Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance

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Introduction

Since a time before memory, Indigenous languages thrived on Turtle Island (the continent now called North America). More then 500 years ago foreigners arrived from lands afar and brought with them their languages. Through many devastating events such genocide, colonialism, linguistic imperialism, new disease, forced relocation, upset of Indigenous economic, social and political systems as well as the most likely influential factor – the enforcement of English-only residential schools for all Indigenous children, Indigenous languages declined in use and existence (McCarty, 2003; Spolsky, 2002). It is estimated that at the time of contact there were an estimated 450 Aboriginal languages and dialects in Canada belonging to 11 language families (Office of the Commissioner of Official languages, 1992). In the last 100 years alone, at least ten of Canada's Aboriginal languages have become extinct (Norris, 1998). There are now approximately 60 Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada belonging to 11 different language families (Statistics Canada, 2008). Only three of these 60+ languages (Cree, Inuktitut and Anishnaabe) are expected to remain and flourish in Aboriginal communities due to their population base (Burnaby, 1996; Norris, 1998). However, new research states that the number of speakers alone is a poor measurement of the health of a language and rather what is most important is the occurrence of intergenerational transmission and especially how many children are learning the language (Barrena et al., 2007; Norris, 2003).

Over the past 40-50 years, Indigenous people have begun a process of reclaiming their languages and working towards its revival and use in communities. Many communities are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their methods of revival, while at the same time original speakers of Indigenous languages are dying at a rapid pace with each passing season. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the literature to-date on Indigenous language revitalization strategies and provide discussion questions and future directions for the continuation of Indigenous languages.

Research Questions

Why is it important to ensure the survival of Indigenous languages?

What are Indigenous communities doing to revive and continue their languages?

What methods are working well?

What stands in the way for Indigenous people to be successful in reviving and continuing their languages?

Recent Research results

Why is it important to ensure the survival of Indigenous languages?
Some of the world's foremost authorities on language, such as David Crystal (2000), Robert Dixon (1997) and Michael Krauss (1992), predict that of the approximately 6,000 languages presently spoken in the world, up to 90% will disappear within the next 100 years. Further, they estimate that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by only 4% of its people (Bernard, 1996; Crystal, 1997). This means that most of the world's language diversity is in the stewardship of a very small number of people (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

Every time a language dies so does an expression of human experience like no other (Blair, Rice, Wood, & Janvier, 2002; Foundation for Endangered Languages, 2004; UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003) as well as unique and irrecoverable knowledge in science, linguistics, anthropology, prehistory, psychology (Foundation for Endangered Languages, 2004), sociology, history, cosmology, ecology, spirituality and religious studies.

What are Indigenous communities doing to revive and continue their languages?
Communities in Canada and abroad are using creativity, ingenuity, innovation and fierce determination to maintain and revive Indigenous languages. The following is a summary of current strategies being employed and research done in Indigenous communities, mainly in North America but with some exemplary models from abroad as well.

Documentation and preservation

Although documentation of a language is sometimes seen as a passive exercise that does not work towards creating new speakers, some Indigenous groups advocate for preservation activities to save what remains of the language before it is too late (Blair et al., 2002; Penfield et al., 2008). Preservation activities include creating dictionaries, taping Elders speaking the language and, more recently, incorporating the use of computers, and interactive CD-ROMs (Morrison & Peterson, 2003). The web-based resource FirstVoices™ is a prominent example of multimedia technology, documenting and archiving Indigenous languages using text, sound and video clips (First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, 2003). Another aspect to documentation which overlaps with resource development is that of creation and work on orthography. Many Indigenous language groups have developed their own writing systems or continue to refine the one they have (Brand, Elliott, & Foster, 2002; Hinton, 2001b).

Curriculum/Resource Development

One First Nations scholar insists that curriculum development is necessary to successfully create a language transmission process (Kirkness, 2002). Most often communities create print resources (Wilson & Kamana, 2001), however some multimedia examples include the award-winning *Cree for Kids* video (ScreenWeavers Studios, 2002) and the Arapaho version of the Disney movie *Bambi* created by Stephen Greymorning (2001).Yaunches (2004) reports an all-Navajo radio station and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation reported producing five and a half hours a week of television programming (Royal Commission of Aboriginal peoples, 1996). Lastly, a Hawaiian group negotiated

an agreement with Apple to create an operating system completely in Hawaiian, the first time a MAC OS was ever made available in an Indigenous American language (Warschauer, Donaghy, & Kuamoyo, 1997).

Language engineering

It is important to continually modernize Indigenous languages. It is especially important to incorporate contemporary expressions and concepts to capture young people's attention and interest (Anthony, Davis, & Powell, 2003), without having to revert to English. Recent examples include a Cree Health Board in Quebec tasked with creating new words for health terms such as pancreas and insulin (Bonspiel, 2005) as well as a Hawaiian computer project (Warschauer et al., 1997) which led to the creation of new Hawaiian words such as 'upload' (*hoÿouka* – the same word for loading a canoe) and 'save' (*mälama* - part of a phrase that means to take proper care).

Teacher training/ Post-secondary initiatives

Some communities train Indigenous language teachers as a strategy for language retention and revitalization (Johns & Mazurkewich, 2001; Smith & Peck, 2004; Stikeman, 2001; Suina, 2004). It is often recognized that being a fluent speaker does not automatically make for a skillful language teacher and, in fact, a first language speaker is often unaware of the difficulties of learning the language (Jacobs, 1998). Kirkness (2002) recommends having "appropriate, certified training programs available to enable our people to become language teachers, linguists, interpreters, translators, curriculum developers, and researchers" (p. 19). In 1999, the British Columbia College of Teachers helped to co-develop and approve one such certificate for teaching Indigenous languages and culture called the Developmental Standard Teaching Certificate (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2001). More recently the En'owkin Centre in partnership with the University of Victoria co-created the Certificate in Aboriginal Language Revitalization, a post-secondary training certificate in Aboriginal language revitalization. In addition, Dr. Lorna Williams, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning at the University of Victoria, is currently in the process of creating a Bachelor and Master's degrees in Indigenous Language and Culture: Recovery, Revitalization and Maintenance. The University of Alberta also runs a summer institute each year called the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) similar to one run in the US called the American Indian Languages Development Institute (AILDI), based at the University of Arizona, both of which focus on teaching language teachers.

Policy development and political advocacy

Some Aboriginal people focus on policy change and work for organizations that strategize, plan and fundraise at federal or provincial levels for far-reaching effects on the language revitalization movement (Assembly of First Nations, 1991; First Nations Languages and Literacy Secretariat, 1992). One such success is the creation of the federal Aboriginal Languages Initiative in 1998, which disburses nation-wide funding for community-based Aboriginal language projects (First Peoples' Heritage Language and Culture Council, 2003; Norris, 2003). Kirkness (2002) stresses pushing for legislation to protect Aboriginal languages as well as the right to use them. In June 2005 the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures produced a report on a proposed strategy to preserve, revitalize and promote the Indigenous languages of Canada (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005). Some communities are organizing themselves

into “Language Authorities” which can be particularly powerful when groups are able to look beyond the imposed boundaries of their “band” or “tribe” and work collaboratively with other groups of a similar language (Ignace, 1998). For an exemplary model of this see Wetzel’s (2006) account of the Potawatomi revitalization efforts.

Research

Kirkness (2002) states that seeking answers to important questions through research is critical to addressing issues of recovering and maintaining Indigenous languages. Some Aboriginal communities are choosing specific research partnerships, largely with linguistic scholars, to learn about linguistic theory, to archive, and to produce effective learning materials in the language (Anthony et al., 2003; Blair et al., 2002; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2003; Shaw, 2001). Other groups of researchers such as McCarty, Romero & Zepeda (2006) are choosing to focus their research on aspects of language revitalization such as the attitudes of young people towards language loss and learning.

Language classes

This is probably the most common form of language teaching, however, it is not a method that generally creates fluent speakers (Blair et al., 2002). These initiatives involve teaching the language as a ‘subject’ in school for children or evening classes for adults (Ignace, 1998). Stephen Greymorning (2000) shares the Arapaho people’s experience of fully implementing language teaching as a subject in the K-12 school system and four years later realized that it was making no difference in creating new speakers.

Bilingual schooling

Several examples of completely bilingual, community-controlled schools exist, such as the well-known Rock Point Community School of the Navajo Nation in Northeast Arizona (Boseker, 2000) and the first bilingual Cree-English school which opened in Thompson, Manitoba in 2001 (Desjarlais, 2001). Bilingual schools are an important contribution to language revitalization strategies in First Nations communities. However, due to the dominance of English, they tend to have varying degrees of success in reviving languages. McCarty (2003) believes that well-implemented bilingual schooling programs have positive effects, while Blackfeet activist Darrel Kipp (2000) warns to stay away from bilingual schooling strategies as they are based on transitioning to full-English language development.

Immersion practices

Cross-generational/community-based

Many communities engage in summer immersion-style programs (Daniels-Fiss, 2005; Jacobs, 1998; Raloff, 1995), which are usually intensive, one- or two-week sessions that often have the advantage of learning outside the classroom for a daily-life experience of the language.

Early childhood focused

Te Kōhango Reo or ‘language nests’ programs, which began in the early 1980s, are an early childhood total immersion program exclusively using the traditional language as the vehicle for interaction and instruction (King, 2001; Te Kohanga Reo, 2004). Te Kōhango Reo is considered one of the most successful language revitalization models in the world (Kirkness, 1998; McClutchie Mita, 2007) and has been an inspiration to efforts both within Aotearoa (New Zealand) and internationally (King, 2001;

Yaunches, 2004). After hearing about the success in Aotearoa a small group of Indigenous Hawaiians travelled to New Zealand in the early 1980s to study what the Maoris were doing (Warner, 2001). Now in both Aotearoa and Hawaii, entire generations of speakers have emerged through immersion programming (Warner, 2001; Wilson & Kamana, 2001).

Due mainly to the success of 'Aha Punana Leo (Hawaiian language nests), Hawaii is now seen as a leader in the U.S. and abroad as a model and a symbol of hope to other endangered language groups hoping to revitalize their languages ('Aha Punana Leo, 2004; Wilson & Kamana, 2001). Although the Hawaiian people now have K-12 immersion schools and university-level programs in their language, 'Aha Pūnana Leo preschools continue to be the foundation of Hawaiian language revitalization ('Aha Punana Leo, 2004).

Interestingly, both the Hawaiian and Maori language leaders first studied the French immersion model in Canada before embarking on their journeys toward language revitalization (Benton, 1996; Warner, 2001). Immersion programs are being created at the preschool and elementary levels in select places across Canada. For example, total immersion programs exist from nursery to grade three in the communities of Onion Lake and Kahnawà:ke (Jacobs, 1998; McKinley, 2003). The community of Adam's Lake in British Columbia offers immersion programs from preschool to grade seven in their community-based school (Ignace, 1998; McIvor, 2006). The Government of the Northwest Territories also reported in 2004 having supported 18 language nest programs over the previous few years (NWT Literacy Council, 2004), certainly the most abundant concentration of these programs found in the country.

K-12 immersion

The achievement of immersion schools from kindergarten through to high-school graduation is no small feat. The Maoris and then the Hawaiians were the first Indigenous groups to accomplish this goal (Wilson & Kamana, 2001). Since 1997, the Maori have offered primary and secondary instruction exclusively in Maori (with the exception of 'English' as a subject) for ages 5 through 18 (Harrison & Papa, 2005).

Adult-focused immersion

Several adult-specific immersion methods exist. The Master-Apprentice language learning program (Hinton, 2001a; Hinton, Steele, & Vera, 2002) has been successfully implemented in California, as a one-on-one immersion program pairing young people with traditional speaking Elders to spend time together exclusively in the language. Another initiative was a Mohawk adult immersion program in which a small group of learners met in a house five days a week from September to June, sharing meals and conversing with Elders and other community resource people (Maracle & Richards, 2002). S. Neyooxet Greymorning has also reported a highly successful immersion model called Accelerated Second Language Acquisition™ which he has been using with children and adults in Arapaho territory (Greymorning, 2005).

What methods are working well?

Hermes (2007) draws upon the work of Aguilera & LeCompte (2007), DeJong (1998), Greymorning (1997), Kipp (2000), McCarty (2002) and Wilson and Kawai'ae'a (2007) to assert that "the Indigenous-immersion method is quickly being recognized as one of the most effective tools for restoring Indigenous language…" (p.58). McCarty (2003)

supports this direction stating, "Language immersion…is increasingly the pedagogy of choice among Indigenous communities seeking to produce a new generation of fluent Native speakers" (p.148). Long-time Indigenous language revitalization advocates Grenoble and Whaley (2006) also state that "total-immersion programs are the best option for revitalizing a language" (p.51). However, it is reflected in the literature that total immersion is not always possible (at least initially) and that communities may have to have a graduated or partial-immersion approach (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007).

Aguilera and LeCompte (2007) study three Indigenous communities' experiences with language immersion. They ably highlight the achievements of these three communities and emphasize that immersion language learning can be done successfully without effecting student's performance in English. They advocate for the well-educated bilingual, bi-cultural adults who will no doubt contribute in important ways to their nations and society as a whole. Lizette Peter (2003) describes a "Culturally Responsive Evaluation" model which was created by an "Immersion Team" with the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. It is a tool they continue to refine and describe as an open-ended, culturally-responsive, useful and thorough tool which effectively identifies strengths and weaknesses of their program in order to continue to improve.

Norris (2003) explains Canada is one of the only nations to collect data on language use and ability. Whaley (2003) states that because many language revitalization strategies are new, "few longitudinal studies are available to assess the impact on language vitality" (p.967). Wetzel (2006) emphasizes that many studies are done on the status of Indigenous languages but little is done to capture the revitalization work being done, particularly, I would add on the outcomes of such efforts. Clearly, much more to draw upon into the efficacy of Indigenous language revitalization strategies is needed.

What stands in the way for Indigenous people to be successful in reviving and continuing their languages?

Barrena et al. (2007) detail several reasons why communities struggle to revive their languages including low number of speakers, and lack of status for the language or official support, external social, economical, political pressures to give up the language. Although in some ways a victory, the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) which provides $5 million dollars a year to be divided equally amongst provinces and territories (Andrews Miller, 2008) is less than adequate. Given the 2006 census population statistics of Aboriginal people totalling 1,172,790 the ALI funding adds up to about $4.25 per person per year for Indigenous language revitalization. However, some provinces and territories supplement this federal funding to make language revitalization more possible for Indigenous people. Language revitalization efforts are also hindered by a lack of interest from the young people and multi-generational shame that exists for many Indigenous nations (McCarty et al., 2006). Krauss (1998) quotes the late Eileen MacLean at a gathering of bilingual educators who said, "we don't need more linguists - rather what we need is good psychiatrists." Many of our people struggle to access the language within them and to teach it to the young people. The same people who teach in

immersion programs and schools often go home and speak English to their children and grandchildren (Greymorning, 2000; M. Krauss, 1998).

Future directions

What must be done in order for Indigenous communities to successfully revive and continue their languages?

The Government of Canada must take action now that responsibility has been acknowledged for the residential school experience (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008). While individual payments to victims of residential school are an important gesture it will never bring back the languages. The most meaningful impact the government could make is the opportunity for our languages to thrive once again.

> ***Indigenous languages must be given official status by being declared the founding languages of this land.***

Pay attention to good work that has already been done – Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) and the *Towards a New Beginning* report completed by the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures in 2005 outline many recommendations that if followed would solve many problems. Such as the call for national organizing, the creation of a National Centre for Indigenous Languages (NCIL) similar to the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) to coordinate orthographies, learning resources, curriculum, databases of speakers, and research efforts.

> ***A life-span approach to language revitalization is necessary.***

Communities must be supported to develop 'whole community' approaches. Languages must be established as living, working languages in families and communities. Hermes (2007) gives examples such as hosting informal dinners, community events, and ceremonies that ensure the language is used, thereby creating an arena for language practice to occur in the community. Sims (2005) shares an example from New Mexico where two Pueblo communities put on a community carnival with different games and food booths are manned by fluent speakers who reinforce the language with students who want to play a game or order food – successfully bringing the language learning out of the classroom and into the community.

Conclusion

Given the history of Canada and other settler nations around the world there is much reason to be discouraged about the continuation of Indigenous languages. However, Indigenous nations are growing at unprecedented rates (Statistics Canada, 2008) and there is a growing serge of community members insisting that our languages must survive. Many communities are developing a growing sophistication in the methods they undertake to revive and continue their languages.

Given the resources, communities could essentially bring back their languages in one generation. With efforts aimed at every member of the community regardless of age the

languages could thrive again. The First Peoples of this land have been burdened with the responsibility of ensuring that Indigenous languages do not die – but partners and allies are also needed to ensure this outcome.

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