Language Nest

Programs in BC

Early childhood immersion programs in two First Nations Communities. Practical questions answered and guidelines offered.
About the author

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*I offer my humble thanks to the two communities who were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with me as well as give ongoing feedback and input into the project.*

*Nanâskamon (I honour you).*

*Onowa*

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# Building the Nests: Early Childhood Indigenous Immersion Programs in BC
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INTRODUCTION

A study was conducted in 2004, as part of a Master’s thesis, of two First Nations communities in BC who were operating ‘language nest’ immersion programs. Both programs were observed and different individuals connected to the program were interviewed. The information gathered along with a review of other research that has been done resulted in a Master’s thesis which can be obtained through the University of Victoria library. This booklet contains highlights of the findings of the study as a summary for the communities involved in the project as well as for distribution in communities that may have an interest in ‘language nest’ programs.

Purpose of the study

Although early childhood language immersion programs have been recognized in French Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Hawaii as the most successful way of reviving languages, this method has not yet been widely taken up in Indigenous Canada. The main goal of this study was to report on the experiences of two B.C. First Nations communities who had developed and implemented early childhood immersion “language nest” programs by highlighting the successes they have achieved and obstacles they faced. The hopes for the study were also to provide practical information and inspiration to other Canadian Indigenous communities who might be interested in language nest programs as an avenue for maintaining or revitalizing First Nations languages.

The two communities approached to co-research this topic were Adam’s Lake Band in south-central British Columbia and Lil’wat Nation (formerly known as Mount Currie).

I think our children need the opportunity to hear our languages so that they can go to sleep with our language, they could hear their grandfather speaking the language, they could hear their grandmother speaking the language, they could hear and dream in the language. And I think, too, I have a belief that when we are in our sweats, if we’re going to meet our ancestors wouldn’t it be beautiful to be conversing in the language as the Creator has gifted us? . . . Our children will be going to those levels, too, because they’ll be going and meeting our ancestors and be able to understand and make sure our messages and our teachings are not lost.

Teacher, Secwepemc Nation
COMMON QUESTIONS ASKED

What is immersion?

‘Immersion’ is a word used to describe methods used to teach a language by using only that language in an everyday context.

What are language nest programs?

These programs began in Aotearoa (New Zealand) by the Maori people over 20 years ago. They are preschool childcare programs run entirely in an Indigenous language without any use of English.

Why do we need them?

♦ First Nations languages in Canada, and particularly in B.C., are in extreme danger of extinction (First Nations languages and literacy secretariat, 1992; Norris, 2003; Poser, 2000; Shaw, 2001b).
♦ Only three of the 50-70 languages in Canada (Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway) are expected to remain and flourish in Aboriginal communities (Burnaby, 1996a; Norris, 1998) none of which are primarily based in BC.
♦ British Columbia has the greatest diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada (Norris, 2003; Royal Commission of Aboriginal peoples, 1996), with between 26 and 34 languages belonging to eight distinct language families, and all are seriously endangered (Poser, 2000; Shaw, 2001a).
♦ The 2001 Canadian census (Norris, 2003) indicates that only 15% of Aboriginal children in Canada are learning their Indigenous mother tongue, a decline from 20% in the 1996 census. The situation in British Columbia is even more desperate. Of the Indigenous languages exclusive to B.C. listed by the Yinka Dene Language Institute, only five languages have speakers under the age of 15 and each has less than 50 young speakers each. Concentrating efforts on children’s Indigenous language acquisition is now at a critical state in B.C. (and beyond).
What do we stand to lose?

Language is often recognized as one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity (Blair, Rice, Wood, & Janvier, 2002; Krashen, 1998; Norris, 1998) and the main vehicle for cultural transference (Norris, 2003; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Without the language of one’s ancestors, individual and collective identity gets weakened and it is likely that the culture would die out within a few generations. As conveyed by a group of Indigenous language preservationists, “songs will no longer have words, no one will speak the proper words when sending off the spirits and there will be no one to say or understand prayers for ceremonies” (Indigenous Language Institute, 2002).
Why language nests?

*Early childhood best time*

Early childhood has long been acclaimed as the best time for language learning (Fishman, 1996; Lee, 1996; Stiles, 1997). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) states that “young children absorb information at a greater rate than at any other stage of life” (Vol. 3, p. 447). Within months of being born, babies begin to acquire language; by age five they master the basic sound system structures and grammar of their native language (Ignace, 1998).

*Immersion works best*

Next to the natural option of raising children at home in the language, immersion practices are the most effective method for creating fluent language speakers in a short time period (Hinton, 2001; Lee, 1996).
What does a language nest programs look like?

The “Cseyseten” (language nest) at Adam’s Lake is conducted entirely in the Secwepemc language. This community used a fairly "traditional" language nest model taking children from 6 weeks to 5 years old (however, their youngest child at the time of the study was 2 years old). The children leave the program at 5 years of age and transition to the immersion school available in the community (if chosen by the parents). The program runs four days a week, 9 a.m. to 2:45 p.m., September to June each year.

The “Clao7alcw” (Raven’s Nest) program at Lil’wat Nation is conducted in the Lil’wat language. This community has taken a somewhat different approach. They did a one-time intake of 3-6 year olds who will move through the program together for four years with no new intakes. Therefore, they now have 5-8 year olds in the program, so it operates more like a one-room elementary immersion school. This program runs five days a week, approximately seven hours a day from September to June each year.
STUDY FINDINGS

What does it take to start a program?

**Leadership**

It takes strong leadership to get language nest programs started in First Nations communities.

And I didn’t even really know what I was doing but I told my partner, I said, ‘I’m moving [home] and I’m going to start a language nest.’ And he said, ‘You are absolutely crazy.’ And I said, ‘I know I am. I’m crazy. But I can’t sleep at night. This is all I’m thinking about. I just have to do it.’ So that’s what I did. . . . And nobody had heard of a language nest and I only kind of heard about it. I just knew this is what I was going to do. So I started going door-to-door to houses on the reserve, and I talked to them about what I wanted to do. And I think just through the nature of people being very polite they sat through it and they listened to what I’d say, but they probably didn’t have a clue any more than I did what a language nest was.

Community Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

**Optimism and determination**

Optimism is key, and not giving up. Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Both communities said the most important thing was to “just do it.” They stressed that if this is what one wants for their community, they must get something going and not allow anything to stand in the way. These program founders would not take “no” for an answer and they were never dismayed by systemic setbacks or internal politics. They did not ask for permission from outside authorities; they established programs first and informed later.
**Autonomy**

*We have been raising our children for thousands of years, we don’t need anyone to tell us how to do it.*

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

A degree of autonomy from provincial or other authorities was needed to be able to simply take action and set up the language nest. When asked how the communities got around the ECE licensing issue, the response was, “We don’t ask. This is not something that can be given. It is our right, our birthright, to have our language, to teach it to our children; we must do it for ourselves, our own people.”

**Elders**

Having healthy traditional speakers in the community who are willing to play a part in the language nest was fundamental to starting and maintaining a program. These two communities were able to meet these criteria; however, it was not always easy to find Elders who were willing to be a part of the program.

**Motivated parents**

*We rely on fluent speakers [to run the program] but [the] motivating force that sustains the movement are those who have lost the language.*

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Parents were the driving force in both communities in getting language nests programs started. Many were denied the privilege of learning their language as children and now have a strong desire to learn it as adults.
Teachers

In both communities, the first teachers who started out in the language nest were not fluent speakers but had some background in education. They were matched with Elders who were traditional speakers and concentrated their energies on saying very little while in the immersion classroom.

I didn’t speak the language at the time, right. I came in just keeping my mouth shut, running around after kids and doing different things. The Elder we hired really didn’t have any idea what to do, so we just said, ‘Let’s just play with them, let’s just do whatever you do with kids but just all speak the language.’ Gradually I picked up more language and the Elder got a little more confident, and that’s how it started. Not a lot of planning when it started, more like a divine inspiration more than anything else!

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Capital resources and funding

Neither community reported a lack of funding or resources as a major obstacle. However, some source of funding must be found. Even if the space was donated and many people volunteered their time, there were some real costs to start-up and operations that were unavoidable. There was a clear recognition that eventually people (especially Elders) would need to get paid.
One community administrator described the process of getting started:

A community member suggested] ‘there’s an empty building that’s not being used, maybe you could write a letter or talk to chief and council about using the building.’ I just basically was naïve and had lots of energy and had this dream and went around organizing, getting the building, saying that we’ll fundraise, we’ll figure out a way to hire the Elders to do this, and I made some posters up, some brochures, and we got a couple of people interested and that’s how it started. I fundraised enough throughout the summer to hire one Elder in the fall and then I volunteered to be the caregiver for the kids. On our first day of opening we had this big empty building with maybe a couple of things in it, not much, with one Elder hired and myself and we had my child, [another teacher’s] two-year-old and another lady on the reserve’s child who was the same age. So we had about three two-year-olds and that went on for about three weeks, then a couple of others trickled in. By the end of the year I think we had seven or eight children.

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Participants in both communities reported the few main capital resources required were a dedicated space (i.e., a building), sleeping cots (depending on the ages of children), child-sized table(s) and chairs, a few toys, some containers for the toys, and at least enough funding to pay an Elder.
Obstacles commonly encountered and how to get past them.

**Parents’ fears**

The main fear reported for parents in both communities was that children would not learn to read, write, and speak English properly and therefore would not succeed in the world.

Parents may be reassured to know that research has shown that literacy skills learned in a mother tongue are readily transferable to a second language (Cummins, 1980; Danesi, 1988). Also, it is important to note that children are born ready to learn more than one language (Crystal, 1997; Genesse, n.d.). Crystal (1997) reports that two-thirds of the world’s children are born into a bilingual environment and develop to be completely competent in both languages. Cummins (1990) states that children do not suffer in any way from bilingualism as long as they continue learning in both languages. He comments further that only if neither language is being taught or learned well is the child at risk of falling behind in their overall language development.

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**ECE licensing dilemmas**

Participants in both communities reported avoiding formal ECE licensing for the language nest program approach. They strategically avoided this route due to the difficulties it created when trying to staff their language nest program.
Finding someone who is a fluent speaker but also has their ECE certification was one of the main challenges reported for setting up and maintaining the language nest.

**Community Resistance**

*We have an Elder on the reserve where he tests, in the beginning, he would test us, ‘Oh, you guys want to teach language to the kids?’ So he would come at me with full, full language. In the beginning I maybe caught a word, if that. I didn’t even know what he was talking about. I stood there dumbfounded. Then he walked away.*

Teacher, Secwepemc Nation

Some Elders refused to speak the traditional language to the language nest children when they encountered them in the community. All but one participant mentioned the negative residential school experience of many First Nations communities as the primary reason community members shied away from language use and regeneration.

One community administrator reported that it was partly their own fear that held them back for close to 10 years from implementing an immersion program. Community administrators feared that the programs would not be a success or that they would let the parents down with their attempts.

*The greatest barrier is our own thinking that there are too many barriers.*

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation
Two participants talked about focusing too much on the negatives and on what was lacking, which only causes people to lose sight of the real work of getting children on the path to learning the language. These participants encouraged people not to waste time focusing on obstacles or avoiding personal responsibility.

**Subscription rates**

Some parent’s fears of the traditional language caused them to refuse to participate in the immersion language programs. One parent illustrated this by recounting an example of another parent’s refusal to send their child to the immersion program.

> You know, like we had one person put the [language immersion] school down. Saying, ‘I want my kid to go be a doctor, and I’m not sending him up there. . . .’ I asked them, ‘Are you scared of the language?’ That’s what they’re scared of. They took it away, now you’re scared to take it back.
>
> Parent, Secwepemc Nation

Parent’s refusal to enroll their children causes the subscription level for the language nest and immersion schools to remain relatively low. One community reported that approximately 10% of the children in the appropriate age category currently choose the immersion program. In the other community, approximately 30% of children at the K-7 level and 8% of preschool aged children are enrolled in immersion programming. The low subscription rate in these language immersion programs limits the funding and community support available to the programs for expansion.

Ironically though, both communities also reported having waitlists for the language nest programs. In one community, the waitlist was due to a four-year pilot program approach which has a one-time intake at the start. In the other community, the waitlist was caused by a lack of space and lack of extra staff that inhibited further intake.
**English dominance**

Participants in both communities reported in different ways that the dominance of English in society, in the community, in themselves, and in others they worked with (including the children) was still a major challenge. In both communities the teachers and administrators were the strictest about language use. At times they had to remind the Elders not to use English, which was a risky venture as it could result in offending or irritating the Elders. However, teachers also reported difficulties in avoiding English in the classroom. They said that it was easy at first to get frustrated, and that those were the times they would most often revert to English. They used reminder systems, such as flashing ‘red cards’ at each other or drowning each other out in the language if they heard someone speaking English. If a verbal reminder was used that this was not a time for English, it was, of course, done in the traditional language.

*I spend a lot of time at the very beginning reminding, ‘Don’t speak English.’ I use my language and I say that, ‘no speaking English, remember what we’re here for’ and you know I get dirty looks from the Elders sometimes or I get frustration, but I’m strong enough to handle that.*

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation
Practical tips for running language nest programs

Accommodate Elders’ needs

Many Elders did not find their involvement in the language nest program easy. While many Elders reportedly thrived and truly enjoyed the work, they also felt the effects of working outside the home at an elderly age and the energy it takes to care for young children full-time. Suggestions were to offer Elders shortened or half days or more condensed visits, such as two-three days at a time on a theme followed by some days off.

Keep it simple

There is no magic to [the language nest], you don’t need to teach the language, just speak it. It is so simple and natural it scares people.

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

The leaders of these projects suggest “keeping it simple”, not making programs more complicated than they needed to be. They encouraged communities to explore and acknowledge the resources that already exist in their communities and to start from there. They discussed the importance of not allowing toys or flashy things to drown out the Elders and the language. They were aware that over-stimulation takes the focus away from the primary aim of traditional language transfer.

People can walk in and say ‘Wow, this is easy, we can find any junky old house and do this out of it.’ Exactly! This is what we need to remove the mystery behind creating a language nest because all we’re doing is inviting children over to grandma’s house and speaking the language all day and playing with them. There’s no mystery to that. . . . We go down to the lake and we play with logs and we put rocks on logs and we make those into canoes, we go out into the fields and we play with the flowers and we make flower wreaths and stuff . . . we don’t need to overcomplicate it. I think that’s what people tend to do. They overcomplicate the whole thing. We forget that children need love and nurturing, they need positive reinforcement, they need acceptance, they need to be safe, they need healthy food, there’s real basics that we need to do, we don’t need to worry about too many other things. In a nutshell, that’s what I think a language nest is.

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation
**Focus on speaking**

Although parents in one community pushed for reading and writing, both the teachers and Elders were adamant that the program design needed to minimize emphasis on reading and writing and focus on the spoken language. They agreed that if there was too much emphasis on these things the children would forget about the oral language and not learn how to speak.

**Use full language**

One Elder emphasized that teachers should be sure not to leave out words they might think are too difficult for the children. She held the strong belief that children need to be exposed to the full range of the language. Cairns (1986) supports this approach in reporting that children respond best to speech that is just beyond their current level of functioning. This Elder also encouraged teachers of the language always to speak in full sentences or phrases and not to teach one word at a time because this is not how language is spoken.

... like say I have a cup here and I was teaching you the language, it would be me7 ste7 ke r let, I’m going to drink tea. I don’t say clluqwme7(word for cup in Secwepemcتسین). I’d say it fully, me7 ste7 ke r let. So it’s natural and sometimes you can repeat it and you’re kind of like playing all the time. Like you’re saying it. And that’s how we all learn our first language. Mom or Grandma or Dad didn’t say ‘Cup, cup, cup’(pointing to the cup in her hand). Do you remember anybody telling you that? Whether it was English or whatever language? No. You ask another adult, ketctseme t’ek clluqwme7 (asking for a cup in Secwepemcتسین) and then you give me a cup and little child will see it, the brain says, ‘Oh, she gave her a cup.’

Elder, Secwepemc Nation
**Strict use of the heritage language**

Teachers were adamant that one must not accept English from the children. One strategy they reported was repeating back to the children in the Indigenous language what the children would say in English. Teachers also emphasized that it is important to use a lot of positive reinforcement when the children spontaneously use the language.

Participants reported the importance of continuing to use the language when interacting with parents at drop-off and pick-up time. Teachers reported using gestures, props and body language as much as possible to help parents understand and to avoid reverting to English in front of the children. However, teachers also reported that if there was a life-threatening situation and caregivers had to communicate with the parents about an incident, they would step outside away from the children and only then use English.

Teachers reported that it was important not to translate to English or the children would not listen to the language. This was something that had to be negotiated with the Elders who came in. Naturally it was frustrating for Elders to talk in a language that no one else understood, and there was an understandable tendency to translate so that there was communication happening. However, teachers found it was important to find other ways to communicate and to keep the language use pure with no leaning on English.

**Ensure language interaction directly with children**

Although in a natural setting children would pick up some language from adult-to-adult interactions, the true language learning reportedly happens when children are spoken to directly and
Language acquisition theory supports that successful approaches to language acquisition must be in the form of interactive, social speech (Cairns, 1986). Participants reported this interplay of language directly with the children as key to heritage language acquisition. In addition, it was reported by one teacher that if the children are left to play on their own they easily revert back to communicating in English.

Creating curriculum materials

Participants in both communities reported a combined approach of making their own curriculum materials and translating other more mainstream materials. Some participants were able to ask Elders to translate or had other support people who would create the resources needed.

Participants in both communities talked about the creation of “big books,” which are large, illustrated storybooks with the words to the story written in the traditional language in large print along the bottom of the pages. The books were most often hand-drawn and manually written, then laminated for durability. Other books were translated from English as they were being read or had the traditional language words to the story taped over top. Some mainstream songs were translated and sung to the
same tune; in other cases, entirely new songs were created in the language. Teachers also reported creating new games or bringing back old games that could be played outside or in the classroom.

**Culture as curriculum**

Teachers in both communities reported using a lot of singing in their programs. Children love to sing and they will pick up the “new” language sounds and remember new words more easily. Both programs reported using traditional drumming and dancing as tools for learning the language as well. This helped to incorporate cultural concepts into the singing, as some of the other songs were English translations of children’s classic such as “Itsy Bitsy Spider.” One teacher was encouraged by the Elders to sing to the children more than talk because as a new speaker her pronunciation still needed much work.

**Structure**

Both communities reported the importance of having a basic structure in terms of early childhood care in place. Both programs started with morning greetings in the language, followed by prayer time, snack time, song time, free play, outside play, and so forth. Although these activities and routines were similar to those in mainstream childcare and elementary school, the key difference is that they were all done in the language. One teacher stressed that without structure there was chaos and it was at those times when the use of English most often happened (i.e., children hitting other children).
Traditional name-giving

Both communities introduced the practice of using traditional names for the children in the language nest as a way of encouraging language use. It set the tone for heritage language learning and reminded the children that when they walk through the doors into the language nest, it is time to speak the language. In one of the communities, giving names to the children became an unexpected community development exercise when many families had to consult with their relatives for appropriate names.

Successes and Outcomes

Effects on children

We’ve gone to a couple of Elders’ luncheons. [The children] start to hear the drums and they start dancing, even on the floor, between the tables.

Teacher, Lil’wat Nation

All participants interviewed commented on some aspect of the children’s increased self-esteem, pride or positive cultural identity formation as a result of the language nest program.

Other respondents reported that the children had a “bigger worldview,” were more in touch with the Earth, and were more respectful. They developed calmer demeanors, better appreciated their history, identity, and traditions, and had hope that all was not lost in their community. Participants in both communities additionally commented that they believed the children were also developing a cultural belief system by way of the Elders’ influence in the classroom and the stories they told.
Leadership skills

Parents interviewed reported that they were learning the language partly from their children at home. One of the parents reported that when she spoke to her five-year-old son in English when he came home from the language nest, he said to her in their language, “Don't speak English.” She said that it really made her think and pushed her to speak in their language. Parents in both communities reported that trying to keep up with their children was a great motivator to continuing with their own language learning.

In one community, the first children who went through the language nest and then K-7 immersion have now graduated from high school and work at the immersion school as curriculum developers. One of the teachers reported that she has conferred with these past graduates (who are now young adults) on certain words or concepts that she does not know. She respectfully referred to them as her “little Elders.”

When I’m stuck, guess what? I’m going to my ‘little Elders,’ and I’m asking them to help me and sure enough, they sit back and they’ll base their answer on a story they’ve heard from their grandfather and [an] answer will come out of that for me.

Teacher, Secwepemc Nation
Language nest as catalyst for immersion schools

Once the children in the language nest get to school age, parents were faced with the decision of what to do to continue their child’s language learning. One community’s response was to open an immersion school, starting with kindergarten. Each year they expanded the school by one year, reaching high school levels in the past few years.

Changing attitudes

Two of the community members interviewed reported that they were extremely skeptical when first introduced to the idea of language nests and teaching the language to young children in the community. The outcomes from the language nest softened some of the resistance they had towards the immersion programs.
The issue of language revitalization is critically linked to the survival of Indigenous people. When our languages are threatened the health and well-being of our peoples, a maintained connection to the land, and an ability to pass on and carry out traditional ways of life and maintain a worldview unlike any other is at stake. Children must learn the language in order for it to survive.

The language used to be passed down naturally in homes, on the laps of our grandmothers and on the land, at the foot of the grandfathers on the traplines. Indigenous languages are at such a state of critical endangerment that we must create artificial ways to pass on the language. However, whatever strategies are taken must work towards reinstating Indigenous languages into common, everyday use in order that they become viable. We need to come full circle, back to speaking our languages to the babes in the cradle swings and on the streets of our communities. One community participant agreed and asked me not to write that language nests are the answer. Rather she wanted to emphasize that returning to natural uses of language transmission is the solution.

I was going to say that language immersion is the way to do it, but that’s not true. The way to do it is to raise your children in the language, very naturally, from the time they are born you speak the language to them, you speak to them in the language, and let the outside world do the English. That’s the truly natural way to do it. I would have done it that way if I’d had enough language to raise my children like that but I had to set it up artificially with hired Elders to come in to do that. Even if it was my own mother cause she wouldn’t have done this without a certain title to it, or whatever. Immersion is not the best way to do it, do not write that. The best way to do is to go back to raising our children in the language.

Administrator, Secwepemc Nation
REFERENCES


**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES THAT MAY BE OF INTEREST**


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Ekosay.

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