



# Language Fluency

## What is fluency?

What makes someone a fluent speaker of a language? In this time when many First Nations people are learning their languages as adults, understanding what makes a fluent speaker is an important question. There is often confusion when talking about fluency because definitions of what it means to be a fluent speaker vary between individuals, communities and contexts.

Language fluency generally refers to a person's ability to use the language to communicate clearly with others. A fluent speaker can use the language to speak with ease on a variety of topics and to discuss

abstract or complex ideas, without using English or other aids like pictures or props. It is possible to be a fluent speaker without knowing all the words of a language. In fact, most fluent speakers of English do not know all the words in the English language. Fluency is not defined by knowledge of vocabulary alone, but by the ability to use the language correctly, effectively and creatively, and in the appropriate way according to the situation. Everyone is fluent in at least one language: typically our first language (mother tongue) that we learned and used from infancy.

It is common in most parts of the world for people to be fluent in two or more languages. This is known as bilingualism or multilingualism.

Only in North America is monolingualism (being fluent in only one language) considered normal.

While a person may be fluent in more than one language, it does not mean that they learned both of those languages from birth. This shows that there are two different ways to be fluent: as a first language speaker or as a second language speaker. A first language speaker is someone who learned the language from birth. Because children learn languages much more quickly and effectively than adults, we can usually speak our first language better than any other language. In First Nations communities today, first language speakers of Indigenous languages are usually Elders.



Splatsin Kikiya7as FirstVoices Training,  
Photo by Aaron Leon

## KEY TERMS

**Fluent speaker:** a fluent speaker is someone who speaks and understands the language well enough to be able to communicate in the language without use of English. A fluent speaker is able to use the language in a variety of situations and knows the vocabulary appropriate to specific contexts or topics. Fluent speakers can also use the language in culturally appropriate ways according to the particular situation where the language is spoken.

**First language speaker / Mother tongue speaker:** someone who speaks the language he or she learned as a child at home and continues to speak it.

**Second language speaker:** someone who has learned or is learning a language after early childhood in addition to his or her first language.

**Proficiency:** the ability to correctly and effectively use a language in a variety of situations, including knowledge of words, sounds, sentence order, meanings and cultural context.

However, it is possible for people to learn their First Nations languages as second languages (whether they learn them as a child or an adult) and still achieve language fluency. We tend to think of this kind of fluency as proficiency. A proficient speaker is able to comfortably and effectively use the language for a variety of topics and situations, without necessarily knowing all of the language.

### **Why does it matter?**

Language fluency is the primary way that we assess the status of a language. A healthy and stable language has many fluent speakers who speak and use the language in all areas of life. By counting the number of fluent First Nations language speakers, we can show what has been lost through colonialism and residential schools. This is important for holding the government accountable for the wrongs of the past. We can also use fluency to help track the progress and success of our revitalization efforts. Successful revitalization

initiatives should result in the creation of new fluent speakers. As the number of fluent speakers begins to increase, we can see that our efforts are having an effect.

### **What about reading and writing?**

All First Nations languages in Canada were traditionally oral languages, passed on from generation to generation. Following contact and colonial influences, First Nations languages now have writing systems so that it is possible to express the languages in written form. Many people believe that reading and writing are important factors in defining fluency. However, while reading and writing are valuable skills, we must remember that all children are typically considered to be fluent speakers of their first language long before they learn to read and write. Therefore, it is not necessary to read and write to be considered a fluent speaker of a language.

### **What can I do?**

Have a discussion with your community and determine your views, values and beliefs around language fluency. Think about how you have defined fluency so far: What are the benefits of this definition? Does it support your efforts in teaching and revitalizing the language? This discussion should identify a common system to assess fluency. Communities should create a definition of fluency that is supportive of learners and acts as an encouraging mechanism to sustain and maintain the language in future generations. Overall, the definition of fluency should not be too narrow because it can potentially limit the resources available to support the language, such as limiting the number of speakers who can teach the language. To learn more about assessing language fluency, see our Second Language Proficiency Assessment Models fact sheet.

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#### WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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