



*Question and Answer Summary*  
*Creating Skwxwú7mesh Sníchim Speakers*  
*With Salia Joseph, Swu7u Billy and Char George*  
*November 12, 2024*

**Q: Is your immersion work in person and with the immersion home, did participants reside together? How were you able to support the immersion participation of adults with family obligations like young children or Elders to care for?**

Immersion was in person before the pandemic, then online during, and hybrid ever since. Participants don't reside in the house. They meet Mon-Thurs 9-4 and lots of flexibility is given when people have family and cultural obligations. Children are often present.

**Q: Is the stewardship program one that is happening on the land?**

The "Stewardship" was a program where instead of offering a new cohort of certificate or diploma, the main team spent 10 months working on their own proficiency, trying to push up beyond intermediate to advanced. It was primarily during the pandemic, so the group met mostly online, but during that time and since then, Myia has organized some awesome land-based learning opportunities for the group.

For example, Myia organized for our team to go up to one of our mountains and do some Alpine Berry picking. She also organized for our team to go by boat where divers got sea cucumbers and different things so our team got to learn how to prepare those things the way that our ancestors would have. We try to do as much on the land as we can, going on immersion walks out on the land, by the beach, by the river - there's different language that happens there.

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**Q: Is this presentation attached to a dissertation paper that we can refer to and cite?**

- Most of the info in this presentation will be in an article manuscript that should come out around April 2025 as part of Nikki Benson's dissertation package and subsequently published elsewhere.
- [Charlene George's dissertation](#) has a lot of this information too
- There is a paper on Advanced Language Learning that includes a lot from this group that will be published in the upcoming issue of the [Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics](#).
- [A glossary of Skwxwú7mesh language revitalization: The work of adult Indigenous language education](#) is a more general paper about the history of the programs.

**Q: Many languages have different dialects. Does your language have multiple dialects? If so, how do you support your dialects in your program?**

The area our language is in is a bit of a special case because there's evidence of dialects in our language from pre-contact. But because of the way the epidemics and the residential schools funneled our people down into such a low number, we don't have dialects per se anymore. What we do have, is every Elder has their own special way of speaking, and there's a little evidence that that comes from different dialects of our language.

For example, we'll have 5 different ways to say the word for butterfly and what we do in our program is we say we're going to teach you this one way of speaking, which isn't too different from how people speak. This is how we're going to teach it, but we encourage them all to look for recordings, ask around in their families to try and find how their family would say certain words. For example, one of our students, Brianne Baker, who works with us now, shared that that her family had a different way of saying "great-grandparent" which we didn't know until she started learning language.

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We always encourage students to find out what their ancestors say. We're lucky that we have many thousands of hours of recordings and many people who have written down language in documents. So, we have lots of work that our ancestors have done that is available to us to do research with where we can search for recordings of people who come from our family that were language speakers. So that's the way we go about it in our program: we say this is how we'll teach it, but we want you to find out if there's a certain way that you might say things differently from your family because we want all that to come back.

**Q: What type of support is available for relocation in order for people to participate in the in-person immersion?**

We haven't had to deal with that yet at this point. We help on the back end to make sure that all the students are equipped with tuition support and their living allowance. Our nation changed it so that if you had done previous Post Secondary education you would still be funded for this SFU program. Before they switched that, we did work as just a non-profit to find funding to match what the other students were getting for those students that weren't qualified because they already had other Post Sec.

We've had to get creative in those types of ways. But at this point, nearly all of our students are from our community and the majority of them have all lived in the lower mainland. We do have people that live out in Chilliwack or up in the Squamish Valley proper and it's a little bit further away from where we're where we are, but we do work creatively to make sure that there aren't any barriers for people financially to join the program and also other types of barriers to apply for the program.

For example, you don't even have to have your high school graduation. You don't even be able to use a computer. I've had Elders that say, "Look, I want to apply, but I don't use the computer." I said OK, let's meet up, dictate to me what the answer is to your application for SFU, and I'll help. We need to remove barriers to accessing language because it belongs to our community. It's for everybody.

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**Q: In the Where Are Your Keys method, the group uses American Sign Language or hand gestures while they're teaching in order for the group not to break out of immersion. Isn't using ASL or these other hand languages using another language and therefore it's no longer immersion?**

SB: Secretly, yes, it is translating. But we don't talk about that. No, but yeah, we asked Evan [[from Where Are Your Keys](#)] about it before who said that, yeah, technically it is like little subtitles underneath your Sḱwxwú7mesh, but because it's with your hands, doesn't interrupt the way that translation happens in the classroom. A lot of people think about Where Are Your Keys as a sign language, but you can almost think of it like training wheels where it helps you start off and then eventually you won't need it. Though even if I don't need the sign language now where I'm at my fluency, I practice it because I'm going to be using it with my students and teaching it to them.

SJ: Unless you went in as an ASL speaker, that was fluent in ASL, it wouldn't be a translation in your mind. The other purpose of it is that it creates another way of learning that's very physical and in your body. Lots of people will remember how to say something because their hands remember it first. It's leaning into another type of language learning intelligence and that is borrowed from the brilliance of ASL. It's relying on other parts of your body and brain other than your voice.

CG: The ASL, we dub it as a "Sḱwxwú7mesh sign language" because there are things that are happening in our language that don't occur in ASL.

A quick story, I was at this ceremony and my sister, who learned *Where Are Your Keys* a little bit, was sitting across at the other end and there were groups of people sitting in between us. We're talking to each other because she speaks hən̓q̓əmiñəm and Hul'q'umi'num' and I speak Sḱwxwú7mesh but we can understand each other in different ways, using this ASL.

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This lady came up to me and she asked if we were trying to speak to her group. I had no idea what she was talking about so she shared she could see us kind of using ASL, but it's different. I had to explain to her the work that we do and she said "OK, I just want you to know that right in the middle there, there's a group of the ASL community and they're trying to figure out what you're saying to them, but they don't know." I laughed and she introduced me to them, explaining what we do.

It's not directly ASL. We use the signs and I wouldn't say we translate saying this sign means "you", this sign means "me". We combine as much as we can because of how many different pronouns we have and the many different ways we have of talking about me, you, that person, us, you all, them over there. We don't even have a link as to decipher which is which so we also say that we have a Skwxwú7mesh sign language in the works now.

SB: And we are very clear with our students that you will not be able to fluently speak using ASL through this program. Fluent users of ASL probably won't understand what you're saying so it's used more like subtitles.

**Q: How many participants in your programs are first time learners versus how many are those with sleeping language? And related to that, did you target adult participants versus silent speakers for this program?**

SB: That's a good question. I'd say 99% of our learners are first time learners. That being said, a lot of people have glimmers of the language in their life, if that makes sense. Like I said, for me growing up, my grandmother was a first language speaker of Líl'wat. The Líl'wat language is different enough from Skwxwú7mesh that I can't understand it with my Skwxwú7mesh ears. My mom would try and teach me as much Skwxwú7mesh words as she knew, which wasn't very much. It was just the basics and that's pretty much a similar story for most people.

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We have had people come through who have had previous language abilities. But not many. I don't think we've had any silent speakers, though, because our silent speakers that we have are all very elderly people. All three of us, for example, were in kind of the same boat where in our OPI, our oral provisions interview, at the beginning of the program, was hilarious. We just sat there looking confused the whole time because we didn't know any of the questions that were being asked. But yeah, I'd say 99% of the students are first time language learners and starting from scratch.

**Q: What sort of content is being created online, art, etc., where it is shared and how might be the best way to reach out to your foundation to learn more?**

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