

Title

Reclaiming our languages: a systematic review of Indigenous language revitalization literature in support of ancestral language learners.

About the project

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues reports that 50% or more of the world's languages will be extinct by 2100. As the web of Indigenous language speakers disintegrates and the use of languages declines, we lose significant knowledge of the world and relations between all sorts of beings: flora, rocks, water, and fauna, including humans.

Indigenous languages are even more significant to ancestral communities. Indigenous understandings of morality and relations are embedded in the structure of languages. Ancestral language learners report significant wellness benefits, including an enhanced sense of identity, a richer understanding of cultural teachings, and significantly decreased rates of suicide. For ancestral learners of Indigenous languages, learning is a form of healing, caring for the community, and honouring ancestors.

Yet, the vast majority of Indigenous language projects and funding go to programs with little to no intention of directly rebuilding communities of speakers. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Call to Action 14, subsection iii (TRC 14.iii), states: "The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization." Funding must be realigned to prioritize reaching ancestral learners of Indigenous languages.

This project is a systematic review of all the literature from peer-reviewed journals to Indigenous-authored newspapers, graduate theses, and white papers to identify the most robust lessons from the field on effectively rebuilding networks of Indigenous language speakers.

We began this project with the following questions in mind:

- 1) What does the literature tell us about running successful, effective Indigenous language programs focused on rebuilding a community of language users? Do different types of language programs have distinct markers of success?
- 2) What counts as a successful, effective language program? Who decides? How are Indigenous communities naming and identifying the goals of language reclamation?

Findings, case studies, resources for community educators, and the full report are available at www.ReclaimingOurLanguages.com

Key findings

- 1) Out of 4,050 articles reviewed, only 50 discuss Indigenous people learning their own ancestral language in any way. While there are significant funding and publishing opportunities in this field, only 1.3% of publications attempt to address the learning of Indigenous languages. Most of the field focuses on language documentation, histories of language loss, and concepts related to decolonizing languages. However, these projects do not necessarily serve the purposes of Indigenous language reclamation. Thus, scholarly training and publishing paths need to refocus the field on the ultimate purpose of Indigenous language reclamation: rebuilding communities of speakers.
- 2) The language projects that most effectively produce language proficiency and fluency are long-term immersion programs, such as language houses for adults or schools for children. Highly concentrated immersion programs cost the most, support fewer learners, and need secure, long-term funding—at least 10 years. However, funding these programs is essential to revitalizing a language. Communities without immersion programs need pathways to intentionally develop these structures for the future.
- 3) The literature reveals that most authors in the field are not Indigenous and that non-Indigenous authors rarely reference or cite Indigenous people by name. In contrast, Indigenous authors often address the experiences of Indigenous learners, name Indigenous people, and discuss the significance of learning to sustain a community of speakers. Non-Indigenous authors overwhelmingly focus their research analysis on their own perspectives of teaching languages but rarely address Indigenous perspectives, learning, or visions for the future of the language. These findings reinforce what TRC 14.iv states, “The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.”
- 4) Nearly all of the 23 articles identified as addressing some aspect of what learners are learning in these programs do so within a public education model of student assessment. Far too few articles address culturally specific, community-designed evaluation processes. Very few publications discuss community-led strategic language plans and how educators determine whether their work meets community purposes. Funders and publishers want to support this type of work, but our data illustrates that the structural efforts made thus far are inadequate.

Policy implications

1. Fund a wide variety of Indigenous language exposure programs (Indigenous radio, signs, games, workshops, camps), even if they do not necessarily produce proficient speakers. These programs create entries to learning the language, build relationships between Indigenous language users, and create community networks to support additional language reclamation work.

2. Support Indigenous immersion programs for all ages through long-term (15 to 20 years) funding initiatives that help language communities foster and build proficient speakers, with designated funding pathways for languages with no current immersion options.
3. Languages with the fewest speakers need the most support to actively move toward reclamation. These communities are most likely to focus their energy on exposure programs to recruit new learners and build relationships among them. Due to the severity of language loss, these communities are potentially owed the most by Canadian reconciliation efforts.
4. Use review criteria to prioritize language work that aligns with the language reclamation needs previously expressed by the community and is preferably led by Indigenous decision makers.
5. Address the communication gap between community-based Indigenous language educators and the scholarly literature by incentivizing creative, alternative approaches to publishing and co-authorship, such as interviews with experienced language educators and Elder speakers. Additional mentoring and pre-review feedback will better support Indigenous authorship.

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Read the full report

www.ReclaimingOurLanguages.com