

# The Role of Cultural Instruction in Adult Indigenous Language Learning

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*Abstract: As one of the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, the TRC demanded that the Canadian government fund language revitalization and preservation programs, including language courses at the postsecondary level. The demand for funding of language revitalization programs has, in turn, augmented the drive for Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) programs in communities and educational institutions, which results in a need for instructional programs. This article presents a review of the literature on Indigenous language instruction coupled with instruction in Indigenous cultural concepts among Indigenous adult learners of Anishinaabemowin: in particular, the focus is on learning gains when a component of cultural instruction is added to Indigenous language instruction to Indigenous adults. This review of literature highlights a gap in the research on adult Indigenous language learning and cultural teachings in the field of adult Indigenous language teaching. Additional research on this topic would contribute to the revitalization of Indigenous languages and contribute to fulfilling Calls to Action 13, 14, and 15 of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Addressing this gap in the research would advance knowledge about the role of cultural instruction in Indigenous language learning, which is useful for ILR curriculum planners and instructors.*

*Key words: Indigenous language revitalization (ILR); Indigenous language instruction; cultural instruction; culture; adult language learning.*

## Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the word Indigenous encompasses the Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and Inuk (Inuit) peoples of Canada (Government of Canada, 2023). The term *cultural instruction* will be defined as instruction in “the material forms of Aboriginal cultures (artifacts, works of art and craft, historical sites) and ... their dynamic forms – songs, dances, stories and teachings that bring collective memory, insight and inspiration to Aboriginal people and to the world” (Government of Canada, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, Brown’s definition of *Indigenous worldview* will frame the discussion (as cited in Tanaka, 2016): Some of the salient and interconnected concepts of an indigenous [sic] worldview include (1) time as cyclical and rhythmic rather than linear and progress-oriented; (2) the interrelated sacredness of time and place; (3) nature as a site of indwelling spirits; (4) a richly defined and enacted sense of relationship; and (5) the use of oral transmission of knowledge. (p. 153).

## Background

The current review of literature focuses on the Canadian context. Despite the actions of European colonisers, there is a significant and thriving Indigenous population in Canada with over 70 Indigenous languages in use (Statistics Canada-Statistique Canada, 2022, p. 1). In the 2021 Census, 1,807,250 Canadians identified as Indigenous, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (Statistics Canada-Statistique Canada, 2022, p. 1) out of an overall population of 40 million (Statistics Canada-Statistique Canada, 2023), i.e., 4.5% of the overall population.

Recognizing the historical oppression and cultural genocide inflicted on the Indigenous peoples of Canada by the church and the government of Canada via the Indian Residential School system and other means (Reconciliation Education, 2023), the government of Canada has stated its intention of rectifying the relationship with Indigenous persons in Canada, as well as undertaking a process of reconciliation and “building a renewed relationship with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples based on the recognition of rights, respect and partnership” (Government of Canada, 2023). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established in 2008. The TRC subsequently published the six-volume *Calls to Action* (TRC, 2015), in which it requested, among 94 items, that the Canadian government fund language revitalization and preservation programs, including language courses at the postsecondary level (TRC, 2015). The TRC’s demand for funding and creation of infrastructure around Indigenous languages in Canada has subsequently augmented the drive for Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) programs in communities and postsecondary institutions.

The call for funding has been partially met with government financing in Ontario for community-based language revitalization projects, educator development, a research network, and funding for early childhood education (Government of Ontario, 2018). Moreover, since the Calls for Action (TRC, 2015), the Government of Canada and Canadian Indigenous groups have co-developed a bill to support Calls to Action 13, 14, and 15 of the TRC (Government of Canada, 2019). Key elements of this bill include funding and support for ILR, a commitment

for Indigenous and government groups to work together, and the establishment of an Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (Government of Canada, 2019).

In parallel to the TRC Calls to Action in Canada, for the last 30 years there has been a move to increased ILR in different countries, with diverse Indigenous groups founding their own schools, running camps, researching, and making recommendations about positive teaching practices (McCarty, 2008; McInnes, 2014). ILR programs have been established in Canada, as well as at the international level (Mexico, Hawaii and United States, and Australia), in both government-run as well as community-based scenarios. The increased focus on ILR programs in Canada and elsewhere highlights the need for research on teaching and learning approach(es) most suitable for adult (Indigenous) learners, while considering the distinct needs of each community.

## Purpose and Theory

The purpose of this thematic review of literature is to learn more about the extent to which a culturally grounded approach would support adult education Indigenous language learning programs in Canada, specifically Anishinaabemowin language courses. In terms of positionality, the researcher self-identifies as a White, multilingual teacher of European and Mexican ancestry. The researcher has personal experience living in the lands of the Nahua in central Mexico, and a personal interest in Indigenous languages and their revitalization. The researcher is currently based in the lands of the Mississauga Anishinabewaki (Native Digital Land, 2022a, c) where Anishinaabemowin is the territorial language (Native Digital Land, 2022b). The researcher decided to research the language of the land where they reside. Anishinaabemowin is an Indigenous language from the Great Lakes area of Canada and the United States; it is also known as Ojibwemowin, Ojibwe, and/or Chippewa (Horton, 2017; Native Digital Land, 2022c; Union of Ontario Indians, 2023).

As the focus of the review is on adult learners in a non-academic context, adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2012; Lindeman, 1926) also exists in a similar, non-academic and adult context, and thus, supports the aims of the current review of literature. The research studies in this thematic review of literature were undertaken with adult participants who participated voluntarily in the studies. As adult learners, the participants are viewed as self-directed, independent, motivated by their own life experiences and learning needs and learner individuality is accepted (Knowles et al., 2012; Lindeman, 1926). Learner independence and self-motivation are considered in the choice of appropriate literature and the role of cultural education in learning Anishinaabemowin.

## Methodology

The search for peer-reviewed articles for the current thematic review of literature was conducted in January and February 2021. The peer-reviewed journal articles for the current traditional-narrative review (Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2019) were found based on searches using key words such as “learning Indigenous languages” AND Canada AND adult, “learning Indigenous languages” AND adults, “Indigenous language revitalization”, “learning Indigenous languages” AND Canada AND “adult learning”. The databases used in searching were multidisciplinary databases with education coverage, such as Web of Science, Scholar's Portal, and Education Source. Within a qualitative framework, the method of analysis of the peer-reviewed articles was traditional-narrative and thematic (Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2019 & Saldaña, 2016). According to the methodology of a traditional-narrative review, the literature search is not exhaustive. The traditional-narrative review “surveys the state of knowledge of a particular area and offers a comprehensive background for understanding .... The reviewer gathers a broad spectrum of the literature written about the topic and synthesizes it into a coherent interpretation” (Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2019). Government of Canada websites, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee website (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), and Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada-Statistique Canada, 2023) websites were also consulted to obtain additional factual information.

## Review of Literature

The teaching of specific components of Indigenous culture is a prominent topic in ILR. According to an Indigenous worldview (Bell, 2013; Brown as cited in Tanaka, 2016; Burns-Ross, 2016; McInnes, 2014), language encompasses and communicates Indigenous culture, so it follows that language and culture would be taught concurrently. As stated by Little Bear (2000), “Language embodies the way a society thinks” (p. 78), so learning a language is a

portal into a culture. Furthermore, understanding Indigenous languages also opens an important pathway to further learning about Indigenous beliefs and ancestral knowledge (Kirkness, 2002), as well as to participation in community and governance (Sims, 2008). This concept stands in contrast to additional language teaching in K – 12 schools which relies on a primarily grammar-based teaching methodology (McCarty, 2008) and is thus not considered to appropriately represent the cultural concepts of the Indigenous world view (Sims, 2008). An understanding of cultural notions and worldview is thus integral to entering the conceptual world of Indigenous language(s) (Brown, as cited in Tanaka, 2016), but also in implementing curricular changes intended to improve the achievement of Indigenous students. Furthermore, knowledge of Indigenous language also provides entrance into the culture (Kirkness, 2002; Little Bear, 2000; Sims, 2008), so knowledge of Indigenous language(s) and culture(s) might be viewed as a circular system where one calls for, as well as enriches the other. Moreover, Little Bear (2000) describes “Aboriginal philosophy as being holistic and cyclical or repetitive, generalist, process-oriented, and firmly grounded in a particular place” (p. 78) as well as rooted in spirituality and ritual.

Most of the literature on teaching and learning Indigenous languages in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand focuses on children and youth learning Indigenous languages in elementary schools (Bell, 2013; Burns-Ross, 2016; Hermes, 2007; McCarty, 2008; Romero-Little, 2008; Vallejo, 2019). A smaller subset of the literature on teaching and learning Indigenous languages in Canada focuses on adults learning Indigenous languages outside of postsecondary institutions in community-based scenarios, which is the focus of the present review (Basham & Fathman, 2008; Green & Maracle, 2018; Tulloch et al., 2017).

There are some instances of culture being taught in the context of Indigenous language learning, although the instances in an adult learning context are limited. Vallejo (2019) studied a Mohawk community school for children and found that music functioned as a portal to language learning, as well as culture and ritual. For example, Indigenous songs are used to teach Indigenous language structures, as well as culture (Vallejo, 2019). Furuta et al. (2015) found that the study of Indigenous Hawaiian culture alongside the Hawaiian language had a positive impact on learner performance. Burns-Ross (2016) found significant communication, interaction, and learning about culture between Elders and youth in a museum-based Indigenous language and culture camp. Bell (2013) designed a K-12 curriculum around the Indigenous medicine wheel, incorporating Anishinaabemowin language learning embedded in the cultural teaching of the Medicine wheel. Furuta et al. (2015) note a marked improvement in Hawaiian and Indigenous student achievement when both Indigenous language as well as culture are incorporated into learning. However, this literature is focused primarily on children and youth (Bell, 2013; Burns-Ross, 2016; Furuta et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2011; Vallejo, 2019).

In the context of adult learning programs in Canada, Tulloch et al. (2017) described an adult language learning project that was part of a larger community program titled *Miqqut*, which was designed to teach Inuktitut literacy, sewing, and life skills following the *master-apprentice model*. In the *Miqqut* program, adult learners were matched with Elders who mentored them in traditional sewing techniques while communicating in Inuktitut. A mixed method methodology was used. Data was collected through entrance, exit, post-program interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation. The program was successful, in terms of both the participants learning Inuktitut and traditional sewing skills, but also in terms of the Elders’ satisfaction with the mentoring relationship.

These findings highlight the powerful interlinking between language and culture that should be taken into account in teaching heritage and additional languages. The mentor-apprentice model shows strong potential benefits for both Elder mentors and learners. Nonetheless, more research is needed on adult Learners and Indigenous language learning, particularly in the context of cultural teachings.

## **Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) outside of Canada**

Several countries have undertaken language revitalization of Indigenous languages. Revitalization programs in Mexico, Hawaii in the United States, and Australia, both government-sponsored, as well as community-based, are examined to identify positive practices that hold potential application to Indigenous language and cultural education of adults in Canada. Many community language revitalization programs follow a model similar to the master-apprentice program (Tulloch et al., 2017), which is a cultural and linguistic immersion program. In complement to the master-apprentice program, digital technology has been successfully used to develop material intended to supplement the Elders’ teachings (Schwab-Cartas, 2018).

An additional positive practice noted in the literature encourages the development of a community of users of the Indigenous language under instruction, as is the practice at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (Furuta et al., 2015). The Faculty of Education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa runs a Master's of Teacher Education program that is tailored to meet the needs of learners of Indigenous and Hawaiian descent (Master of Education in Teaching, 2023). The program emphasizes learning Hawaiian and Indigenous traditions, culture, and language (Furuta et al., 2015). The majority of graduates from this Master's Education in Teaching program remain in the Hawaiian and Indigenous communities where they have done their teaching placements, which benefits the communities by having teachers who are already familiar with their languages and communities and are thus well-equipped to offer a culturally responsive education to the children in the community (Furuta et al., 2015).

In Oaxaca, Mexico, where there are many Indigenous languages which are at very real risk of language death (Wolfram, 2004), language revitalization projects are currently in practice at the community non-profit level (CEDELIO, 2016). An Indigenous community that was seeking to slow language death (Wolfram, 2004) of their traditional and historical languages in that region invited the linguist, Leanne Hinton, to visit their community and advise them on language revitalization practices (CEDELIO, 2016). Hinton advised the group to "ask the older generation to speak the language all the time" and to incorporate their learning from their apprenticeships with the Elders in their "day to day" activities (CEDELIO, 2016). These recommendations may help the community rebuild their base of language users and cultural practices associated with language use.

To further assist in supporting Indigenous languages and culture in Oaxaca, Mexico, the federal government of Mexico has very recently established an Indigenous language university (Aguilar Peláez, 2023; Gómez Mena, 2020; Universidad Comunal Autónoma de Oaxaca, 2022). The founding of a public university run by and for the Oaxacan Indigenous community, the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca*, holds the promise of local, culturally in-tune higher education for the Indigenous community (Aguilar Peláez, 2023) and will help maintain some of the Indigenous languages in Oaxaca, Mexico. The goal of the communal university is to offer local students in Indigenous communities of Oaxaca, Mexico a postsecondary education institution in their own communities. The curricula of the undergraduate and graduate programs are grounded in Indigenous culture and sustainability, emphasizing the importance of learning key concepts such as community participation and responsibilities, art and folklore, community development projects, and others (Universidad Comunal Autónoma de Oaxaca, 2022). While it is too soon to see the impact of these new postsecondary programs based on Indigenous languages and culture, the social practices developed by the university courses will be very helpful to the Indigenous communities because they are community-based and originate from a knowledgeable and respectful stance regarding local languages and cultures.

## Conclusion

Overall findings from current research on cultural instruction of Indigenous languages to adults are that interpersonal-based and community-based methodologies have shown good results (master-apprentice model, language immersion programs, community language use, increased knowledge of Indigenous traditions and culture). Finally, there is potential to use digital technology in Indigenous language revitalization by digitizing Elders' voices (Schwab-Cartas, 2018) and teachings with the intention of using them as digital learning objects in the instruction; however, digitization depersonalizes the learning and thus, does not align fully with Indigenous values and must thus be considered carefully.

Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) among adult populations has been reviewed, particularly specific postsecondary and community programs in Oaxaca, Mexico and Manoa, Hawaii. These findings demonstrate that universities and institutional funding play a significant role in adults' learning of Indigenous languages. In the postsecondary programs explored, Indigenous language proficiency deepened the adult student's learning. Community participation in the programs and curricula that favour community development is also key in achieving positive outcomes. Adult learners are also frequently closely tied to their communities; as such, it makes sense that programs for adult learners should also be closely linked to communities. The implications of these findings are that community-university partnerships, with significant community input, may be fruitful in teaching Indigenous languages to adults using a culture-based model.

In addition, this review of literature identifies areas of success within an overall paucity of research on adult learning of Indigenous languages, specifically culture-based instruction of Indigenous languages to adults, taught in an adult learning theory context (Knowles et al., 2012; Lindeman, 1926) in Canada. Based on this gap in the literature, further research is needed on incorporating cultural instruction into Anishinaabemowin language teaching for Indigenous adult learners. Such research would facilitate the revitalization of Indigenous languages and address Calls to Action 13, 14, and 15 of the TRC (TRC, 2015). Furthermore, addressing the gap in the existing research would advance what is known about the role of cultural instruction in Indigenous language learning, which is specifically useful in developing recommendations for ILR curriculum planners and instructors.

### **Future Research**

As next steps in this research, it would be helpful to know more about teaching methodologies appropriate to teaching about culture and theoretical perspectives that might support these methodologies, such as adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2012) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), as well as further research on teaching Indigenous cultural knowledge integrated into teaching Indigenous languages.

Ultimately, this short review of literature could be extended into a research project on the topic of Indigenous language revitalization in a specific community, including community data collection through focus groups and interviews to elucidate community needs, thoughts, and desires around Indigenous language revitalization. An additional possibility for future research would be data collection in a community where there has been an ongoing language revitalization project with the intent of learning what the community members think about the project and whether they think it has helped keep their language alive.

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