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Adult Indigenous language learning in Western Canada: What is holding us back?

Onowa Mclvor, Ph.D

INTRODUCTION

Adult language learners are often overlooked as serious contributors to the overall revival of Indigenous languages. This paper focuses on this “missing generation”, those who are striving to (re)gain their ancestral language(s) in their adult life. The findings that emerged from a self-study of one urban adult Indigenous language learner allow the following questions to be more broadly addressed: What do we know about adult Indigenous language learning? Are some learning and teaching methods more promising than others? What conditions must exist for successful adult language acquisition? What is holding us back? What are the common barriers and challenges for adult language learners? How do we overcome the common barrier and challenges to successfully achieve language proficiency? The following paper addresses these questions in an exploration of adult Indigenous language learning in Western Canada using research journal excerpts from my autoethnographic study as well as an exploration of relevant literature.

Research journal entry - miyoskamin (spring) 2012

Through my own journey of learning my language,

I set out to discover what “really” worked...

It led me down many roads

To Master-Apprentice language learning

To Accelerated Second Language Acquisition

Then both...

I found... both are useful... and... other strategies exist...

But there is no “magic bullet”

Yet, there is no time to waste

We have to start somewhere

We have to do something... but what? And how?

BACKGROUND

Indigenous languages are endangered in what is now commonly referred to as Canada, and around the world. It is estimated that in the next one hundred years, more than half of the languages that exist today will no longer be spoken (Harrison, 2007; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Indigenous language loss is occurring at such a rate that Krauss (1998) predicts “we stand to lose more [I]ndigenous North American languages in the next 60 years than have been lost since Anglo-European contact” (p. 10). Krauss blames this acceleration on both the “physical genocide, then linguistic genocide” of the past and subsequent Indigenous “abandoning [of]... heritage language in favour of English” (pp. 9-10). Indigenous language loss is largely the result of violent colonial policies created and enacted by imperial governments to marginalize and assimilate Indigenous peoples, and dispossess them of their traditional territories. Indigenous language revitalization is a movement to relearn and return our ancestral languages to the lands where they belong.

APPROACHES TO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVIVAL

Adult Indigenous language learning has not been a strong priority for the Indigenous language revitalization movement overall, though many different approaches were created over the past decades to revive Indigenous languages. These approaches include, but are not limited to, documentation approaches, school-based programs, immersion programs, and community language classes.

The FirstVoices™ project in British Columbia, a nation-wide digital repository for Indigenous languages (First People’s Cultural Foundation, 2011), language nest programs focused on immersing young children in the language (King, 2001), and school-based immersion programs such as those developed by Indigenous Hawaiians (Wilson & Kamana, 2001) and the Maori (King, 2001) are examples of such initiatives. Although at times adults learn alongside children in language nest and school-based programs, adult Indigenous language learning has not been a strong priority for the Indigenous language revitalization movement overall. However, adult Indigenous language acquisition as a separate goal, and the approaches developing as a result, are gaining prominence and attention within Indigenous nations. Yet many of our people struggle with accessing successful, research-based, meaningful, and useful learning experiences as adult learners in order to become proficient speakers of our languages. The rise of, and need for, effective Indigenous adult language learning approaches is a relatively new societal phenomenon.

APPROACHES TO ADULT LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Though increasing efforts and resources are being invested in developing approaches for adult language learners, this area of research is emerging within the Indigenous language revitalization field of study. While literature pertaining to adult Indigenous language learning exists, it remains sparse, limited to fewer than ten sources, including recent dissertations and Indigenous community and organization newsletters. Most of

this literature is largely descriptive in nature (describing what was done, e.g., “adults came together to learn the language one night a week for ten months”) with very few explicit research projects focused on examining the approaches, experiences, or outcomes. This lack of literature in adult Indigenous Second Language Learning [ISLL] is apparent to several scholars in this field of study. Mohawk scholar Bonnie Jane Maracle noted in 2002, “no formal collection or documentation of information pertaining to adult immersion programs is available nation-wide” (2002, p. 389). Seven years later, Christopher Gordon (2009) stated in his study of an Anishnaabemowin adult immersion program, “Adults as a focal group in [I]ndigenous language revitalization research in general are few” (p. 7).

While a multitude of approaches to Indigenous language revitalization exist, formal approaches specific to adult Indigenous language learning are of primary interest to this paper. (Informal approaches include strategies such as self-study using books and audio/visual recordings.) From the formal adult Indigenous language learning literature, three prominent approaches emerge: language classes, cohort-based immersion, and individually focused approaches.

Language Classes

The language class model is the least promising of the three approaches in terms of its impact and focus. This approach normally consists of one to three hours of non-immersion classroom-based instruction per week (for examples see Gardner, 2004; Stiles, 1997). According to the literature, this approach does not generally create new speakers (Blair, Rice, Wood, & Janvier, 2002; Hinton, 2001; Maracle & Richards, 2002) because of insufficient exposure to language input, and ineffective strategies which often emphasize contextually lacking noun and phrase memorization and English explanations of the language rather than Indigenous language speaking and listening opportunities. However, the results of language classes vary depending on a number of factors.

Adult Indigenous language classes are sometimes designed for particular groups, such as parents of children in immersion programs or tribal office staff, and are sometimes open to all community members. Classes often take place in the evening to accommodate community members who work outside the home, but are at times scheduled during the day or over the lunch hour (as is the case for many staff-focused classes). Increasingly, these types of weekly language classes are being offered by universities or colleges for postsecondary credit, sometimes in partnership with the local communities they primarily serve (Blair, et al., 2002; Gardner, 2004; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007).

There are some advantages to the weekly language class model. It can be a catalyst for communities, and a first step in a longer, more intensive journey toward language revitalization. These classes can also create interest in and appreciation of the language from outside the community, which has advantages in raising the profile and value of Indigenous languages in society in general. Hinton (2001) suggests that language classes can have positive side effects on individual learners, such as increased cultural pride, a renewed sense of identity, and stronger community relationships.

Group-Based Adult Immersion Approaches

Group-based immersion is the second adult-focused approach explored in the adult Indigenous language learning literature. While these programs are rare in Canada, two types of this approach have been documented as summer immersion camps (Alexie, Alexie, & Marlow, 2009; Daniels-Fiss, 2005; First Peoples' Heritage, Language, & Culture Council, 2010; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007) and school-year-based immersion programs (Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002; Maracle & Richards, 2002; Richards & Burnaby, 2008), ranging in length from one week to ten months (Daniels-Fiss, 2005, First Peoples' Heritage, Language & Culture Council, 2010; Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002; Richards & Burnaby, 2008). The main differences between this approach and the weekly language class are the volume of input, the potential frequency of exposure to learning and teaching experiences, and the method, which in this case is exclusively immersion.

The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people of southwestern Ontario have the most widely known adult immersion group in Canada; five documented programs ran "intermittently" (Maracle, 2002, p. 387) between 1985 and 2002 (Maracle, 2002; Maracle & Richards, 2002). An updated publication lists two of these adult immersion cohorts in Mohawk territory as "currently operating" (Richards & Burnaby, 2008, p. 236). In addition to the Kanien'kehá:ka examples, Gordon (2009) examined an Anishnaabe adult immersion program that was offered through a Michigan tribal college.

While immersion language learning is reported to be successful with children (King, 2001; Wilson & Kamana, 2001), one could surmise that this success would be replicated with adults, but there is little evidence to support this speculation within the literature. This could be partially due a lack of relevant language learning assessment models resulting in little data production. Whatever the reason, it is certainly an area of research that requires further focus for the future of Indigenous language revitalization.

The immersion literature focuses on cohorts rather than on individual learners, provides program recommendations, and documents the instructors' experiences, which in turn helps to inform individual adult-focused approaches. For example, both Maracle (2002) and Gordon (2009) interviewed students, and both studies indicate that students are motivated to learn their ancestral language for the following reasons: to become speakers of the language, to strengthen their cultural identity, to "save" the language, and to pass the language on to others, either at home or as a teacher of the language (Maracle, 2002; Gordon, 2009).

Individually Focused Approaches

Individually-focused, more self-directed adult Indigenous language learning approaches make up the final category of approaches identified in the literature. Two formal individually-focused language learning approaches were foregrounded in this self-study: the Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program (MAP), and the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) approach to language learning.

MAP is a one-on-one immersion program that originated, and was first implemented, in California as an Indigenous language learning strategy. Language learners

are paired with master speakers, and the team spends 10–20 hours a week together over a 2–3 year period speaking the language exclusively to develop basic speaking skills (Hinton, 2002). MAP is gaining momentum and is being taken up by many different groups across the US and Canada (Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, 2010; Ahlers, 2004; First Peoples' Heritage, Language & Culture Council, 2010; Gardner, 2004), though almost no published research has been conducted on this approach to date.

ASLA was created by Dr. S. Neyooxet Greymorning, Arapaho tribal member and University of Montana professor. It is an immersion approach that focuses on developing comprehension and speaking abilities, and can be used with groups or individuals. Using methodologically sequenced categories of colour images that depict people, objects, and scenarios, and build on one another to increase complexity, ASLA can be effective for developing a working command of the language. ASLA sessions can range in length from a few minutes to an entire school day.

Although Greymorning is recognized as one of the few Indigenous scholars devoted to Indigenous language revitalization, to date he has chosen to inform people about ASLA only through conference presentations, annual workshops in Montana, and community-held invitational workshops. He has, so far, chosen not to publish on the approach because of concerns about misunderstandings and improper implementation, as well as copyright issues. To date, only one publication (Sarkar and Metallic, 2009) has been located that references the ASLA approach specifically.

Sarkar and Metallic (2009) describe the adapted approach as a “teaching method ... based on a carefully selected sequence of key images, through which the learner is gradually introduced to Mi'gmaq vocabulary and grammar” (p. 57). Metallic attended an ASLA workshop in 2005 and began using the approach in her community shortly after, reporting that by 2009 “some learners ha[d] progressed to an advanced level” (Sarkar & Metallic, 2009, p. 57). Sarkar and Metallic (2009) add that through student testimony collected over a two-year period, this model achieved “success ... for learners whom other methods had failed” (p. 58). Judging by the experience of the Mi'gmaq, the evidence of Greymorning's workshops, and the growing interest in the ASLA approach across Canada and the US (anecdotal information), it is clearly an approach worthy of consideration.

MAP and ASLA share three distinct qualities. The first is their exclusive use of the Indigenous language as the mode of instruction, which encourages language learning without lengthy grammatical explanations *about* the language in English. Second, both approaches are adaptable to individually-focused language learning undertakings, as opposed to classroom-only approaches. Last, these two approaches also share an anti-literacy philosophy, focusing exclusively on oral language at least until intermediate or advanced speaking skills are developed. This philosophy stems from their shared belief that a focus on spoken language creates new adult speakers more quickly which, according to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), runs counter to widespread beliefs about successful adult language learning programs, most of which have literacy components.

NO MAGIC BULLET

In spite of the potential for success using these language learning approaches it is important to acknowledge that “a search for the best method” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 164) is approached cautiously and with trepidation by current second language theorists. Scholars such as Kumaravadivelu (2006) recommend moving toward a “postmethod” state, one that focuses less on “one magical method” (p. 164) but rather seeks to complexify the many factors that contribute to learning and teaching. While this approach is wise, the fact remains that Indigenous individuals and communities require approaches and strategies for learning and teaching through which language speakers, who are also often Elders, can access training that will better enable them to effectively teach their language. Hence, as a way of moving forward, we turn then to contemplate the conditions necessary for successful adult additional language learning.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL ADULT SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

Regardless of what learning and teaching approach is used to acquire command of a new language, it is important to recognize that based on several decades of second-language learning research certain conditions are necessary for successful second-language learning. The following conditions are those identified as essential for success.

Time: Learners typically need **thousands of hours of exposure** to a new language in order to reach the point of high functioning. Programs and instruction must have sufficient quality (real examples of communication, e.g. use of full sentences), duration (enough hours per week, per month, per year), and intensity (avoiding long gaps between learning and practicing) to allow learners to gain this necessary experience. Time is often touted as the number one challenge for adult language learners, yet ironically sufficient time spent is the primary factor in successful language learning.

Opportunity: Similar to, but separate from the time factor above, learners must have the **opportunity to hear and practice producing** the target language in a **variety of topics of interest** alongside others with similar levels of investment in learning the language (Ellis, 2005).

Accommodation: Individuals’ prior language learning histories, anxieties, difficulties, desires, goals, and **personal preferences for learning must be assessed and considered by language teachers** to expedite successful learning outcomes (Naimie, Siraj, Abuzaid, & Shagholi, 2010; Dörnyei, & Shehan, 2003).

Appropriate Content: **Learners must gain access to age-appropriate curriculum that is cognitively and socially relevant.** This means that adults may not necessarily be comfortable learning (or teaching) popular children’s songs such as “head and shoulders.” The material learned must be appropriately paced, as in not too slow or too much too quickly, with sufficient opportunity to review what has already been covered, time for reflection, and opportunities to practice in order to ensure retention. The second-language learning research also underscores that this content must have an appropri-

ate balance of focus on meaning and focus on form. Focus on meaning is demonstrated with actual communication, including speaking and listening. This must be balanced with more structural components and “focus on meaning,” that include grammatical explanations, word endings, pluralization patterns etc. (Ellis, 2005).

Given this information, future Indigenous language revitalization research might best serve learners by focusing more on creating and adapting learning environments to provide these optimal conditions for adult Indigenous language learners, and less on individual approaches to teaching and learning (such as TPR, MAP or ASLA).

WHAT IS HOLDING US BACK?

While some barriers to language learning are specific to the Indigenous experience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult language learners do face some similar challenges. These challenges include: time constraints, life responsibilities, lack of speakers or learners to practice with outside of class, and sustaining motivation. Quality teaching that accommodates individual learning needs is not always available to learners. However, adult ISLLs face additional barriers. The first set of barriers is associated with Indigenous language speakers/teachers/mentors, and these include: a scarcity of healthy and available speakers, reluctance on the part of some to speak the language, speakers being out of the habit of speaking the language, and speakers’ low skill level and knowledge base for second language teaching. Each of these factors is explored below.

That there are relatively few fluent speakers available to teach or mentor learners has huge implications for language revitalization. With each passing season, we are losing more and more Elder speakers and, with them, our most valuable language revitalization resource. Many speakers remain reluctant to speak the language, while others are simply out of practice. The reality is that most Indigenous language speakers in Western Canada have been, and continue to be, immersed in the English language for decades. Many Indigenous language speakers are thrust into the role, or elevated within the community as “teachers of the language” without any training on how to mentor or teach, a horribly unfair and often unproductive situation.

The second set of barriers to adult ISLL involves individual adult learners themselves. These barriers include isolation, the impacts of migration away from reserve communities, a lack of skills for effective language learning, and a lack of time for learning. A common barrier for individual adult learners is the lack of a community of speakers, in addition to their mentor/teacher, with whom to practice and engage. In addition, the migrant nature of many Indigenous people’s lives, the various historic factors separating Indigenous adults from their communities of origin, and the realities of a major demographic shift to urban living contribute to learners’ isolation. Adults are often juggling career building and/or basic economic survival with family responsibilities to children, Elders, and community, an expected and essential part of any Indigenous reality whether urban or rural, on or off reserve. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) acknowledge this reality, noting that, besides being past the [supposed] “critical period” for language learning, the main difficulty for adults is the lack of sufficient time in their lives for language learning (p. 58).

Clearly there are multiple barriers to individual adult ISLL journeys. However, how do we move beyond these challenges? What steps can learners and their supporters take to ensure adult learners become a central part of revitalization efforts.

HOW DO WE MOVE BEYOND?

The following is an excerpt from a journal entry from the autoethnographic (self-study) research on which this paper was based. The entry summarizes the conclusions that were drawn from the examination of many years of adult language learning and therefore are my beliefs about what is necessary to “move on” and “step up” to take up our responsibility as adults in the fight to save our ancestral languages.

Research Journal Entry, nîpin (summer) 2011

it can be difficult

it can be isolating

it can be frustrating

it can (at times) seem impossible

BUT it is possible.

It takes:

being highly motivated

being willing to sacrifice—making room in your mind, body, spirit—life—for language learning (may mean giving up tv time, reading English newspapers, etc.)

taking responsibility—you must accept that no one is going to do it for you, no one is going to lead it or make it happen, you have to be willing each and every day to make it happen

accepting you will do the work of two—you may not have a prepared, capable teacher who is fully educated in second-language learning strategies, techniques, and what it takes to create a new fluent speaker—your teacher-mentor may have ideas you will have to deconstruct, they may lack patience, they may lack time; it will be your responsibility to create a curriculum, to work with your teacher(s) in culturally appropriate ways to offer you what you need to become a speaker

learning about 2nd language learning—you will need to learn strategies and approaches to teach yourself via books, videos, recordings, and with your mentor(s)

finding mentorship – you need to find a mentor (or two if you can!)

finding ways to use the language and to bring it into your world, either by teaching your children, getting in touch with relatives who speak your language or incorporating it into your workday

building confidence to speak your language, you will need to build the confidence to speak your language in public and in front of your relatives, neighbours, and coworkers who do not speak your language

finding outside support, such as financial—which can translate into time or curriculum materials, so that you can spend more of your waking hours learning and using the language

emotional support—it is difficult to do this work in isolation and there will be times you will feel completely alone, you will feel that there is no point, that it cannot be done; you have to find or create a support circle around you to keep going

creating a speaking community - doing everything you can to pair up with someone or optimally create a community of learners (and teachers) by finding like-minded people who are interested and willing to learn and become your conversation partners — as this work can be very lonely and isolating and besides, who will you talk to once you learn?

Adult Indigenous language learning takes commitment, resilience, determination, sacrifice, prioritizing and support

LEARNER MOTIVATION

In order to accomplish that which is set out above, adult Indigenous language learners must be motivated. Through the observation of my own journey and through personal communication with others on similar journeys, I realized that there are two main reasons why adult Indigenous language learners must be highly motivated. First, few adult Indigenous language learning programs are readily available so self-initiation is essential, and second, Indigenous adult language learners tend to be busily engaged in other activities, such as full-time work and family responsibilities (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Research indicates that few second-language learners develop the ability to speak the target language if they are not highly motivated (Newcombe & Newcombe, 2001). Moreover, beyond whatever initially motivated the learner, there must be factors that *sustain* motivation. Although it is plausible that the same factors that provided initial motivation could remain the primary motivators, researchers note that motivations to learn a second language often evolve (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). Regardless of whether the motivations are new or old, one or more factors must be found that will sustain the language learning effort and override the tremendous struggles and time sacrifices of the language learning process. The process can be uncomfortable, owing to an aching brain or a twisted tongue, or because of healing that must take place. To express this more simply, the benefits must outweigh the sacrifices, a process that Ortega (2009) recognizes as mutually reinforcing: once one begins to notice benefit(s) from the language learning efforts (such as the enjoyment of speaking, satisfaction from learning something new, or hearing improvement in one's pronunciation), the motivation to continue will strengthen.

Through my own language learning journey and through conversations with other adult Indigenous second language learners I have learned that as a learning group we are almost always motivated to learn our languages by one of three factors: 1) to fulfill a cultural identity emptiness that exists due to a historic dislocation from land, family, or community; 2) to be able to understand and communicate with Elders in their first language; and 3) to be able to speak to one's children or make our Indigenous tongue the language of our home. Basham and Fathman (2008) support this understanding in the conclusions they drew from a language survey conducted with Indigenous adults citing the three main motivators as "preservation of the language and culture, desire to teach children and desire to communicate with Elders" (p. 589).

COLLECTING ADULT LEARNER'S SUCCESS STORIES

Another important factor in "moving beyond" is learning from one another and expanding the cache of stories accessible to adult learners to inspire and motivate them. The following examples of individual adults' ISLL experiences are included as samples of adult ISLL stories. However, as previously mentioned, very few stories of successful adult ISLL have been documented and shared and therefore many more stories need to be collected and shared to award the opportunity to learn from those who have become proficient speakers of their language in adulthood. This is an important stepping-stone in the race against time for reviving Indigenous languages in Canada.

Daniels-Fiss (2008) describes her experience of learning the *Nêhiyaw* language as an adult, in part by organizing and participating in a *Nêhiyaw* immersion camp over two consecutive summers. The camps were intended to be immersion experiences, but she reports that language learning was more specific to daily activities, routines, and rituals, such as morning prayers, repetition of new songs learned, listening to stories (instructors used actions to convey meaning), direct vocabulary work on immediate activities such as cleaning up and making fire, and *Nêhiyaw* spiritual ceremonies. By the end of the second five-day camp, Daniels-Fiss found that her "Cree speaking abilities improved ... [and she was] less shy about speaking publicly" (2005, p. 80), which indicates that this approach to adult ISLL has its merits, at least perhaps for basic familiarity with the language.

Leanne Hinton (2011) offers brief accounts of two successful Native American adult language learners. However, she provides no details on the structure of their language learning endeavours. Jessie Little Doe Baird (Wampanoag) and Daryl Baldwin (Myaamia) both received master's degrees in linguistics after teaching themselves their languages using only archival materials, since neither language had been spoken for 150 and 50 years respectively (Hinton, 2011). Hinton reports that they have both become proficient enough speakers to make their respective ancestral languages "the language of their homes" (2011, p. 315).

Clearly, additional examples of relevant, successful and adaptable approaches to adult ISLL are needed.

CONCLUSION

For greater success with adult Indigenous language learning in Western Canada, we must work towards the “necessary conditions for successful language learning” identified in this paper: sufficient time spent; sufficient listening and speaking opportunities; accommodation for individual learners; and relevant, useful content. Adult learners may also benefit from the lessons shared of how to move beyond the barriers and challenges which exist such as taking personal responsibility, making the time, creating a speaking community and bringing the language into their world. We also need to collect more stories of successful adult language learners and document their practices, adding to the cache of examples from which new learners can draw. The “promising practices” explored in this paper, both MAP and ASLA, are also under-researched with almost no formal studies that empirically examine either approach leaving a void that further, structured research could fill.

Adult learners are an underused resource for the uphill, urgent battle against Indigenous language loss in Canada. The lack of adult-focused language learning research and literature in the field of Indigenous language revitalization indicates the oversight of adult learners as powerful potential contributors. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) see adults as a learning group in the Indigenous language revitalization movement who have much to contribute to creating “domains for language use” (p. 57), given their relative influence on daily life on the planet. Increasing the number of adult learners and expanding this engagement brings the additional benefit of shifting responsibility away from young language learners who are commonly tasked with the burden of returning the language to everyday use. The time is now for adult learners to step up and take personal responsibility of their learning but also to be supported through research and investment in developing strategies that are highly effective. The future of our languages depends on it.

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