



Language Immersion

What is immersion?

Language immersion is a method of teaching and learning a new language in which people learn *in* the language, not just *about* the language. In First Nations language immersion, no English is used in the classroom or immersion environment. All content, such as math, science, or language arts, is taught using the First Nations language. Immersion creates a natural process for language acquisition, much in the way we learn our first language.

An example of an immersion program is a Language Nest, which immerses young children in their First Nations language. Mentor-Apprentice programs pair adults—one who speaks the language fluently (the mentor), and one who is learning (the apprentice) in situations



Tsilhqot'in Language Nest

in which they only speak the First Nations language. Language immersion ideally begins in early childhood and continues throughout the education years.

Why is it important?

Immersion is the most effective way to learn a language as it creates a natural learning environment similar to how we learn our first language. Language immersion creates a meaningful environment where language is used purposefully.

Functional communication means learners use the language for practical purposes rather than just

“Immersion means simply doing everything in the language, from brushing our teeth to eating, from playing to praying — all the time.”

- Yamamoto & Yamamoto (2004)

reciting words and phrases. This natural learning environment helps learners to develop the communication skills to become fluent speakers. Learning *about* language does not create fluency, but learning *in* the language provides

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS IMMERSION PROGRAMS¹

- Get support from the community, the school board and school administration.
- Make plans to create qualified language teachers with training in immersion teaching. Developing partnerships with local universities will help support these plans and put them into action.
- Develop learning resources that focus on language use for practical purposes.
- Access current research and gather knowledge that will support your immersion program. It is also important to share your experiences and best practices with other communities.
- Create opportunities for language use outside of school by showcasing the language at community events. Develop adult language classes to support language use in the home.
- Make plans to expand your immersion programs and recruit younger language speakers to keep momentum going.

¹Adapted from Tompkins, J., Orr, A.M., Clark R., Pirie, D., Sock, S., & Paul-Gould, S. (2011). *Best practices and challenges in Mi'kmaq and Maliseet/Wolastoqi language immersion*. Retrieved from <http://www.apcnc.ca/images/uploads/FinalReport-BestPracticesandChallengesinMikmaqandMaliseet-WolastoqiLanguageImmersionProgramsFinal.pdf>

real and authentic communication situations. Language immersion is the best approach for learners of all ages — early childhood, youth and adult.

Offering immersion programs in schools is the first step to breaking the cycle of language disruption. Children can become proficient in their First Nations language and develop cultural awareness. Immersion programs help reverse the trend of language loss and are an important part of language revitalization efforts. Embracing immersion programming reflects community commitment to building strong First Nations identities among children.

What can I do?

Early childhood is the ideal time for language learning and full immersion is the most effective strategy for language revitalization. You will need proficient adult speakers to teach the language to children. If your community does not have enough speakers, you will need to start training adults in the

RECIPE FOR IMMERSION: THE KEY INGREDIENTS²

Vision: Community belief in the possibilities of immersion.

Leadership: School and community leadership that fosters the commitment to actively pursue this vision.

Resourcefulness: Working as a team to plan for the future and recognizing that everyone plays a role and has something important to offer.

Connection: Creating enthusiasm and passion for the language and reconnecting the community, history, culture and language.

²Adapted from Michel, K. (2012). *Trickster's path to language transformation: Stories of Secwepemc immersion from Chief Atahm School*. (Doctoral Dissertation). University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

language using adult immersion methods such as the Mentor-Apprentice model.

Children attending immersion programs need the opportunity to speak the language outside of school, so it is crucial that the language is spoken at home and in the community. Program leaders may need to reassure parents that learning the First Nations language will not interfere with their children's ability to continue learning and speaking English. For more information on the benefits of speaking more than one language, see our Bilingual Families fact sheet.

KEY TERMS

- **Immersion:** a method of language instruction that uses the language being taught as the only language of instruction. No English is used.
- **Language Nest:** a language program for preschool children in which they are immersed in their First Nations language.
- **Mentor-Apprentice:** one language mentor and one language apprentice spend time in immersion together in a natural setting to gain or increase language proficiency.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

First Peoples' Cultural Council. (2013). *Language Nest handbook online companion toolkit*. Retrieved from http://www.fpcc.ca/language/Resources/Online_Companion_Toolkit/default.aspx

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Gessner, S., Michel, K.A., & Parker, A. (2014). *Language Nest handbook for B.C. First Nations communities*. Brentwood Bay, BC: First Peoples' Cultural Council.

Hinton, L. (2011). Language revitalization and language pedagogy: New teaching and learning strategies. *Language and Education*, 25(4), 307-318.

Yamamoto, A. & Yamamoto, K. (2004). *Awakening our languages: An introduction*. Santa Fe, NM: Indigenous

Language Institute.

McIvor, O. (2005). The contribution of Indigenous heritage language immersion programs to healthy early childhood development. In J. Whitehead (Ed.), *Research connections Canada: Supporting children and families*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Child Care Federation.



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