



Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2010

Fact Sheet

This fact sheet presents an overview of the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council's 2010 *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages*.

WHY REPORT ON THE STATUS OF B.C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES?

British Columbia is home to 60% of the First Nations languages in Canada with 32 distinct languages. This diverse wealth of languages is at risk, however, and every First Nations language in B.C. is in danger of being lost.

This report provides concrete measures to record the status of First Nations languages in B.C. with the hope of building a stronger case for the urgency to act quickly with revitalization efforts. It also highlights the work of B.C. First Nations to revitalize their languages and discusses strategies being used to stem the tide of language extinction.

FINDINGS

Based on the framework created by the First Peoples' Council for defining and measuring language endangerment according to three variables—speakers, usage and language resources—all B.C. First Nations languages are severely endangered or nearly extinct. Some are already sleeping.

Language Speakers

- Fluent speakers make up only 5.1% (5,609) of the total population (109,588 in this report) and the vast majority of them are elders.
- Semi-fluent speakers make up 8.2% (8,948) of the population; their levels of language proficiency vary widely.

Usage

- First Nations language learners make up only 11.1% (12,223) of the total population.
- Approximately 1 – 4 hours a week are spent on language in non-immersion First Nations-operated schools and Head Start Programs where language is taught.
- 34% of the students attending a Head Start program or First Nations-operated school were reported as not learning a First Nations language.
- First Nations languages are rarely used in the home, government, media or for daily communication.

Language Resources

- Only about 31% (53) of communities have recordings of their language available as a community resource. Many of these recordings are old and poor quality.
- Only about 52% (88) communities have any sort of curriculum materials for teaching the languages. Many of these curricula are very limited and have not been developed for different levels of language learners.
- Only about 39% (66) of communities reported having access to a FirstVoices.com archive of their language. However, other communities may use different archiving systems.

continued on page 2

WHY ARE THERE SO FEW SPEAKERS OF FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES?

The dramatic decline in B.C. First Nations languages since the late 1800s is largely due to the following causes:

- The Canadian government's historic severe assimilation policies
- The Residential School system followed by Indian Day Schools that removed First Nations children from their homes and forbade them to speak their languages
- Social, industrial and cultural pressures from the dominant English-speaking society
- Exclusion of First Nations languages from government, commerce, industry, arts, education and media

WHY IS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IMPORTANT TODAY?

Language is the way a culture is transmitted—it represents the identity of a people and holds cultural, historical, scientific and ecological knowledge. When a language is lost, we all lose out on the knowledge held within it and the unique way its speakers view the world.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO REVITALIZE LANGUAGES?

The status of B.C. First Nations language is critical, but the report recognizes that there is considerable work being done in communities to revitalize languages. Actions include:

- Collaborating to share ideas and resources, as well as overcome common challenges
- Creating new speakers by participating in immersion programs
- Recording, documenting and archiving languages
- Developing short- and long-term revitalization plans to benefit communities across language groups

HOW WAS THIS INFORMATION GATHERED?

The data used in this report is derived from the First Peoples' Council Language Program's 2006–2010 database of "language needs assessments" that are filled out by community organizations when they apply for language funding from the First Peoples' Council Language Program. This data is the most accurate and up-to-date available since it comes directly from First Nations communities and is constantly updated whenever a new language needs assessment is filled out. Also, this data was collected from 83% (170) of the First Nations communities in B.C., which provides an accurate and comprehensive representation of the status of First Nations languages in B.C.

To view the *First Peoples' Language Map of B.C.*, go to: <http://maps.fphlcc.ca>. To view archives and learn B.C. First Nations languages, go to: www.firstvoices.com.

To download the full report, go to www.fphlcc.ca.

"...I was beginning to fear that our language was slowly disappearing, especially as each Elder is put into the ground."

Clara Camille, Secwepemctsin Speaker