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Growing the Fire Within: Exploring Innovative and Successful Adult Language Learning Methods in Indigenous Communities in Canada and the US

Chew, K. A. B., Manatowa-Bailey, J., Lukaniec, M., McIvor, O., & Linn, M.

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# Growing the Fire Within

Exploring Innovative and Successful Adult  
Language Learning Methods in Indigenous  
Communities in Canada and the US

We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.



## **Report Prepared by**

Kari A. B. Chew (Chickasaw Nation, University of Victoria)

Jacob Manatowa-Bailey (Sauk, MICA Next Steps Language Revitalization Planning Project)

Megan Lukaniec (Huron-Wendat Nation, University of Victoria)

Onowa Mclvor (maskēkow-ininiw, University of Victoria)

Mary Linn (Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage)

This report summarizes the outcomes of a five-day gathering called “Exploring Innovative and Successful Adult Language Learning Methods in Canadian & US Indigenous Communities” at the First Peoples House at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Feb 18-22, 2020.

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We thank those who attended the gathering and generously shared experience and ideas.

### **Gathering Attendees**

Jarrid Baldwin

Rohahí:yo (Jordan Brant)

Samuel Catanach

Susanna Ciotti

Ryan DeCaire

Evan Gardner

Tsohahí:io (Lauren Deom)

Tehota'kerá:tonh (Jeremy D. Green)

Neyooxet Greymorning

wahde galisgewi (Ryan Mackey)

Owennatekha (Brian Maracle)

Robbie Penman

Crystal Richardson

Khelsilem Rivers

SXEDȪELISIYE (Renee Sampson)

Kahtehrón:ni Stacey

PENÁĆ (David Underwood)

Dominique Wiley-Camacho

Grahm Wiley-Camacho

### **Research Assistants**

Carolyn Belleau (Esk'etemc, University of Victoria)

Nicki Benson (University of Victoria)

Robyn Giffen (University of Victoria)

### **Special Recognitions**

We recognize those who offered support for our Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant application, but who could not attend the event: Tahohtharátye Brant, Jaeci Hall, Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson), Peter Jacobs, and Zeke Zahir.

We also offer special remembrance for Dr. T'łat'laḱuł Trish Rosborough, our dear friend and mentor, who was an advocate for Kwak'wala and all Indigenous languages. We continue to do this work both in her honor and at her request.

This report and graphics within designed by the folks at Fuselight Creative, [www.thefuselight.com](http://www.thefuselight.com).

# Opening

Indigenous communities and organizations are working to reclaim and revitalize their languages. Indigenous adult language learners, who did not grow up speaking their ancestral tongues, are critical to these efforts. These adults may run language revitalization programs, teach the language in school- and community- settings, and use the language at home with their children.

While few would dispute the necessity of supporting Indigenous adult language learners, it is not always clear how best to do this. Additional language learning (ALL) models for Indigenous adults vary widely in terms of approach and results across Indigenous communities in Canada and the US. Seeking a collective vision for supporting and strengthening Indigenous adult ALL, a group of leading scholars and practitioners from Indigenous language revitalization programs and organizations and from academic institutions, convened for a five-day gathering called “Exploring Innovative and Successful Adult Language Learning Methods in Canadian & US Indigenous Communities” at the First Peoples House at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Feb 18-22, 2020.

***“We have to know we are doing the best we can, as strategically as we can, to ensure our language will thrive in our communities into the future.”***

- Kahtehrón:ni Stacey

The vision for this gathering emerged from a shared commitment to Indigenous language revitalization and ALL by co-organizers Kari A. B. Chew, Jacob Manatowa-Bailey, Onowa Mclvor, and Mary Linn, who were later joined by Megan Lukaniec. The organizers asked the group to offer Origin Stories of their ALL environments (conditions that support learning) and methods (how one teaches/learns language) as a way of opening the gathering. Through the telling of Origin Stories, the group explored the question:

— How can we support  
Indigenous adults  
who are becoming new  
speakers of their  
Languages?

This report shares information, ideas, and analysis emerging from the gathering.

# Our Purposes for Gathering and Our Processes for Sharing Knowledge

Our group collectively identified several foundational purposes for gathering to discuss Indigenous adult ALL. These included:

- To seek holistic knowledge about how Indigenous communities can effectively support adults who are striving to become new speakers of their languages;
- To develop Indigenous ways of thinking and co-construct new knowledge about how to best support Indigenous adult ALL;
- To initiate and deepen long-term collaborations and knowledge sharing across communities so that we can learn and engage in language revitalization work together; and,
- To creatively explore and capture critical issues and areas for future research

The group determined that “the inability to easily and effectively access and share what works across communities” is one of the greatest challenges those involved in language revitalization face. Thus, the group agreed to ask the tough questions, challenge ourselves to decolonize practices and methods, and, most importantly, to support each other. We shared a belief that great things can be achieved when people work together. It is ultimately Indigenous peoples— informed by ancestral wisdom and community aspirations—who guide and sustain this work by: **following and maintaining the integrity of distinct cultural teachings and protocols, decolonizing Western tools to better align with Indigenous knowledge, and learning and teaching language in ways informed by the specific needs of the language and people.**



## Why Gather for Collective Work Across Communities?

The group collectively shaped a vision for the gathering:

Learn from each other  
Mutually benefit  
Build community.  
Develop our own way of thinking  
uplift each other to  
overcome challenges  
To see the future



# DURING THE PROCESS

*We encourage you to*

- ⇒ Trust your facilitators and the intentional design of this meeting
- ⇒ Connect Indigenous language learning & acquisition to larger themes, contexts, and purposes
- ⇒ Seek connections over differences and strengths over deficiencies
- ⇒ Approach our work together with humility and an open mind
- ⇒ Be deliberate and reflective in your contributions
- ⇒ Share your language and, when using English, avoid getting stuck in semantic discussions ●●

What other encouragements would you offer for engaging in collective work across communities?

- ⇒ Be open & honest about your own situations

encouragement:  
Stories of Challenges help as much as Stories of success.

⇒

⇒

Invited participation and harmonious collaboration

Create/ Strengthen support among trench workers

We all receive the gift of language, and survive the losses in our communities. We can talk about this.

Recognize everyone's experience + knowledge to be shared, let's listen + learn + understand together

to always be... (diagram)

encouragement take time to

encouragement "Strong opinions, loosely held."

Exploring Innovative and Successful Adult Language Learning Methods in Canadian & US  
Tuesday, February 18 to Saturday, February 22, 2014  
University of Toronto

Try not to duplicate work.

name/identify new specific moves or tricks for

We used post-its and stickers to visualize which encouragements most resonated.

In order to fulfill the purposes of the gathering, the group offered encouragement to each other and to all those engaged in supporting Indigenous adult ALL. These included:

- Connecting Indigenous ALL to larger themes, contexts, and purposes
- Seeking connections rather than differences and strengths over deficiencies
- Approaching the work with honesty, humility, and a good mind
- Being deliberate and reflective in your contributions
- Sharing language and, when using English, avoiding semantic debates
- Striving for inclusivity by seeking the voices of those who aren't written about and don't write about themselves
- Enjoying the work by finding the humour, joy, and happiness along the way
- Keeping a clear goal in mind

While the work to emerge new speakers of Indigenous languages is characterized by struggle, we do not struggle alone. When engaging in this work, commitment and perseverance are more important than perfection.

***“In order to truly stay connected to who we are as Onkwehón:we, we must continue our journey of learning our language.”***

– Tsohahí:io Deom

***“This work takes courage.”***

– the late Dr. T'fat'laḱuł Trish Rosborough

# Origin Stories

## **SENĆOŦEN Learning and Teaching Methodologies**

*PENÁĆ (David Underwood) and SXEDŦELISIYE (Renee Sampson), WŚÁNEĆ School Board*

SENĆOŦEN revitalization efforts began in the 1960s with the establishment of a school where the language was taught and the subsequent development of a writing system. More recently, the WŚÁNEĆ School Board and community has developed its own SENĆOŦEN learning and teaching methodologies.

Adult learners participate in WŚÁNEĆ SENĆOŦEN IST, a diploma program in Indigenous Language Revitalization through the University of Victoria. This 2-year program supports the emergence of proficient speakers, many of whom go on to work with the SENĆOŦEN LE, NONŦET SCUL, ÁUTW – SENĆOŦEN Survival School.





### **Moving from Advanced Proficiency to Mastery of Kanien'kéha**

*Kahtehrón:ni Stacey and Tsohahí:io Deom, Kahnawà:ke Education Center*

Beginning in 1970, language revitalization efforts at Kahnawà:ke span fifty years. From Kahnawà:ke Education Center, Kahtehrón:ni Stacey and Tsohahí:io Deom shared insight and knowledge they have gained through teaching, leading programs, and developing curriculum for a variety of organizations and programs.

Their Origin Story focused on their current work to decolonize language learning in order to support adult learners in reaching ultimate attainment—the endpoint of which the learner has mastery of Kanien'kéha.

***“Our goals are to see the reappearance of intergenerational speakers, including new first language speakers, and to re-normalize Kanien'kéha as a living language.”***

– Kahtehrón:ni Stacey and Tsohahí:io Deom



### **Awakening myaamia**

*Jarrid Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma*

A citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, Jarrid Baldwin has been part of the myaamia language reawakening since its beginning. Prior to this reawakening, the language had not been spoken for generations.

Baldwin spoke about creating and strengthening the diasporic Miami community, which has experienced multiple removals from ancestral homelands, as part of readiness for language learning to take place. Of focus was the developing Neepwaankita Certificate Program—a partnership between the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, the myaamia Center, and Miami University—which will train myaamia language educators to work in Miami Tribe language programs such as youth language camps.

***“Language revitalization is about community building.”***

– Jarrid Baldwin



## **The Karuk Master-Apprentice Program**

*Crystal Richardson, Karuk*

Drawing on more than fifteen years of experience as a trainer in Master-Apprentice methodology, Crystal Richardson offered an Origin Story focused on Karuk language pedagogy resulting in adult advanced speaker creation.

Her career emerged from her own experience as a teenager working towards fluency in the Karuk language as a tribal member. Richardson discussed her work as a teacher and co-curriculum developer with the Karuk language community. As someone who has obtained conversational fluency in Karuk, Richardson serves now as a mentor helping other Karuk language learning apprentices achieve their goals.

Her personal and professional experiences are complimented by her academic research about language teaching and pedagogy.



***“If not for my community investing in me, I would not be a master of my language.”***

*—Crystal Richardson*

**Cherokee Master-Apprentice Program**

*wahde galisgewi (Ryan Mackey),  
Cherokee Nation*

wahde is a Cherokee traditionalist, storyteller, dancer, and language specialist. He has been a Cherokee language teacher and curriculum developer for almost two decades, teaching both adults and children.

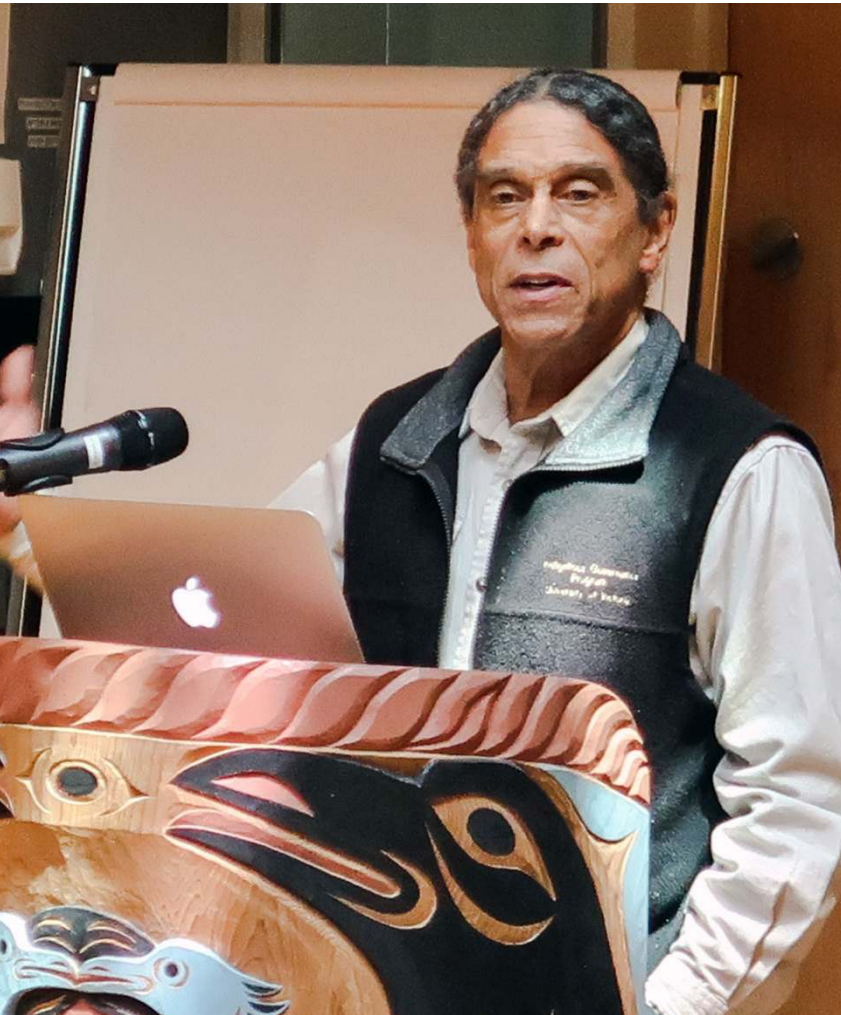
His Origin Story focused on the Cherokee Master-Apprentice Program, which strives to create a Cherokee language environment where only Cherokee is spoken. Through the program, apprentices receive approximately 4,000 contact hours of Cherokee over the two year program.



***“Our goal is to create a Cherokee language environment where only Cherokee is spoken.”***

*– wahde*





## **Accelerated Second Language Acquisition**

*Neyooxet Greymorning, Arapaho*

Neyooxet Greymorning began working in language revitalization in 1973. He holds joint positions in Anthropology and Native American Studies and has taught his Arapaho language at the University of Montana since 2004.

As the developer of Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), Neyooxet has conducted over 200 language teacher training workshops in four different countries; Australia, Canada, Italy, and the US serving over 2,000 language teachers.

Students in his Arapaho language courses at the University of Montana quickly learn to have conversations and tell stories in the language.

Anecdotally, many other communities have expressed having some success with this method.



## **Salish Fluency Transfer System and Curriculum**

*Grahm Wiley-Camacho and  
Dominique Wiley-Camacho, Salish  
School of Spokane*

Grahm and Dominique Wiley-Camacho shared the origin story of the Salish Fluency Transfer System and Curriculum in the language, with English translations.

The work began with LaRae Wiley, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, and Chris Parkin, who had experience with language teaching as a high school Spanish teacher.

The couple co-founded the Salish School of Spokane and began creating a multilevel 1,000 hour curriculum that uses audio recordings and visual aids to support ALL.

The work has expanded over time, with several other communities adapting the Salish Fluency Transfer System.



**Root-Word Method & Onkwawén:na  
Kentyókhwa Adult Mohawk Language  
Immersion Program**

*Owennatekha (Brian Maracle),  
Rohahí:yo (Jordan Brant), and Ryan  
DeCaire*

Owennatekha co-founded the  
Onkwawén:na Kentyókhwa Adult  
Mohawk Language Immersion Program  
in 1998.

Together, he, Rohahí:yo, and Ryan  
Decaire shared about the root-word  
method for teaching and learning of  
polysynthetic languages. The team  
discussed the need to develop language  
curriculum and to teach in ways which  
are specific to the structures of a  
language.

The program has emerged new  
proficient adult Kanyen'kéha speakers  
who are now re-establishing the  
intergenerational transmission and  
normalization of Kanyen'kéha across  
various communities.



***“We work to bring our language  
back to the way it used to be when  
our grandparents were young.”***

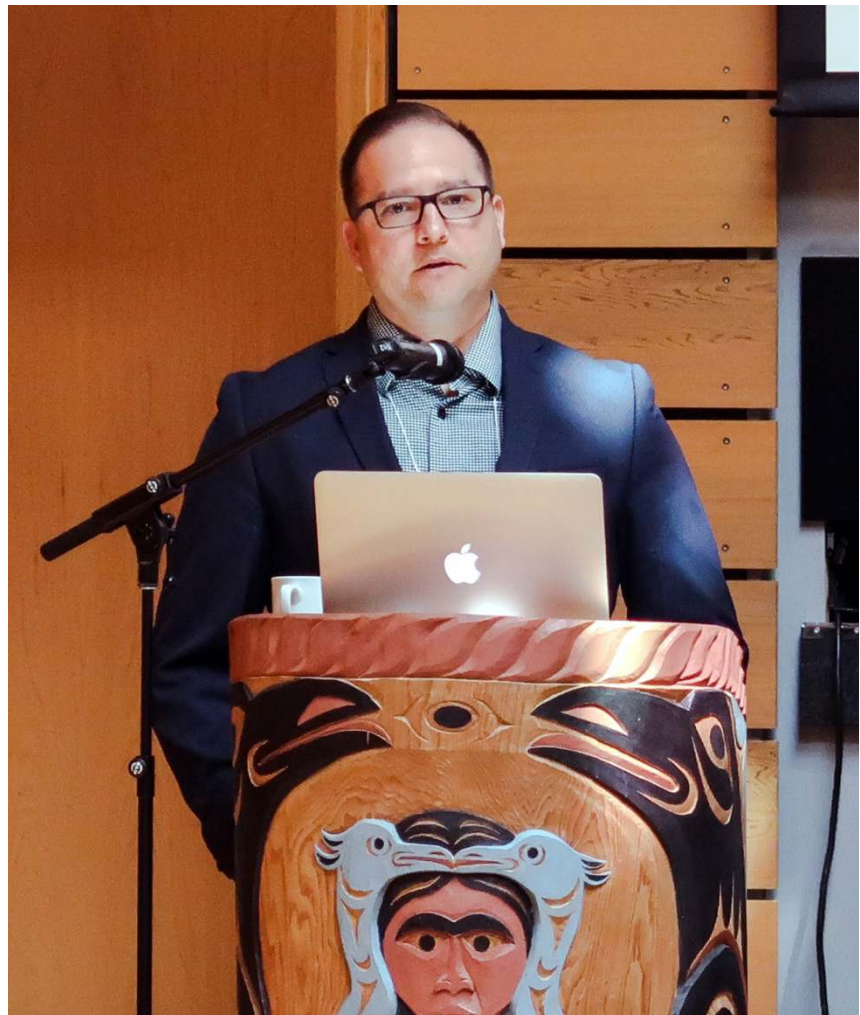
*—Owennatekha Maracle*

**The Onkwawén:na Kentyóhkwa Adult  
Mohawk Language Immersion 3rd Year  
Program**

*Tehota'kerá:tonh (Jeremy D. Green)*

Tehota'kerá:tonh is Kanyen'kehá:ka' (Mohawk) wolf clan from the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. He speaks Kanyen'kéha and has been involved in Kanyen'kéha language revitalization for 25 years.

Tehota'kerá:tonh shared the Origin Story of a third year program at Onkwawén:na Kentyóhkwa, which was implemented because graduates of the two-year program struggled to maintain language proficiency after leaving the program. The goal of the third year is to further develop students' ability to communicate meaningfully.





## Where Are Your Keys?

*Evan Gardner and Susanna Ciotti*

As the creator of *Where Are Your Keys?* (WAYK), Evan Gardner's Origin Story focused on his motivations as a non-Indigenous person to support language revitalization efforts.

WAYK supports the language learning and teacher training of youth and young adults (ages 14 and up). Taking a game-based learning approach supported by sign language, WAYK teaches people to teach language while learning the language themselves.

Since 2005, Evan has partnered with adult language learners from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (chinuk wawa); the Yurok Tribe (Yurok); Kodiak, Alaska (Alutiiq); Tsleil-Waututh Nation; St. Paul Island, Atka, and Anchorage, Alaska (Unangam Tunuu); among others.



**Kwi Awt Stelmexw partnership with  
Simon Fraser University**

*Khelsilem Rivers, Squamish Nation*

Khelsilem spoke about the Kwi Awt Stelmexw partnership with Simon Fraser University (SFU) which is an accredited two-year full-time adult immersion program, where students build proficiency in Skwxwu7mesh.

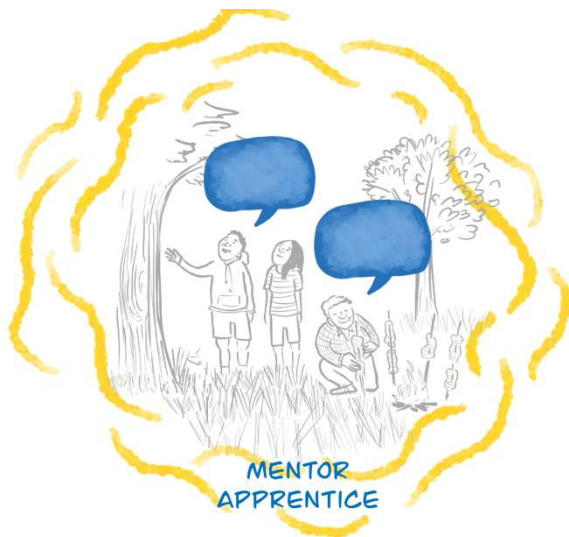
The initial program ran from September 2016 to April 2017 at SFU's Burnaby campus. Students completed 1,000 classroom hours exclusively taught in the language and graduated with a certificate in First Nations Language Proficiency.

The goal of the partnership is to grow the number of speakers to at least 157 by the year 2027.



# Finding Similarities Across Indigenous Adult ALL Contexts

Indigenous Adult ALL contexts use various innovative methods. **Most methods focus on immersion, meaning that only the Indigenous language is spoken for a sustained period of time.**



Originating with Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival in the early 1990s, one of the most well-known and adaptable models emphasizing immersion is the Mentor (or Master) Apprentice Program (MAP).

Pairs or small groups of language learners do activities with language speakers in the Indigenous language. MAP has been adapted by communities throughout Canada, the US, and beyond.



In Northern California, a network of motivated individuals across multiple communities gather regularly to learn, teach, and speak Karuk. In Oklahoma, the Cherokee Nation financially supports learners for 2 years of intensive full-time study with speakers.

**Some methods teach learners to teach.** Adult learners often simultaneously learn and teach the language. The Kahnawà:ke Education Center, the Neepwaankita Certificate Program, and the W̱SÁNEĆ School Board each focus specifically on supporting teachers who are learner-speakers to increase their language proficiency.

Likewise, the Salish Fluency Transfer System is a comprehensive, sequenced curriculum based on recorded narratives of speakers and designed to be delivered by language learners. *Where Are Your Keys?* equips language learners with tools to teach what they know to others.

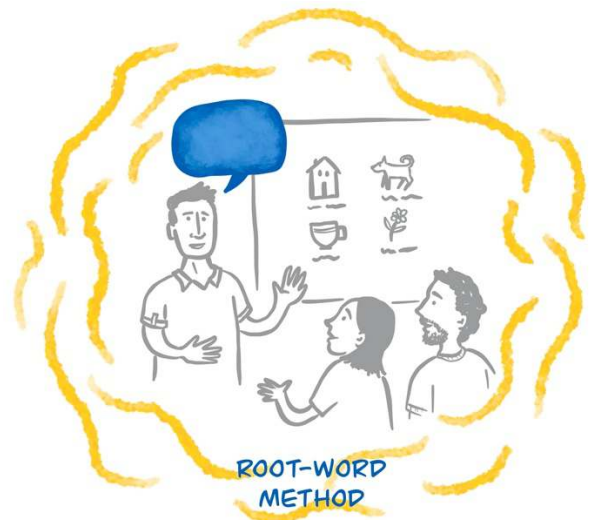
Like MAP, these approaches have all been adapted and implemented to support language revitalization across Indigenous communities.

**Some methods rely on highly trained language teachers with proficiency in the language and strong understanding of the linguistic features of the language.** The Root-Word Method is used in the Onkwawén:na Kentyókhwa Adult Mohawk Language Immersion Program and responds directly to the structure of polysynthetic languages—in which words contain many parts.

Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), developed by Stephen Greymorning to teach Arapaho, uses pictures and strategic scaffolding of language input to support ALL.

Many contributors to Indigenous adult ALL methods and learning environments have linguistic training or at least a good understanding of the linguistic features of the language. This knowledge allows them to introduce language structures gradually, from simple to more complex. These programs aim to explicitly teach language structures while remaining in the language at all times.

**Proficiency is reached through thousands of hours of exposure and practice with the language.** The Cherokee Master-Apprentice Program, Onkwawén:na Kentyókhwa Adult Mohawk Language Immersion Program, Salish School of Spokane, and Squamish Language





Proficiency Certificate Program are all full-time immersion programs. Other programs follow intensive models but are offered several hours per week or over shorter terms.

**Most learning environments use various kinds of assessment tools for program planning, ongoing student assessment, and program evaluation.** Several have used the ACTFL scales as a starting point for determining language levels, in student self-assessment, or in more formal testing through use of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI).

Dr. Greymorning spoke of doing regular oral comprehension checks with his students in ASLA. In the Onkwawén:na Kentyókhwa Adult Mohawk Language Immersion Program, students are tested after each unit through a translation test and annually with the OPI. WAYK uses both the NETOLNEW self-assessment tool ([netolnew.ca/assessment](http://netolnew.ca/assessment)) and ACTFL ‘can-do statements’ for student self-assessment.

Throughout the gathering, the group expressed a need to deepen our understandings and effective use of assessment methods, as well as to explore ways to decolonize assessment tools, modifying them to meet the needs of specific Indigenous language contexts.

**Successful learning environments make learning enjoyable.** Language is deeply connected to identity and learning and teaching can be highly emotional activities. Therefore attention must be given as to how to maximize comfort and support learners. Throughout the gathering, members of the group shared strategies for supporting learners, emphasizing the role of kindness, patience, and ongoing opportunities for support.

*“Enjoy the language.”*  
– PENÁĆ

# Critical Actions Toward Creating and Sustaining Learning Environments

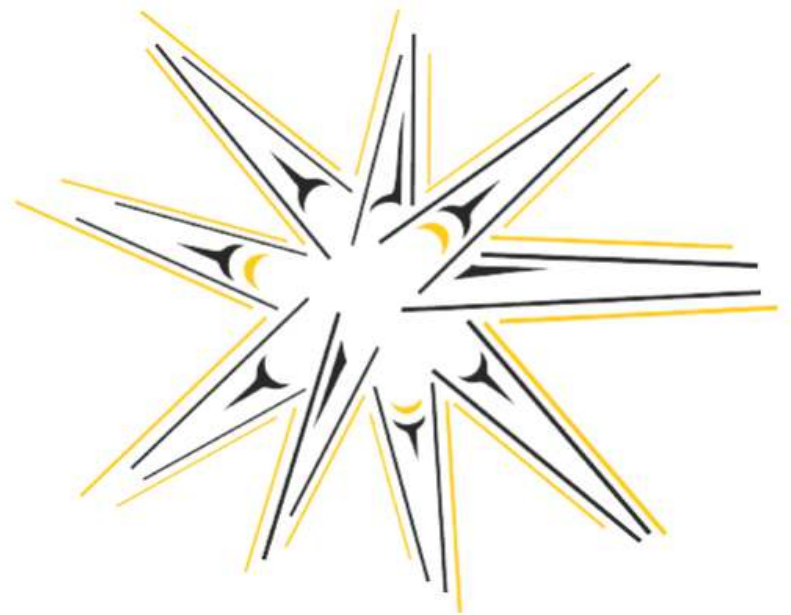
Language revitalization is not just about teaching language; it's also about supporting and motivating people. As Graham Wiley-Camacho of the Salish School of Spokane stated, the critical challenge we face in language revitalization is treating language revitalization “as a series of technical problems instead of sociocultural problems [as we should].” The group determined that energy, fire, and determination are vital to push language efforts forward. Additionally, language revitalization thrives when Indigenous community members (and their allies):

## Initiate

Language revitalization begins with a spark, that, when nurtured by individuals and families, grows into flame.

Several people at the gathering shared stories of feeling the spark for their language at times of transition or rites of passage in life, such as moving from youth to young adulthood, becoming a parent or grandparent, or experiencing a death.

While a language program cannot ignite a passion for language for community members, it can prepare the fire and maintain embers of language until others are ready to begin. The Salish School of Spokane began as a non-profit, family-based effort that grew into a full immersion school whose language transfer method has been replicated in other communities.





## Respond to Community Needs

The purposes for Indigenous ALL are many and varied. Increasing learners' language proficiency is often a primary goal. Learners at Kahnawà:ke are working to increase the proficiency of advanced Mohawk learners. But proficiency is not necessarily the only goal.

Miami people have reawakened their formerly sleeping language and are now reconnecting a diasporic community through language reclamation efforts. For many, language work is about healing and reclaiming identity.

Those at the gathering shared that part of responding to community needs is defining success within the community and not through imposed measures. Often this requires finding and working with the people who nurture, protect, and advocate for learners.

***“Our language comes from the earth and moves through us.”***

–Tehota'kerá:tonh (Jeremy D. Green)



## Innovate

Impactful adult ALL efforts don't just replicate existing second language learning models. The Adult Language Immersion Program at Six Nations continually evaluates and refines approaches to teaching, learning, and speaking Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk) based on teacher, learner and community needs.

Innovation is necessary to help individuals build their speaking proficiency in the target language more efficiently and to provide opportunities for language use in a real community. The classroom is engineered to expand the community of speakers and promote language use outside of the program. Further, innovation is important to moving past issues of complacency in ALL programs. Innovations can help maintain momentum.

One program, for example, struggled with access to documents, so they created their own digital archive. This innovation gave the community greater control over their language.





## Partner

The foundation of sustainable learning environments is a strong team that supports one another and seeks collaboration. These collaborations may be with Elders and knowledge-keepers, linguists, and institutions.

In order for language work to grow, it is important to connect with others doing similar work. Kwi Awt Stelmexw and the Onkwawén:na Kentyókhwa Adult Mohawk Language Immersion Program have both developed partnerships with universities who provide credit to participants upon completion of their programs.

Several group members stated that drawing on and nurturing various kinds of partnerships has been essential to the success of their programs. They emphasized the need for setting clear expectations with partners, maintaining open communication, and continuously seeking opportunities for mutual support.

***“Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I get up at sunrise and pray.”***

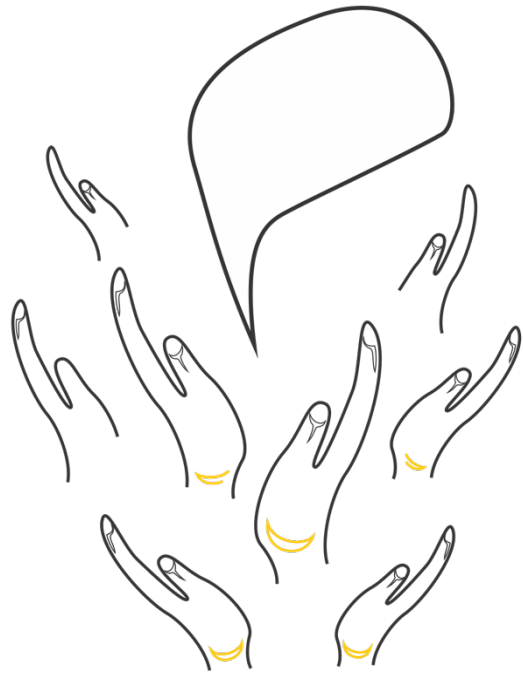
—Neyooxet Greymorning

## Persist

Language revitalization efforts are built on hard work and shared responsibility over time. It is necessary to keep a big picture perspective that can sustain you over your lifetime.

The origins of SENĆOŦEN language revitalization programs, for example, can be traced back to the work of elders and speakers in the 1960s. Today, the community has consistent cohorts of new language learners who help grow an established immersion school. Jarrid Baldwin, of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, visited a diasporic community of Miami people in Washington over a period of five years to help spark a flame for language there.

While these are successes to celebrate, there are also many challenges in doing this work, both at the personal and programmatic levels. Those who are most successful have a strong support network that inspires them to move forward. Many at the gathering shared that they rely on partners/spouses, families, and friends who encourage them as well as mentors who show them what is possible and demonstrate resilience.



***“My family sustains me  
and gives me strength.”***

–Kahtehrón:ni Stacey

# Growing the Fire

Each of us has a role to play in supporting the emergence of new Indigenous language speakers.

**To allies, seek ways to move beyond advocacy by offering increased support and access to resources for Indigenous language learners and programs.** Susanna Ciotti of Where Are Your Keys? stated that a “limited understanding of the real needs of language revitalization (people, money, space, time, training, energy) by many (but not all) of the entities that hold the purse strings” remains a barrier to language revitalization work. This concern was echoed by many others. Learn more about Indigenous language revitalization and find meaningful ways to help meet the needs of the communities and organizations doing this work.

*“If funding is not sustainable, how can programs be sustained?”*

—Susanna Ciotti

**To community members, it’s up to you to grow the fire within for your language.** The work of language revitalization is difficult but fulfilling. It is important to celebrate progress. One group member shared that learners who are just starting out should understand that they are not “bad” community members because they don’t know the language; rather they are beginners. Over time, beginners become proficient speakers.

Along this journey, it is also necessary to find time to rest. Take breaks, get out of the office, spend time on the land in order to renew motivation. Ultimately, the group offered this message of hope and reassurance to one another and all those who work to ensure the futures of our languages:

***Don’t wait for permission to use your language.***

***Find supportive people and begin to build together.***

***Laugh and find joy in the journey.***



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