

Let's Speak Together

Talking Bags

How to use a Talking Bag



The NWT Literacy Council gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance for this project from the Government of Canada and the GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Contact the NWT Literacy Council for more copies of this manual, or you can download it from our website.

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ISBN 978-1-896472-78-2 (January 2025)

Acknowledgements

This guide is based on the *Granny and Grandpa Talking Bags: How to Use and Create Them* manual that the NWT Literacy Council created in 2019. Mahsi to Emily Smith, who researched and wrote the original version.

The idea for talking bags came in part from Maro Sundberg, a Dene Elder from the Yellowknives Dene Goyatikò Language Society. She worked with other Elders to develop a kit for Wìlìhèh language classes. The kit included male and female dolls, stuffed dogs, a toboggan, and samples of traditional clothing and tools. Elders used the kit to tell stories, sing songs, and teach language and skills. Inspiration also came from the *Granny and Grandpa Connections Box*, which was part of a BC initiative called *Success by 6*.

Many thanks to the Elders who shared their knowledge and time, to help develop the original resource:

- Betty Takazo Junior, Fort Good Hope
- Georgina Fabian, Kátł'odeeche
- Mary Snowshoe, Fort McPherson
- Liza Pieper, Ndilò
- Verna Arey, Aklavik
- Mary Carr, Ndilò
- Margaret Field, Fort Providence
- Mary Kudlak, Ulukhaktok
- Therese Zoe, Gamètì
- Angie Lantz, Łutselk'e
- Marion Mackeinzo, Délìnè

In the spring of 2024, the NWT Literacy Council and the Government of Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment embarked on a project to create and distribute Talking Bags to encourage Indigenous language use in celebration of Indigenous Languages Month in February 2025. This led to the creation of the two companion resources: *Let's Speak Together Talking Bags: How to Make a Talking Bag*, and *How to Use a Talking Bag*. kinanāskomitin and haḡ' cho to Daina Sanderson and Jolene McDonald for moving this project forward.

Marsì chogh, máhsì cho, quyanainni to everyone who shared their knowledge and time at the July 2024 *Let's Speak Together Talking Bags* workshop:

- Bernice Neyelle, Délìnè
- Mary Ann Vital, Délìnè
- Bertha Catholique, Łutselk'e
- Celine Marlowe, Łutselk'e
- Catherine Mouse, Fort Simpson
- Mary Snowshoe, Fort McPherson
- Winnie Greenland, Fort McPherson
- Tikkiq Kayuqtuq, Yellowknife
- Mollie Oliktoak, Ulukhaktok
- Iga Atagootak, Pond Inlet
- Mary Malgokak, Ulukhaktok
- Marie-Adele Rabesca, Whatì
- Berna Martin, Dettah

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About this Guide

If you are reading this guide, it means you have a Let's Speak Together Talking Bag! This guide will teach you what a Talking Bag is, give you tips on how to use the Talking Bag to prompt Indigenous language use, and provide suggestions on how to welcome Elders into programs that use the Let's Speak Together Talking Bags.

If you do not have a Talking Bag or are interested in making a Talking Bag for yourself or a program you are involved with, check out the *How to Make a Talking Bag* guide.

What is a Talking Bag?

Talking Bags are a resource that anyone can use to share, speak, and promote Indigenous languages through play. Talking Bags can be used in many different situations:

- Family literacy programs
- Early Learning and Child Care programs
- Classrooms
- Playgroups
- Libraries
- At home
- Friendship centres
- Seniors' homes
- Mentor-Apprentice Program sessions, and
- Any opportunity for two or more people to come together and share language!

It is important to remember that you do not have to be fully proficient in your Indigenous language to use a Talking Bag. Let's Speak Together Talking Bags have been created with emergent, beginner and intermediate speakers in mind. Anyone can use the language prompts included with the Let's Speak Together Talking Bag to share the language with a friend, a child, or any conversation partner.

This guide provides tips for all levels of language speakers and learners so anyone can share in enjoying and learning Indigenous languages.

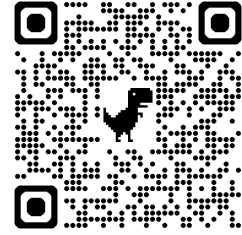
Get to know the contents of your bag



Picture 1 - Contents of a Talking Bag from the Inuvialuit region

1. Take a look at what is in your Let's Speak Together Talking Bag, or at the example in the picture above. How could you teach the language using cultural items like the ones in the Talking Bag, or in the picture? Write two or three ideas.

2. Watch the *Granny & Grandpa Connections Box* video on [YouTube](#)¹. While the *Connection Box* centered on culture and language, it was not designed specifically as an Indigenous language learning tool. The Let's Speak Together Talking Bag is intended to teach, share, speak and promote Indigenous languages.



After watching the video, reflect on how the items in the box helped to create connections and share the language. What are techniques from the video that you will try? Are there any more strategies you'd use to share your language?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWjUPjZRZ8>

How to Use Talking Bags to Share Indigenous Languages

The Let's Speak Together Talking Bags have been designed to help users share and learn Indigenous languages. Everyone can take part. This section of the guide has tips for using the Talking Bag with emergent, beginner, and intermediate conversation partners. It also provides tips on how you can use the guide as a tool for language learning even if you consider yourself a language learner, and for Elders using the Talking Bag.

I am using the Talking Bag with **emergent** speakers

Emergent speakers typically are just beginning their language journey. Emergent speakers may react to basic commands and demonstrate limited understanding with gestures. They may be able to respond to simple commands or answer familiar questions with one-to-two-word responses. They may struggle to hear new sounds that are used in the Indigenous language.

- Think about emergent speakers as though you are talking to a baby.
- Use short, simple phrases that speakers can reuse, such as “Hi, Bear!, Hi, Fox!”, “Good morning Bear!, Good morning Fox!”, “I have flour, I have salt, I have baking soda, I have water, I have oil/lard, I have bannock!”
- Model the pronunciation and get the learner to really look at your mouth, lips, and tongue when you are making sounds, especially new sounds that are not used in English.
- Speak slowly.
- Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

With an emergent speaker, work on:

- Vocabulary that learners can “plug and play” to make new, short phrases.
- Basic conversation such as greetings, introductions, and responding to basic questions.

When the emergent speaker can name most of the items in the Talking Bag, can confidently respond in one-or-two-word sentences, and is starting to hear and recognize the sounds of the language, try out some strategies for beginner speakers!

Activity

Think about emergent speakers in your community. What ideas would you use to share the language with an emergent speaker who is an adult or child?

Look at what is in your Let's Speak Together Talking Bag. What is a song or game you can play that incorporates repetition and play while using the items in the Talking Bag. Write two or three ideas.

More tips and tools

For more information about working with emergent speakers, check out the *Our Languages Curriculum and Program of Study*² pages 107-108 (Promising Community Practices for Emergent Learners - 1A).

² https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/our_languages_curriculum_2020_low_res.pdf

I am using the Talking Bag with beginner speakers

Growth as a beginner happens over an extended period of time. Beginner speakers are starting to catch on to the language. They may feel nervous to speak out loud and will make lots of mistakes when trying new words and combinations. Beginner speakers are working on saying three-to-five-word sentences around certain themes and can start to connect phrases with connecting words like 'and', 'but', and 'or'. They can also initiate some questions. Beginner speakers can now hear the unique sounds of the languages and can use these sounds correctly in words.

- Think about beginner speakers as though you are talking to a toddler or young child.
- Encourage experimenting with the language.
- Stick to short, full sentences using present tense verbs.
- Practice simple questions and responses, such as: "Does the bear like berries? The bear likes berries. Does the bear swim? The bear swims."
- Practice negatives. For example, "I am good, I am not good." "It is a bear, it is not a bear."
- Talk about different people doing things – he eats / you eat / I eat.
- Be kind when mistakes are made!
- Laugh and have fun!

With a beginner speaker, work on:

- Verbs, connecting words and nouns so learners can "plug and play" and learners can start to make longer phrases.
- Being creative, having fun, and freedom to try things out!

When the beginner speaker can name most of the items in the Talking Bag, briefly describe them, generate new sentences based on the vocabulary they have, and speak for around one to two minutes, they may be ready to try some of the strategies for Intermediate speakers.

Activity

Think about some “survival phrases” that you want to share with your beginner speaker to help stay in the language, such as “Speak slowly,” “How do you say _____ in my language?” or “Can you say it again?” Write them down here. Some ideas for survival phrases can be found in the *I want to learn*³ book available in the NWT’s Indigenous languages⁴.



Think about any games, activities, or stories that you would like to share with a beginner speaker using the items in your Talking Bag. Write two to three ideas here.

More tips and tools

For more information about working with beginner speakers, check out the *Our Languages Curriculum and Program of Study*⁵ pages 109-110 (Promising Community Practices for Beginner Learners – 2A).

³ <https://www.ourlanguagesnwt.com/books>

⁴ Click on the book image, the click “English” to see survival phrases.

⁵ https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/our_languages_curriculum_2020_low_res.pdf

I am using the Talking Bag with intermediate speakers

Intermediate speakers are often a few years into their language learning journey, and it can take a long time – two years or more – to move from intermediate to advanced proficiency. Intermediate speakers feel more comfortable in the language and enjoy initiating playful interactions and activities. While they may make a few grammatical errors, and “have an accent” when speaking the language, they are able to engage in a back-and-forth conversation on a number of topics. They can understand what people are saying and ask expanding questions such as ‘why’ to deepen their understanding of the topic.

- Practice speaking about and from the perspective of others.
- Start incorporating different perspectives of time, E.g., in the future, in the past, etc.
- Use different time markers such as ‘before’, ‘during’, ‘after’, ‘yesterday’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘in the beginning’, etc.
- Ask questions of the learner and ask them to expand on concepts.
- Use the Talking Bag materials to introduce a variety of experiences, e.g., use them to teach a traditional story, and as a prompt to talk about going to the grocery store.
- Encourage learners to speak in new situations, model conversations that they may have at school or work, in the grocery store, or at a community event.

With an intermediate speaker, work on:

- Continually challenging the learner with more complex sentences.
- Natural conversation in a variety of daily situations.

Activity

Research has shown that learners need to hear and use words and phrases 20 times in 20 different situations to remember and use them correctly. Think about the items in your bag, and how you can use the items to help reuse the language in new situations. Write a few ideas.

Think about how you can use the items in your bag to help an intermediate speaker use language in a variety of situations. Write a few ideas.

More tips and tools

For more information about working with intermediate speakers, check out the *Our Languages Curriculum and Program of Study*⁶ pages 111-112 (Promising Community Practices for Intermediate Learners – 3A).

⁶ https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/our_languages_curriculum_2020_low_res.pdf

I am a language learner and using the Talking Bag with other language learners

You don't have to be fluent in the language to use the Let's Speak Together Talking Bag. Here are some ideas if you have a Talking Bag but aren't quite sure where to start.

- Your Talking Bag may also include a vocabulary sheet to get things going. Start by practicing key vocabulary and stay in the language phrases.
 - If you do not have a vocabulary sheet, find a dictionary, use the apps or seek out a language speaker to create one.
- Your bag may come equipped with a key ring with ideas for games to play. Try out the games. Mistakes are ok in learning!
- Check out the resources for your language at www.ourlanguagesnwt.com. There are songs you can listen to, and activities you can play.
- Bring your Talking Bag to an Elder or bring an Elder into your program or home to enjoy and explore the contents with them.

Remember, your ancestors are happy to hear the language!

I am an Elder using a Talking Bag

Hands-on learning is an important part of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Children learn by watching and doing. To complement this learning style, the Let's Speak Together Talking Bag encourages interactive play.

There is no right or wrong way to use a Talking Bag. How you, as an Elder, use it is up to you. Here are some examples.

- Encourage children to explore the items in the bag, using as much Indigenous language as they can. This will let you know how much language they have, and what strategies to use (emergent, beginner, or intermediate).
- Talk about how each item is important to your culture while using as much Indigenous language as possible. Gestures can help you stay in the language while getting the message across.
- Use your language to name and describe each item.
- Tell a story or sing a song related to the items in your Indigenous language.
- Invite the children to ask questions about each item and respond in your Indigenous language to reinforce the language.
- Ask children to help tell a story. For example, every time you use the word for one of the items in your Talking Bag, get the children to repeat it in the Indigenous language.
- Use the items to demonstrate a skill, such as food preparation in your language.
- Go for a walk and invite children to gather items to put in the bag. On the walk, point out different things you see and say them in the language.

- In your language, use the name of each item in the bag in a sentence.
- Use the contents of the bag to teach words and colours in your language.
- Hide the items around the room and have a scavenger hunt staying in the language.

Remember to review the tips for emergent, beginner, and intermediate speakers on the previous pages, and adjust your speech to meet their language learning needs!

It is very important to stay in the language. This is the **best** way for brains to learn language. Learners will understand what you are saying if you use gestures, point to items, and use the tools and prompts in the Let's Speak Together Talking Bag. Don't translate, and trust that learners will pick up the language with time and exposure. But when you see that the language learners really don't understand what you are saying, you might want to translate to English—do that as little as possible

Be kind, making mistakes is part of the learning process. Learners will be willing to try again when the teacher responds with kindness. If they make a mistake, always correct learners gently. Allow silence while the learner's brain is working and patience when there are mispronunciations. When correcting learners **always** provide your own answer in the language to model the correct pronunciation.

Welcoming Elders

Welcoming Elders into programs and activities that use a Talking Bag can be hugely beneficial. With Talking Bags, Elders participate in their traditional roles as mentors and teachers. Through interactive play and oral tradition, Elders connect with children to teach the language and about the culture and traditions that are part of who they are. Talking Bags are great tools to prompt Elders to use and stay in their Indigenous language. They can use the items in Talking Bags to animate stories, teach vocabulary, sing songs, demonstrate skills, or in any way they see fit.

Why include Elders in language and early childhood programs

Oral language development is vital for young children and is also the best way for anyone to begin learning a language. Oral language is the first step in developing strong literacy skills. Elders play an important role in promoting and developing oral Indigenous language skills.

A strong foundation in language and culture helps to build self-esteem and social identity. In Indigenous culture, Elders are integral to the learning process. They pass knowledge, history, values, beliefs, and skills from generation to generation through the oral tradition.



Elders play an important role in learning. There are many benefits to welcoming Elders to use the Let's Speak Together Talking Bag in language learning programming. Having Elders involved:

- Strengthens intergenerational relationships.
- Passes on the language, culture, values and tradition.
- Allows children the opportunity to learn how to interact respectfully with Elders.
- Recognizes and values Elders as knowledge holders and language keepers.
- Gives children, youth, and adults a chance to hear their Indigenous language.
- Nurtures feelings of belonging and well-being.
- Can have a calming effect – Elders are medicine, you feel good in their presence.

All in all, involving Elders benefits children, educators, Elders, and the wellbeing of the whole community.

To include Elders in your program, it is important to build relationships with them. Here are some ways to build relationships and include Elders:

- Let Elders know that they are welcome.
- Actively seek out Elders to participate.
- Invite Elders to come in pairs.
- Go over the Talking Bag and contents with the Elder in advance.
- Review the section 'I am an Elder using a Talking Bag' from this guide with the Elder.
- Plan how you will use the Talking Bag together with the Elder to teach language.
- Go on a field trip to visit an Elder or group of Elders.

Elders may have many different demands on their time. Be careful not to overburden them with requests.



[Preparing for an Elder's visit to a program](#)

When you involve Elders in your program, treat them with respect and according to the protocols of their culture. To prepare for an Elder's visit, ask for guidance about your community's protocols. Teach children how to interact respectfully with Elders and behave appropriately, e.g. how to greet an Elder, listen quietly when an Elder is talking, and thank them at the end of the visit.

Ahead of time, pay attention to certain practical matters.

- Provide a ride to the program if needed.
- Be ready to welcome Elders and introduce them to the children.
- Teach children how to greet an Elder according to local protocols. This may include introducing yourself and naming your parents.
- Offer coffee, tea, and a snack during their visit.
- Make sure Elders have a comfortable place to sit.
- Decide if it is appropriate to offer a gift or pay an honorarium.



Conclusion

Now you have all the tools and tips to use your Let's Speak Together Talking Bag to teach and learn your Indigenous language. Remember that it can be challenging to learn languages. The important thing is that you are hearing and speaking the language as much as possible. The Talking Bag is a great tool for language learning. There is no wrong way to use it – just use it! Be kind to yourself and others as you teach and learn your language. Have fun!