are based on the latter number.

<sup>2</sup>Cree is considered a first language where it is the language most often spoken in the home, best understood by most children, and the major language of the community. It is the second language where it was not the dominant language of children at home or in their community.

<sup>3</sup>In many northern Ontario schools, especially in small communities and on reserves, the age grading common in large urban schools is rare. Classes often include children of different ages.

Two sessions were conducted with native language teachers, one in Moosonee with 15 participants who teach the "L" dialect of Western Cree. Fourteen teachers from Attawapiskat and Kashechewan who teach both "N" & "L" dialects participated in the other session.

## FINDINGS

### *Overall Appeal*

Response to the test tape was very enthusiastic from all audience groups, across ages and communities. It elicited lots of talking, laughter and repetition, and there was close attention paid to all segments by most screening session participants - adults and children. Even second language children who had relative difficulty in understanding the Cree, demonstrated high levels of attention to the tape. Among parents, 71 percent said their children would like the program very much and 82 percent said they would watch the program with their children. As one parent said: "children relate to this kind of programming." Discussions revealed adults were happy to see a program for children in their language. And most of the children took delight in hearing and recognizing the language they heard at home.

The most positive response among children was in grades two and three. These children were deeply engaged by the test tape - they laughed at many parts, repeated Cree words that they recognized or that were emphasized, and spontaneously guessed at what was happening in the story segment. Although still positive, the response was slightly weaker among younger (kindergarten and grade one) children. They paid less attention and were less involved. Surprisingly, the tape was well received among most older children - those in grades four and up.

### *Program Attributes*

The research looked at responses to the characters, specific program techniques and styles and the language used throughout. Strengths and weaknesses were identified and the producers were provided with suggestions for change.

**Puppets.** The puppets were very successful among the children in the sample - they laughed at them, pointed to ones they liked and talked excitedly about them among themselves. Seventy-nine percent said they liked the puppets, only five percent did not (16 percent gave no answer). Further indication of their attraction to the puppets was that in most groups, children spontaneously picked favourite puppets among themselves. Some variations in liking were observed - boys liked them less than girls and seven-year-olds like them most. Older children (nine and over) liked the puppets, not finding them too "childish".

Nine separate puppet characters are introduced in the puppet cameo segment of the tape and the researchers recorded differences in children's

responses to each of them. Based on interviews with the children and their questionnaire responses, the production unit was given an indication of how well, and why, the different puppets were liked by subgroups of children. For instance, one puppet character received less attention and interest during viewing. Interviews pointed to children's difficulties in understanding some of what the character was saying as contributing to lower attention. Another finding was that the children tended to have difficulty remembering or identifying the names of puppets when answering the questionnaire. Interviews confirmed this, revealing that the puppets' names were not clearly established and that some children confused the names with Cree words. For instance, one well-liked character was called *Goochich*, a name which means "little boy"

***Puppet voices and language.*** The humorous nature of the puppets, and just the fact that they were speaking in Cree, delighted children and adults. Respondents gave feedback on the intonation and expressiveness of the puppet characters' voices and on the correctness of the language used in the puppet dialogues. There was some concern that certain voices sounded "too old" or "too adult." Both adults and children mentioned this and, though it did not detract markedly from the appeal of the puppets, it indicated to the Children's Television Unit an area in need of refinement.

***Vocabulary segments.*** These segments were very successful with children five to eight years old. The segments stimulated them to repeat the sounds and words, to guess what the word was, to mimic the actions used to convey the meanings, and to engage in word play. Older children, nine and over, were less enthusiastic about these segments, but the pieces still held their attention. Parents and native language teachers were happy with the choice of words.

The group interviews with elders, parents, and native language teachers served to identify several potential problems with vocabulary segments. For instance, in the segment on *shashipiw* (stretch), native language teachers and some parents pointed out that the presentation did not maintain the Cree distinction between animate and inanimate words. The segment included a shot of a piece of elastic being stretched to demonstrate the word. Parents, elders and Native Language Teacher respondents pointed out that *shashipiw* would not be used to refer to this action, the stretching of an inanimate object. Rather it is used for animate things and their actions, such as a child stretching his arms in waking up (which was the other visual demonstration in the segment). A sizeable minority of the children, especially among second language learners, understood the word to refer to both animate and inanimate types of stretching, blurring the Cree semantic distinction. This alerted the production team to the need to design visuals that convey words and linguistic concepts accurately.

***segments.*** Viewers' responses to the narrative elements of the program format were examined and two approaches to dramatic scenes were compared by showing two versions of the same scene. In one version, a character turns to the camera and addresses the audience directly; in the other,

the two characters play the scene "naturally" without addressing the audience. Overall, the narrative segments were successful, holding the attention of all the children, except the youngest ones. Many children, first and second language learners, tried to guess what was happening, and called out while they were watching. Quite a few second language learners in grades two and three had difficulty understanding the dialogue - but many were able to figure out what was happening by following the visuals. There was a strong preference for the second version of the drama which had no direct address to the audience. Adults found it more "natural," "the way people really talk." Some kids found it easier to understand and more lively.

In the final segment on the demonstration tape a puppet character is shown with an actor portraying his mother who speaks to him about trapping and relates a story about her father. The segment avoided showing the human actor fully on the screen, taking a "child's eye view" and showing adults from shoulder to waist only. The style was generally well received, but the section tended to have lower attention levels among the children than the other segments. Attention and interest in this scene were related to comprehension - those children who understood Cree better watched more closely and talked about it more. Parents and elders thought it was a very good idea to include an adult figure who could be a source of traditional knowledge.

**Attention to program segments.** The children's level of attention to the development tape was not equal for all segments or parts of segments. Rather, attention increased during the following events: interaction between puppet characters, music, "surprises", funny or silly events, and the introduction of props or unusual objects (like a marten pelt). A sense of anticipation, such as in the vocabulary segment *wani-ikan*, also stimulated attention. Attention dropped when puppets talked to the camera for extended periods of time. This may be due in part to the low comprehension levels of some children - attention did not drop noticeably among older children during such periods.

### ***Language: Use, Comprehension, and Dialect***

The sample audience's response to the language in the test tape was very important to the production team, given the series' goals to promote language use. Because the series was in the early stages of development, formal testing of language acquisition was not undertaken. But interviews and observation addressed reactions to the language in the segments and self-reported measures of comprehension were used.

**Language use.** Observations of the children during viewing indicated that the test tape stimulated language use and word play and engaged the children both verbally and visually (with syllabics). The segments sparked spontaneous language use among children in all of the sessions. This was a critical finding because it indicated that the series for native children could succeed in using and drawing attention to native language. In fact, even some members of the adult sample were observed repeating words from the dialogue and guessing the words in the vocabulary segments.



The study was not intended to measure children's language acquisition, but it did demonstrate that the test segments encouraged children to recognize, think about and, to some extent, use the Cree language. Children of all ages repeated words they heard – words they already knew and new ones. In one segment, when one puppet said to his friend *astam* (“come here”), one of the children in a grade two screening session responded by moving toward the television. This anecdote is indicative of the high levels of attention and involvement, even among second language learners. Children responded to questions from the puppets – those directed at the audience and those that were part of the dialogue between puppets.

**Comprehension.** The research revealed the expected range in comprehension among children. Language comprehension was gauged by an item on the questionnaire and by comprehension questions posed during the interview. Overall, 64 percent of the children indicated on the questionnaire that they understood the Cree in the tape, which corresponds with the researchers' estimates from the discussions. Not surprisingly, the language on the test tape was understood best by more respondents in the communities where Cree was the dominant language (Attawapiskat and Peawanuk) and in other communities among those groups of children for whom Cree was a first language (in some of the groups in Moosonee).

Comprehension was related to age – younger children had a hard time understanding some dialogue and grasping parts of the story segments, and comprehension increased with age (See Table 3). Interestingly, understanding the Cree in the show was not related to grade, reflecting the wide variation in children's ages within grades. Comprehension difficulties were usually reported by children as speech that was “too fast”. The puppets' speaking too fast for children was also noted by the parents and elders and by native language teachers.

Table 3  
Comprehension of Cree Spoken in the Program

	percentage	percentage of children			
	of all children (n=115)	5/6 years	7 years	8 years	9+ years
Understood	64%*	44%”	56%	62%*	87%
Did not understand	28	44	34	27	10
No answer	9	11	10	12	3

\* Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

**Dialect.** Generally, the development tape, which used the "N" dialect, crossed the boundary between "L" and "N" dialects fairly well. Native language teachers who taught "L" dialect praised the tape, and said they would probably use a puppet program based on what they saw. However, they felt that the "L" dialect spoken in their area would be preferable – realizing that it was impossible to make both available at the same time. Few adults in the "L" dialect communities complained of dialect differences, other than to point out that they would like to see other versions when possible. There were no marked differences in comprehension among children from different dialect backgrounds (as revealed on self-reported comprehension questions and in interviews), but this issue remains to be studied in detail.

### ***Native Children: TV Viewing and Other Characteristics***

Interviews and questionnaires with the children revealed some interesting background information on their TV viewing habits, familiarity with native television broadcasting, Cree language competencies, and attitudes to learning Cree. This information gave the series producers a picture of their intended audience. For instance, the research revealed that despite the relatively isolated nature of their communities, the children in this study are intimately familiar with television from the south. Virtually all of the children watch television, and satellite and cable TV distribution gives most of them a wide selection of television channels to view: 31 percent reported receiving between one and five channels in their homes; 57 percent receive ten or more.

### ***Suggestions for the Series***

Parents, elders and native language teachers had suggestions of words and topics for inclusion and were interested in having input into the language aspect of the series. Native language teachers gave suggestions on the type of grammatical and lexical items to cover. Teachers recommended incorporating the vocabulary words in sentences in other parts of the program – anticipating the intended format of the series in which featured vocabulary is used in the basic story line. The language teachers also recommended using more repetition in dialogue, and some said simpler words should be used. Elders and parents suggested that the program deal with animal characters, landscapes and weather, traditional cooking, legends, sports, wisdom and lore, Cree songs and music. Many referred to traditional native ways of life, crafts, and the history of native people. The comments and suggestions from adult teacher participants in the study provided the Children's Television Unit with useful guidelines and resources for further development of the series.

## CONCLUSION

The formative evaluation effort made several important contributions to the development of the series. First, it indicated that the basic concept for the

series was on the right track. Both children and adults enjoyed the test tape and were enthusiastic about a program intended explicitly for children. The research indicated the program styles could amuse and hold the attention of children – even among groups for whom Cree was a second language, and for segments explicitly devoted to language teaching. Adults also responded warmly, indicating that the program would receive their support. And native language teachers in the sample said that they would probably use the show and that it was right for primary level children.

The second important contribution of the research was the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the program segments and styles. It provided positive and negative feedback on the developing ideas of the Children's Television Unit. The research also pointed out that there is some latitude in the use of dialects. The "N" dialect used in the test tape was acceptable to adult and children "L" dialect speakers-though parents, elders, and teachers urged that the program be made available in their dialect. But perhaps the most important contribution of the research to program development was in exposing the production team directly to their audience, and at a time when what they heard and saw could be incorporated into the creative process.

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