Teaching Approaches for Indigenous Languages

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Reviewed by Red Bear Robinson, Knowledge Keeper

Cultural environments and how an individual views and understands the world stems from the beliefs and customs from their ancestral lands (Barlow, 1991; Reedy, 2003). Language is integral to this process: it is how cultural values, beliefs, dispositions, and knowledge are expressed and how identities are ascribed or formed (Gee, 1989; McCarty, 2008). Hundreds, if not thousands, of Indigenous languages, however, are endangered, as colonial assimilationist policies and practices have prevented the passing down of Indigenous languages from one generation to the next (Galla, 2016; McIvor, 2020). Many Indigenous children were taken from their homes and the use of their ancestral languages was forbidden in formal educational settings (McIvor, 2020). The imposition of these assimilationist policies and practices was aimed at eradicating young Indigenous children from their ancestral cultural and linguistic identities, which has led to the harmful legacy of intergenerational trauma that still exists today (Baskin, 2016). Wilson & Beals (2019) explain, and I would agree, it is not "until there is recognition of the trauma that allows for healing; [that] . . . the cycle can be broken" (p. 34).

In this paper, I will synthesize literature that I was able to access, outlining immersive and non-immersive Indigenous language teaching approaches used in schools across Canada and the United States. These approaches aim to educate students about Indigenous culture and history, using their ancestral language(s), which can support healing from the traumatic legacy of the residential school system (McCullum et al., 2014). To begin, I define the terms immersive and non-immersive approaches, which were two terms commonly used throughout the literature I reviewed. I also synthesize literature pertaining to specific teaching strategies such as, the teaching of language conventions and storytelling, both oral and digital. Finally, I offer my concluding thoughts based on the literature I reviewed.

Prior to synthesizing the literature, I wish to first locate myself here, which I have learned is the custom in many Indigenous communities (Styres, 2017). It is also a form of relational accountability (Wilson & Hughes, 2019). My name is Veronica Loreyn Castillo. I identify as a first-generation Filipino Canadian who speaks my ancestral language of Tagalog. The knowledge of Tagalog was passed down from my parents and grandparents to me and is my first language. My ability to speak Tagalog has personally shown me the strong link between language, culture, and identity. For this reason, I believe it is vital to provide culturally responsive teachings as a teacher so that students' cultural and linguistic identities are reflected in the classroom. I am a strong advocate for working with the appropriate community members, including Elders and other stakeholders to support the passing on of diverse cultural knowledge, most especially Indigenous knowledge, to generations to come. Although I am non-Indigenous and without this ancestral knowledge to be able to discern appropriate approaches and tools for the development of Indigenous languages, I take up the invitation by Onowa McIvor (2020), a nehinaw (Swampy Cree) and Scottish-Canadian, to do more in preserving Indigenous languages as a non-Indigenous ally living and working on the ancestral lands of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island. Through community collaboration, language nests can be formed; where members of the community work together with stakeholders and Elders to connect students to their Indigenous ancestry (Paskus, 2013). In using language nests, intergenerational passing down of knowledge takes place, thus providing opportunities for students, educators, and parents to learn their ancestral language(s) (Ferguson, 2010; Paskus, 2013).

Teaching Approaches

Both immersive and non-immersive teaching approaches provide students with exposure to their ancestral language; something that is crucial in the formation of one's identity (Gee, 1989; McCarty, 2008). In immersive approaches, most, if not all instruction is given to students in their ancestral language, and the curriculum is heavily based on culture (McCarty et al., 2021). In non-immersive approaches, students are exposed to their ancestral languages, but this focus only takes place during specific curricular areas, and does not comprise most, or all, of the school day. Although immersive language teaching approaches are said to be most effective in learning and sustaining language(s) (Fishman, 1991; Todal, 2018), as it optimizes the amount of time and opportunities students have in and with the target language (Johnson, 2017; McIvore, 2020), it is important to recognize the colonial barriers some Indigenous communities continue to face when it comes to implementing immersion programs such as, so few fluent speakers of their ancestral language(s) (Rosborough & Rorick, 2017). Such barriers have prevented some Indigenous communities from being able to implement full immersion programs at school, leading to the need for more parental involvement to learn the ancestral language(s) alongside their child(ren). A lack of funding for full immersion programs have also contributed to the barriers Indigenous Peoples face when learning their language(s).

Immersive Land-Based Approaches

Since language instruction in immersion programs comprises most, if not all, of the school day, the curriculum is said to be strongly based on culture, promoting language fluency, and encouraging the use of language beyond the classroom (McCarty, et al., 2021). Indigenous immersion programs take students beyond textbooks and paper, placing emphasis on balance and harmony with earth and the land (McCarty, et al., 2021). Students are taught responsibilities to care for the earth and themselves. This approach prompts the students to build their knowledge about themselves in relation to others and with land (McCarty, et al., 2021). In Una'maki (Cape Breton, Nova Scotia), the Mi'kmaq community views the land as a respectable resource, as it teaches the students about their responsibility in caring of the land, and how in doing so, the land will take care of them back (Julian & Denny, 2016). This encompasses the cultural value of being in relation and the worldview that everything in this world is interconnected (Lent, 2022). Through collaboration with the school, community members and Elders, language nests can be formed: in these nests, Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are passed down intergenerationally through immersing students in the culture and language all throughout a school day (Julian & Denny, 2016). When this is not possible, non-immersive language teaching approaches are implemented. However, when inauthentic non-immersive language approaches are used, such as what is commonly referred to as "the grammar-based method", students may learn the language, but not their culture.

Non-immersive Approaches

Because there are, at times, so few fluent ancestral language speakers within some Indigenous communities, in many cases, Indigenous community members have found it necessary to develop their own learning tools while also learning the language themselves when implementing non-immersive approaches (Hermes et al., 2012; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Rorick, 2019). The non-immersive approaches discussed in this section are teaching language conventions as well as oral storytelling, and the use of technology. I argue, however, that the storytelling method should be a central component of the language teaching method and not merely a part of it.

Teaching Language Conventions

Translating English words and phrases to an Indigenous language (Rosborough et al., 2017) is one-way non-fluent Indigenous community members could both learn and teach their ancestral language(s). However, in doing so, the nature of the Indigenous words is disregarded and many gaps in learning and understanding the language are created, as the translations lack the rich knowledge, views, beliefs, and traditions that were rooted within the Indigenous language(s) and their culture (Rosborough et al., 2017). This strategy of memorizing translated vocabulary and/or phrases quickly became superseded, as the teaching of Indigenous languages shifted to a focus on grammar and a communication-based method (Rosborough et al., 2017). This shift in direction was based on many

Indigenous languages, such as the Kwak'wala language, which is a polysynthetic language, that is, a language with more than one meaning or idea (Rosborough et al., 2017). By shifting focus to grammar and communication, the construct and metaphor of the Kwak'wala words were highlighted, thus connecting teachers and students to the knowledge and worldview that comes from the Kwak'wala language (Rosborough et al., 2017). It was this shift that emphasized the need to not only learn the language, but to learn the culture as well.

Teaching through Oral Storytelling

An approach that is said to more diligently integrate both language and cultural learning is the oral storytelling method. It is yet another teaching strategy Indigenous community members use in non-immersive language teaching programs when faced with a lack of fluent speakers of their ancestral language(s). Although oral storytelling can be used in immersive programs as well, when there are so few fluent ancestral language speakers (Rosborough & Rorick, 2017), Elders can be invited into specific curricular areas to offer cultural teachings in the form of stories to not only expose students to their ancestral language(s) during that particular class time, but to also expose children to their culture through language. The oral tradition of storytelling gives Elders, family, and community members the chance to share culture and land-based stories to foster a more balanced approach to learning and development, based on thinking, reflecting, and experiencing (Peltier, 2017). Inviting Elders as knowledge keepers in this way affords opportunities for learning that goes well beyond what is learned through textbooks or through a grammar-based approach. During the time stories are told, students are surrounded by their culture and their language(s), and the knowledge and wisdom they acquire through these stories can then be passed down to the next generation (McCullum et al., 2014).

Within Indigenous communities, knowledge is built through stories and through the sharing of these stories. Storytelling provides an experience of attachment and identity (McCullum et al., 2014). It is an oral tradition that exposes students to the culture and language, which allows them to know themselves in relation to others and the earth (Peltier, 2017). For many First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities, stories play a crucial role in passing down history, cultural beliefs, traditions, values and roles of men and women from one generation to the next (McCullum et al., 2014).

Technology as a Teaching Tool

Since another barrier some Indigenous communities face is "the passing of Elder speakers who hold specialized cultural and grammatical knowledge" (Rosborough & Rorick, 2017, p. 120), in the Mi'kmaq community, Indigenous educators acknowledge how beneficial technology could be in creating digital resources that preserve the culture, identity, stories, and teachings of Elders. As technology and digital media continue to evolve, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators can turn to technology to help preserve Elders' knowledge, including language and culture, thus ensuring that future generations are able to access and learn from the voices of the Elders before them (Galla, 2016).

In northern British Columbia, in the Nak'azdli Whut'en community, they are implementing the strategy of digital storytelling as a medium to share Elder knowledge and wisdom, coupled with digital literacy (Hausknecht et al., 2021). Intergenerational relationships are fostered, as Elders are paired with students in the junior/intermediate division (Grades six and seven). They share stories and wisdom with the students who make their own interpretation using pictures and sound on a digital device (Hausknecht et al., 2021). These teachings can be recorded to share with future generations.

Conclusion

Research shows that immersing students in their ancestral language(s) and culture(s) for long periods of time, such as an entire school day, or within the home setting, is most effective in developing a new language (McInnes, 2014; McCarty et al., 2021). However, at times, this type of intergenerational language transmission is not possible due to so few fluent ancestral language speakers within some Indigenous communities (Rosborough et al., 2017). Therefore, non-immersive approaches are developed and implemented, such as inviting Elders into specific subject areas (e.g., cultural class) to educate students on their history, cultural beliefs, traditions, values, and roles through storytelling (McCullum et al., 2014). I argue, however, that the storytelling method

should be a central component of the language teaching method and not merely a part of it. Such non-immersive approaches can support language revitalization initiatives until there is an increase in fluent speakers of that ancestral language who then can bring their language(s) and culture back home and/or to each subject area at school.

I believe that, when the desired outcome of the school and local community is to revitalize language and pass this knowledge from one generation to the next, it is important that educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous come together and implement non-immersive approaches within the classroom, especially when there is limited access to resources (e.g., fluent speaking Elders and knowledge keepers) (McInnes, 2014). By providing opportunities for students to experience their ancestral language(s), students are better positioned to gain and develop a stronger sense of self in relation to their community and ancestry (McCullum et al., 2014; Peltier, 2017).

I also acknowledge the role in which technology can be used within the classroom to help document and share the stories and cultural knowledge shared by Elders (Hausknecht et al., 2021). As a teacher, I strive to collaborate with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners and allies to ensure that I am providing my students with authentic and meaningful opportunities for them to connect to not only their language, but their culture as well.

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Author Biography

Veronica Castillo is a graduate student in the Master of Teaching program in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto. She recognizes that there is no universal Indigenous way of knowing and being and thereby wished to note that any conclusions made in this paper are strictly through her lens as a first-generation Filipino Canadian who has had experience learning and retaining her own ancestral language, Tagalog.

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