

*îkakwiy nîhiyawiyân:*

I am learning [to be] Cree

by

Onowa McIvor

B.A., University of Victoria, 1998

M.A., University of Victoria, 2005

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## Abstract

Indigenous languages are at risk of extinction all over the world. While revitalization approaches range from documentation, to early childhood immersion, to school-based approaches, to adult and community language classes, approaches focused on adult Indigenous language learners are sparse. Many Indigenous adults did not have an opportunity to learn their ancestral language due to geographic dislocation from home territory, adoption, migration, urbanization, or discontinued language use between generations. While many of these adults are determined to regain this part of their heritage, very few cases have been documented. This study begins to fill this knowledge gap through its contribution of an autoethnographic account of the author's language learning journey with *nîhiyawîwin* (the Cree language) over more than ten years. The journey was documented through journal writing and other language learning records, which were used to create the autoethnography. The primary aim of this study was to examine the motivations, processes, effects, and outcomes of the author's journey into urban *nîhiyawîwin* learning. While the autoethnographic approach focuses on only one story, this research contributes to a broader understanding of adult Indigenous language loss and recovery in Canada. This dissertation contributes to the creation of new knowledge in four distinct ways: it adds to the largely untold story of urban adult Indigenous language learning in Canada; it expands the foci of the Indigenous language revitalization movement to include Indigenous adult learners; it aligns Indigenous language revitalization efforts with the decolonization movement; and it provides the opportunity to inform second-language researchers and practitioners about adult Indigenous language learning. Several implications arise from this research, including justification for Indigenous language

learning as a new academic field of study, and policy recommendations are made pertaining to funding and legislation.

## **Preface**

The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board provided approval for this study under certificate number H10-03088.

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I would have loved to *nîhiyawiy* with you.

***mâcipayiwîn***  
(the beginning)

Languages are dying all over the world. The vast majority of those threatened and in danger of disappearing are Indigenous languages (Harrison, 2007; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). While approaches to “save” Indigenous languages vary, ranging from documentation, to early childhood immersion, to school-based approaches, to adult and community language classes, the possibilities for increasing the number of adult Indigenous language speakers are largely underexplored (and perhaps underestimated). Increasingly, adults who did not learn their Indigenous tongue as a first language are determined to regain this part of their heritage. These Indigenous adults have also become advocates for the survival of Indigenous languages as part of efforts to further self-determination, rebuild sovereignty, and strengthen cultural identity.

Many Indigenous adults did not have an opportunity to learn their ancestral language as children because of geographic dislocation from home territory, adoption outside the culture, migration or urbanization of the family unit, or severance of language continuation between generations. An increasing number of Indigenous adults in Canada want to learn their ancestral language(s), yet struggle with how to gain this knowledge and ability (Daniels-Fiss, 2008; Maracle, 2002; Sarker & Metallic, 2009). This challenge is due, at least in part, to a low number of visible role models who have successfully learned Indigenous languages as adults. Very few of these cases have been documented and almost no evidence exists of the methods they used to learn the languages.

Adult Indigenous language learning, as a component of the wider project of Indigenous language revitalization, has not yet been widely studied in Canada or the United States. This doctoral study contributes to this knowledge gap in one central way,

with several other important contributions and outcomes. This study's main goal is to further the understanding of the experience of adult Indigenous language learning in Canada through the intimate study of one person's successes and the challenges and barriers she encountered. This study aims to contribute to reshaping the Indigenous language movement by making a case for the more central inclusion of adult Indigenous language learning as a strategy within the revitalization movement. This study will also strengthen the links between the goals of the decolonization movement and the potential contribution of Indigenous language revitalization within that movement. Through this contribution to new knowledge creation, which builds on two decades of language revitalization work in a variety of fields, a new area of academic study emerges, that of adult Indigenous language learning.

### ***Purpose***

This study is an autoethnographic account of my language learning journey with *nîhiyawîwin*<sup>1</sup> (the Cree language) over more than ten years. During the six years prior to my entry into a University of British Columbia (UBC) doctoral program, I tracked my language learning journey through journal writing and notes about my language learning. In the six years since I entered the program, my record keeping has been more intentional. In all, twelve years of records documenting my personal language learning journey have been used to create this autoethnography.

The primary aim of this study was to examine the motivations, processes, effects, and outcomes of my journey into urban *nîhiyawîwin* learning. While the autoethnographic approach to the study purposely focuses on one adult's story, an important purpose of the study was to contribute to a broader understanding of adult

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<sup>1</sup> When using roman orthography for writing *nîhiyawîwin* (a syllabic form exists as well) capital letters are not normally used, perhaps because there is no "proper noun" distinction in *nîhiyawîwin* and although it shares an orthography with English it does not systematically follow English (or other) writing norms.

Indigenous language loss and recovery in Canada by adding another voice to the too-few stories of adult Indigenous language learning in Canada.

Autoethnographies are, by nature, studies of lives being lived by their author-researchers; they do not always set out to address specific questions. Autoethnographic approaches to research “are flexible, reflexive, and reflective of life as lived; they do not follow a rigid list of rule-based procedures” (Ellis, 2009, p. 16). Autoethnographies are often exploratory and aim to tell a life’s story for the purpose of evocative response, stirring readers to action while offering greater depth of understanding of the subject at hand.

While this study is in many ways holistic and intuitive in nature, the following questions formed a focus for the study’s narrative:

- What can the author and others learn from this autoethnographic study of an urban *nîhiyaw* (Cree) woman striving to learn her language out-of-territory?
- What have been the processes, experiences, outcomes, meanings, and significance of a *nîhiyaw* woman learning her ancestral language in her adult years?
- What language learning approaches have been effective and which have been ineffective in furthering this language learning journey, and why?
- What challenges, barriers, successes, and possibilities for adult Indigenous language learning emerge from this story that may further understandings of adult Indigenous language learning?
- What understandings emerge from this study about the unique challenges of urban, out-of-territory language learning?

- In what ways might this study's outcomes inform the Indigenous language revitalization movement, Indigenous communities, and Canada at large about the challenges and possibilities for adult Indigenous language learning?

### ***nitâcimôwin (telling my story)***

This dissertation is the story of my coming to understand my maternal family's history with *nîhiyawîwin*, my struggle to overcome the loss of *nîhiyawîwin* in our family, and the turning of my energy towards restoring *nîhiyawîwin* in my life and the lives of my children. I have spent well over a decade attempting to learn *nîhiyawîwin*, the language of my heart. This dissertation is a study of that journey.

I am a *nîhiyaw* and Scottish-Canadian woman married to a *nîhiyaw-napiw* (Cree man). We are raising a family together on Salish territory on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. For the past sixteen years, I have been actively reclaiming my maternal ancestral language and culture while living far from my homeland. Although this dissertation tells the story of my own journey with language, it does not begin with me. I am one person in an ancient web of people. Countless generations have come before me, and our histories of language loss and gain are intertwined and complex.



Figure 1. *niya* (me), growing up in rural northern Saskatchewan circa 1982

Both of my maternal grandparents were *nîhiyawîwin* speakers. *nohkom* (my grandmother) was one of many in her generation who decided that she (and therefore her family) would be better off speaking only English. She, like most parents, wanted what was best for her children. She believed that speaking *nîhiyawîwin* had no value and, in fact, was devaluing in that speaking *nîhiyawîwin* identified you to others as being “Indian” and therefore subject to stereotypes such as lazy, drunk, and generally inferior. Her mother (my great-grandmother Isabella) spoke little English, but once Isabella passed on, *nohkom* ceased using *nîhiyawîwin* with *môsom* (my grandfather, who also spoke *nîhiyawîwin*), and consequently did not pass *nîhiyawîwin* on to her children.



While many others' stories inevitably intertwine with my own, I have been careful to tell only those that belong to my family or those which I have been encouraged and permitted to include. The most obvious interconnection with my story is that of my partner through our marriage and children; in addition, he has been involved in my language learning journey as a *nîhiyawîwin* mentor. Both of our families' histories include complex experiences of Indigenous language loss and gain. While according to *nîhiyaw* protocols it would be improper for me to tell my partner's language story without his having initiated the request, I have received permission to include a part of his mother's story and the photograph that is shown in Figure 2.

I feel a connection to my late mother-in-law, Suzette Dokkie Napoleon, not only because she raised my husband from infancy when his biological mother (her daughter) died at the age of 20, but also because she lived in a similar context and era as my maternal great-grandmothers, Isabella Mowat and Jessie Campbell. All three of these women lived in Canada's north (Suzette in northern British Columbia and Isabella and Jessie in northern Manitoba) from the early to the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when *nîhiyawîwin* was among the dominant languages spoken and subsistence lifestyles were the norm. I often try to imagine the changes in the world they must have witnessed in their lifetimes without ever travelling much more than a few hundred kilometres from the places of their birth.

The story yet to unfold in this dissertation is built around the seasons. While this chapter is titled *mâcipayiwîn* (the beginning), like the seasons, this story is cyclical and therefore has no beginning (and no end). However, as all stories must begin somewhere, so this story "begins" at a place of honouring the many forebears whose lived experiences have inevitably contributed to the current context from which my story emerges; it begins at a place where *nîhiyawîwin* flowed effortlessly within families and

communities, when strong women and men kept their language alive—for themselves and also for their children and grandchildren. This is the point at which the story circles back and connects with the very aims to which I am striving to return: a time when *nîhiyawîwin* can flow effortlessly in our family between parent and child and eventually grandparent and grandchild, as we pass down the teachings and cultural values embedded in the language while reinforcing and shaping a *nîhiyaw* identity.



**Figure 2. Suzzette Dokkie Napoleon with her granddaughter Naomi**

*miyôskamin* (spring) 1978  
photo credit: Della Owens

### ***At kohkom's (grandmother's) knee***

As I searched for a family photo that signified for me a starting point for this story, the above image (Figure 2) of Suzzette and her granddaughter (my niece) emerged. For me this photograph captures the spirit of a new life, a new cycle beginning, of wisdom flowing from honoured knowledge- and language-keeper to *kosim* (grandchild).

Like many of her generation, my late mother-in-law Suzzette refused to speak English. She lived a long life in northern British Columbia (BC), passing on to the spirit world in 2001. Except in some parts of northern Canada, Elders like Suzzette who never adopted a colonial language are becoming more and more rare. It is difficult to imagine today the world in which Suzzette grew up in the early 1900s in Canada's north, where the languages of everyday communication, trade, and commerce were still the original languages of that land. Yet, there was a time not so long ago when Indigenous languages flowed effortlessly from the mouths of our people, a time when our languages were no more rare than the air we breathed.

As *nîhiyawak* (Cree people), our language was foundational to our culture and worldview. It contained our belief systems, our laws, our decision-making practices, our child-rearing customs, our songs, place names, the history of the land, the history of our migration, and our family's histories. When children were born, they heard primarily our languages being spoken and sung, and in stories repeated night after night around the fire and, later, the kitchen table. Children were directed according to values which were embedded within our cultural ways; they were taught in our languages how to behave properly. Young men were taught in our languages how to track game, how to give thanks to the animal for the life they had taken, and how not to waste any part of the animal. Not speaking unless there is something important to say is a *nîhiyaw* way of being, and so traditionally we did not speak as much as is expected or encouraged in today's world. However, that which *was* important to convey was said in the language. Because traditionally our languages were not written, our education occurred entirely through observation and oral teaching. Our communities were not segregated by age. Young children remained close to their caregivers at all times. Older children cared for younger children and worked alongside the adults, learning all they needed to know to

thrive in the world, including how to be a good person, how to be aware of their surroundings, how to give thanks and have reverence for the earth and its gifts, how to get food for their family, how to prepare and preserve food, and how to create housing, tools, clothing, and modes of transportation to assist with the activities of everyday life.

We lived our ways through our language.

### ***nîhiyawîwin context***

The current overall context of Indigenous languages in Canada will be explored later in this chapter, leaving the focus here on *nîhiyawîwin* in order to provide a better context for *this* story. *nîhiyawîwin* is one of over 60 Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). The territory across which *nîhiyawîwin* spans is the largest of all Indigenous language territories in Canada, reaching from northern Quebec and northern Ontario, throughout Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and into the northeast corner of British Columbia (Okimâsis & Ratt, 1999) and parts of the Northwest Territories (Language Commissioner of the NWT, 2011; Wolvengrey, 2001). *nîhiyawîwin* is also the language with the largest number of speakers, reported in the 2006 national census to be 87,285 (Statistics Canada, 2008). While the relatively high<sup>2</sup> number of speakers is an obvious advantage to the vitality of *nîhiyawîwin*, the span of the territory is a disadvantage. *nîhiyawîwin*-speaking communities are quite spread out and the language includes five different dialects, which generally become less mutually intelligible the farther apart they are.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Indigenous people are becoming increasingly urban, and this trend will no doubt have impacts on even the strongest languages, particularly those such as *nîhiyawîwin* whose vitality have benefited from the isolation of large northern populations.

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<sup>2</sup> Globally, a language with fewer than 100,000 speakers is considered to have a low number of speakers.

<sup>3</sup> This has been reported to me by various L1 Plains *nîhiyawîwin* speakers who have said they can understand very little of spoken Moose Cree.

Five major dialects of *nîhiyawîwin* exist in Canada: Atihkamêk Cree, Moose Cree, Swampy Cree, Woodlands Cree, and Plains Cree (Okimâsis & Ratt, 1999; Wolvengrey, 2001). Each dialect is commonly referred to by a letter or digraph signifying the main differentiation between dialects. For example, Swampy Cree is also known as the “n” dialect, Plains Cree as the “y” dialect, Woodlands as the “th” dialect, Moose Cree as the “l” dialect, and Atihkamêk Cree as the ‘r’ dialect (Okimâsis & Ratt, 1999), although it is also recognized that all of these dialects (and subdialects) have vocabulary which is unique to them.<sup>4</sup>

My story involves three of these five dialects. My maternal family spoke Swampy Cree (or the “n” dialect) in our ancestral homelands of northern Manitoba. I grew up in northern Saskatchewan, in Plains Cree territory, and therefore had the opportunity (although extremely limited) throughout my childhood and youth to hear the “y” dialect. My partner speaks a subdialect of Plains Cree known as Northern Cree (a branch of the “y” dialect) which is specific to the northeastern corner of BC between the Alberta border and the foothills of the Rocky Mountain range.

Because there are no speakers left in my immediate family and I live far from my homelands, I am mainly learning the Northern Cree subdialect as it is my partner’s dialect and therefore the most logical for me to strive to learn and make the language of our home. I also write in the Northern Cree subdialect as it was the first *nîhiyawîwin* orthography to which I was introduced and it is the main dialect I continue to learn.<sup>5</sup> The third dialect which enters my story is that of my most recent language mentor,

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<sup>4</sup> An example of the difference between two dialects such as the “y” and “th” is in most places where a “y” appears in a word (except for the end), it would be replaced by “th.” For example, the word *miywâsin* (meaning ‘it is good’) in the “y” dialect is *mithawâsin* in the “th” dialect but *nikâwiy* (mother) is the same in both dialects.

<sup>5</sup> The main difference in the writing systems of the Northern and Plains Cree is the use of the letter *e* in Plains versus *î* in Northern for the same sound. For example, the word for a Cree person is *nehiyaw* in Plains Cree and *nîhiyaw* in Northern Cree.

Jackie, who speaks Woodlands Cree, or the “th” dialect. Although I strive to use the “th” dialect when we are together as a gesture of respect to her, she understands the “y” dialect well due to her vast exposure to and experience with “y” speakers, and she is very gracious about my use of both dialects during our time together.

### ***Dissertation overview***

The dissertation’s prologue, *mâcipayiwîn*, introduces the study—an autoethnographic account of my language learning journey with *nîhiyawîwin*—by outlining its purpose and guiding questions and providing a context. This is followed in chapter one, *kayâs* (history and context), by an overview of Indigenous language history in Canada, which provides the foundation from which my story emerged. Some consequences of this history, the current situation of Indigenous languages in Canada, and an overview of the Indigenous language revitalization movement that is now underway are also provided.

The second chapter, *masinahikan kiskihtamôna* (knowledge that is written or comes from books), reviews foundational and influential literature related to adult Indigenous language revitalization in Canada. The chapter includes the study’s theoretical frameworks, a summary of relevant case studies, and a brief exploration of the concept of “ancestral” language learning.

The third chapter, *sihcikiwîna* (the way or method of doing something), outlines the blend of two methodological frameworks used in this dissertation: autoethnography and Indigenous research methodology. The language learning approaches used, the type and manner of records kept, and the meaning-making processes followed in the study are also included.

The autoethnographic heart of this story emerges in chapter four, *nitâcimowin* (my story), a telling of my journey with *nîhiyawîwin* derived from records that were kept over a twelve-year period. The six seasons from *nîhiyaw* epistemology give shape to the story.

Chapter five, *kîkwaya kê miskamân* (what I have found), offers understandings that emerged from the study, presented through a process that Ellis (2009) calls meta-autoethnography, whereby the autoethnographic author reflects on her story and draws out findings, interweaving these conclusions with relevant scholarly literature.

The sixth and final chapter, *iskwâyâc tihtamowina* (final thoughts), discusses the implications of the understandings that emerge from the study. The chapter offers suggestions for future research into adult Indigenous language learning as a part of the movement to revitalize Indigenous languages in Canada.

## **Chapter 1. *kayâs*** (history and context)

This chapter provides a historical overview of Indigenous languages in Canada through four distinct yet overlapping language eras: the era of commonplace Indigenous multilingualism that existed “since time immemorial”; continued Indigenous multilingualism in the period of early contact with Europeans; rapid Indigenous language demise in the colonial policy era; and the current condition of Indigenous languages, both in Canada and around the world. The chapter concludes by examining policies and approaches of the Indigenous language revitalization movement.

### ***Historical overview of Indigenous language eras in Canada***

This section is an exploratory theorization and contextualization of the history of Indigenous languages in Canada up to their current state. It is perhaps ambitious and no doubt incomplete in parts, as this topic alone could be a dissertation study. However, my story cannot be told without this section. This history provides an important backdrop to how adult Indigenous language learning became necessary, and it situates my family’s (and therefore my own) place in a context of language loss and revitalization in the land now known as Canada. While travelling back in time more than 1000 years may seem excessive, this period is a mere blink in the span of time to which our Elders refer when they say “since time immemorial.” Many First Nation teachings include the requirement to look back seven generations as well as seven generations forward when considering the actions of today. I see this historical exploration as my way of fulfilling this cultural teaching and rooting my research within this ancient web of experiences.



The history engaged within this section is complex and varied. While I strongly support the need for increased specificity when discussing both the history and the present contexts of Indigenous people's lives, some degree of shared experience can be counted on. During the decade or century in which Indigenous peoples encountered the sustained presence of European settlement, the level of preexisting multilingualism and subsequent language decline doubtlessly varied from region to region. However, this historical overview is intended to provide a broad foundation to my family's story as one in a patchwork quilt of histories. I describe the following history as "eras" of which the exact time that any one community experienced each one, and to what degree and in what ways, varied. Again, the intention of this overview is primarily to highlight the following: that there was a time when Indigenous languages flourished naturally on Turtle Island<sup>6</sup>; that multilingualism was a common state prior to European contact; and that all First Nations experienced a dramatic decline in the number of Indigenous language speakers due to large death tolls, language erosion, or both. All of these conditions culminated in an overarching decline in Indigenous language use on Turtle Island and the necessity for language revitalization and maintenance activities which has led to academic study and theory building in this area.

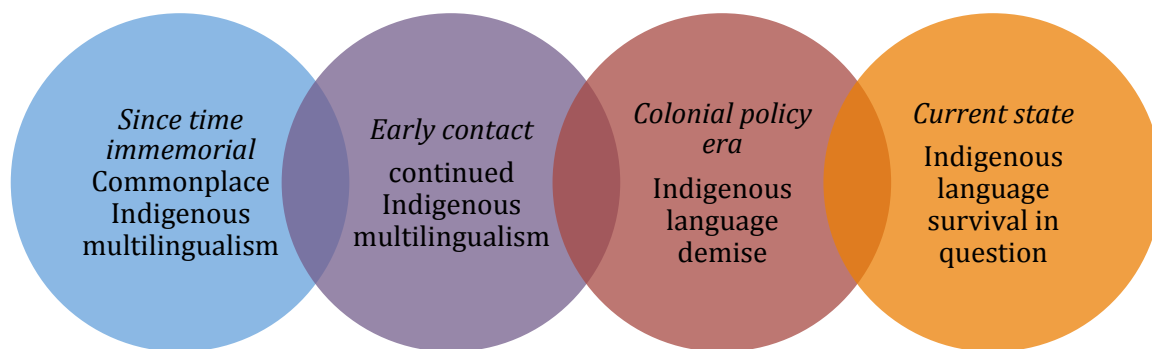
While much of today's academic discourse focuses only on the current condition and demise of many Indigenous languages (Hinton & Hale; 2001; Norris, 2007; Reyhner & Lockard, 2009), the present moment is just one era in the history of Indigenous languages in Canada. Informed by my formal and informal study of Indigenous language revitalization over the last ten years, I theorize that the history of Indigenous languages on Turtle Island has spanned four distinct yet overlapping eras: (i) the time when

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<sup>6</sup> A term used by Indigenous people for the land now known as North America, although it more specifically focuses on Canada and the USA due to their similar experiences with colonization.

Indigenous languages were the only languages spoken across Turtle Island, a time also marked by Indigenous travel, trade, and intermarriage when Indigenous multilingualism flourished, an era dating from the beginning of human life on Turtle Island until the late 1400s; (ii) a period of continued vitality of Indigenous multilingualism, despite waves of new immigrants, lasting from the late 1400s until the mid-late 1800s; (iii) the rapid demise of Indigenous languages from the mid-late 1800s to the late 1900s; and (iv) the current condition, from the 1990s to the present day. Although the fourth era is a time of continued broad language decline,<sup>7</sup> this period is also recognized as distinctive as a time of concern and growing interest in Indigenous language survival marked by an increase in both community language revitalization initiatives and scholarly literature on the subject (see seminal examples such as Burnaby, 1996; Cantoni, 1996; Fettes, 1992; Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hornberger, 1996; Ignace, 1998; Kirkness, 1998; Krauss, 1998; Maurais, 1996; Norris, 1998; Reyhner & Tennant, 1995; Wurm, 1997).

**Figure 3. Indigenous language eras**



To begin, the first and second eras are highlighted as underemphasized in the Indigenous language revitalization literature, which leaves these eras as undertold stories in the history of Indigenous languages on Turtle Island. The second era marked a

<sup>7</sup> While 95% of Indigenous languages in Canada are currently declining (Statistics Canada, 2008), it is important to keep in mind that a handful of languages (namely Anishnaabowin, Inuktituk, and *nîhiyawîwin*) have been experiencing either a steady state or a slight increase in the number of speakers.

time when Indigenous languages maintained some of their vitality due to the actions of both Indigenous and certain non-Indigenous people. In this era of early contact, both Indigenous peoples and particular influential early settlers (mainly clergy and fur trade company employees) held Indigenous languages in high regard and contributed positively to their vitality.

### **Indigenous multilingualism**

Through travel, trade, and tribal intermarriage, the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island made centuries-long contributions to the continuation of Indigenous multilingualism.<sup>8</sup> Evidence exists of travel both near and far between Indigenous nations all over the Americas prior to the arrival of European explorers (Calloway, 2003; Flannery, 2001). Indigenous multilingualism/multidialectism was both necessary and commonplace due to this travel for purposes of adventure, trade, following buffalo and other large game, food gathering (often from neighbouring territories), and tribal intermarriage. Providing an example, anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (1990) reports this typical multilingualism in her interviews with three female Yukon Territory Elders in northern Canada, each of whom reports speaking two or more Indigenous languages in addition to English because of regular travel and intermarriage throughout their territory.

Following this long period of Indigenous multilingualism on Turtle Island came a time of sustained European settlement. Although this development fuelled the decline of most Indigenous languages, examples exist of both Indigenous people and early settlers taking up each other's languages, which thereby continued the trend of multilingualism for some time. Some Indigenous people learned European languages upon the foreigners' arrival in order to provide translation, aid the foreigners' survival,

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<sup>8</sup> Multilingualism is used here to mean a working knowledge of two or more languages.

and enhance their own positions to benefit from European trade. Anishnaabe scholar Jan Hare and renowned historian Jean Barman recount one such incidence of a prominent Tsimshian family's aid to early missionaries Emma and Thomas Crosby:

In order to carry out their intentions, they required conduits to Tsimshian society.... [They were] not familiar with the languages, customs, and traditions of these coastal peoples. The Crosby's knowledge and understandings of their surroundings came from the Tsimshian and more particularly, from a prominent couple, Kate and Alfred Dudoward. (Hare & Barman, 2005, p. 185)

Early settlers, most prominently explorers, fur traders, and missionaries, also contributed to continued multilingualism on Turtle Island through their learning of the Indigenous language(s) of the territory in which they resided (Campbell, 1885-1910; Hare & Barman, 2005). These early settlers were motivated to know the languages for a number of reasons. The most immediate motivation was survival, especially during their first winters. Other motivations included trade and the advancement of the colonial agenda through land acquisition and religious conversion. Despite the latter, less admirable motive, these efforts contributed positively to the value placed on Indigenous languages and assured their continuation for a time.

One account of an early settler's efforts to learn and use Indigenous languages comes from a journal kept by one of my Scottish-born great-grandfathers during his time as a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) employee in northern Manitoba (Campbell, 1885-1910); this journal is preserved in the HBC archives in Winnipeg. The following excerpts from his journal describe his linguistic efforts:

1888—I could now talk the Cree language enough to do business with the Indians, and had the work of the Post attended to. (p. 12)

1889—I now spoke the *Saulteaux* language fluently. Cubby Sinclair who noticed that I picked up the languages readily, pretended to believe it was the same as *Gaelic*, this was one of his jokes. (p. 14)

Thomas Crosby, an early missionary during this same era, wrote: “We hoped to learn the language, preach the Gospel and teach them, as well as we knew how, the arts of civilization” (Hare & Barman, 2005, p. 185). This early period of Canadian history, when multilingualism was more prevalent and encouraged, was documented mainly in journals, memoirs, and autobiographies. Prior to the rise of a scholarly field focused on Indigenous language learning, the academic literature more pointedly emphasized the demise of Indigenous languages, with less focus on the time before this decline (Dalby, 2003; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Harrison, 2007; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

### **Indigenous language demise**

The third era in this overview of the history of Indigenous languages is estimated to have lasted from the mid-late 1800s to the late 1900s. It signifies a time when Indigenous language use dramatically declined across Canada and the United States (and probably in Mexico and elsewhere as well). Although it is difficult to estimate the number of Indigenous languages which existed prior to sustained European settlement, Michael Krauss (1998), an American linguist, reports that a “fair estimate” would be well over 300 languages “in what is now the United States and Canada” (p. 9). Krauss warns that while approximately 210 of these languages still exist, only 32 have child speakers.

While the large number of languages and the span of the territory in which they were spoken have undeniably contributed to the challenge of maintaining the languages, various other interrelated factors, mainly related to contact with European settlers and colonial governments, have contributed to Indigenous language decline. This era of

language decline was dominated by shifts in control from Indigenous to European governance and the creation of powerful institutions, such as the Department of Indian Affairs,<sup>9</sup> which led to the oppression and marginalization of Indigenous people and their languages. Vast reductions in Indigenous languages occurred due to the erosion of traditional territories, changes to traditional governance, an increase in the number of foreigners, and the introduction of colonial legislation and policies, which included formal schooling in English or French. Despite the impact of these interrelated stressors, one factor that cannot be underestimated in its contribution to Indigenous language decline is that of the decimation of the Indigenous population itself.

### Death

Precision is difficult due to a lack of formal record keeping during this period; however, Northcott and Wilson (2008) estimate that 200,000–500,000 Indigenous people lived in central and eastern Canada in the 1500s. By 1861, following contact with European settlers, this number had been reduced to 23,000 (Morton, 1997). The enormous decline in the population of Indigenous people during early contact no doubt contributed greatly to the deterioration of Indigenous language use and therefore the languages' long-term survival.

Disease and warfare are the main reasons for the extreme death rate of Indigenous people. Of these, disease was the most significant contributor (Northcott & Wilson, 2008). In the words of an American scientific journalist, “disease turned whole societies to ash” (Mann, 2005, p. 123). Through contact, many diseases to which Europeans were immune were introduced to Indigenous communities which had no immunity, and the results were devastating. Mann (2005) explains:

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<sup>9</sup> This department has undergone many name changes over time, most recently in 2011, to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. However, I use the name that is most commonly used by Indigenous people in Canada.

Living in the era of antibiotics [and vaccines] it is difficult to imagine the simultaneous deaths of siblings, parents, relatives and friends.... [In] a grim flash of light, Indian villages became societies of widows, widowers, and orphans; parents lost their children, and children were suddenly alone. (p. 122)

Through the erasure of whole tribes and the abandonment of entire languages by those who joined neighbouring tribes for survival, mass death also meant mass language death.

Population decline also weakened the fabric of Indigenous societies. Much of the leadership strength in Indigenous communities died in the waves of disease and warfare to which Indigenous people were exposed. Mann (2005) describes how disease “not only shattered the family bonds that were the underlying foundation of Indian societies, it wiped out the political superstructure at the top” (p. 122). During the summer of 1701, the leaders of forty Indigenous nations gathered in Montreal to negotiate peace among themselves and the French. While they were there, “dozens died” of influenza (Mann, p. 123).

It is widely agreed that disease was by far the most devastating factor in the decline of Indigenous populations in North America (Diamond, 1999; Mann, 2005, Northcott & Wilson, 2008); however, colonial warfare driven by conquest for land also had a significant impact. Numerous examples are documented, many of which were described as massacres because of the large number of Indigenous people who died in each battle. Harvard scholar Flannery writes that the period between 1850 and 1870 in California “saw the worst massacres of indigenous peoples ever to take place in the United States. Tens of thousands of Indians perished at the hands of the American frontiersmen, miners and camp followers” (2001, p. 240). Legendary historical librarian Dee Brown (1970) describes the Wounded Knee massacre in which 300 of 350 Sioux

were killed: “The big Hotchkiss guns on the hill opened up on them, firing almost a shell a second, raking the Indian camp, shredding the tepees with flying shrapnel, killing men, women, and children” (p. 444).

A third cause of large-scale death was not directly from disease or warfare, but rather from the prevalent colonial quest for land acquisition. Government decisions and actions regarding the displacement of entire tribes of people were, at times, death warrants. For example, thousands of Cherokee people were forcibly marched westward to “reserve” lands at “the most dangerous time of year, and between 4,000 and 8,000 died of starvation, exposure and despair” (Flannery, 2001, p. 310).

The mass-scale deaths from disease, warfare, and forced dislocation had an immense impact, not only on Indigenous peoples’ numbers and their spirits, but also on the vigour of their languages. The deaths of massive numbers of Indigenous people not only caused the decline of Indigenous languages as the number of speakers diminished; both people and languages were supplanted by a simultaneous increase in the number of foreigners, to a point at which Indigenous people and their languages became the minority in their own territories.

### Land loss

Dislocation from traditional territory has caused great hardship to many Indigenous people and it cannot be underestimated as an important historical and ongoing factor in the demise of Indigenous languages. Traditionally, tribes lived in areas chosen for their rich resources. During colonial land takeovers, entire tribes were moved from their traditional territories to areas that were often impoverished by a lack of good water sources and abundant and familiar plant and animal life. In addition, many tribal groups were traditionally nomadic. This did not mean that they travelled endlessly or without purpose, but rather that they moved within a certain range of



territory for seasonal sustenance, as Indigenous people understood well the importance of cyclical land and water resource use.

The foremost cause of loss of territory was colonial land-takers, many of whom benefitted from the introduction of treaties in Canada. The “negotiation” of historic treaties was largely a farce in Canada; the “process” was dominated by colonial interests, colonial law, and deception. As described by Hare (2003), “in this New World, land trade was not a trade at all. It was marked by deceptive practices and bad faith bargaining that forced relocation, economic displacement, and undue confinement” (p. 590). Indigenous leaders were unfamiliar with colonial styles of negotiation, mistakenly taking negotiators at their word. They were also naïve about foreign concepts of ownership and the consequences of colonial treaties on land use. Yet, it is important to recognize that some Indigenous leaders actively sought treaty making because they understood that the world was changing; therefore they demanded within treaties certain provisions, such as education, health care, and housing in exchange for land.

The combination of confinement to reserves, the colonial destruction of Indigenous territories for distribution among settlers, and the building of towns, railroads, ports, mills, mines, oil extraction facilities, and, later, power and gas lines has had, and continues to have, devastating effects on traditional ways of life. This severing of traditional ways of life, all of which were tied to and contained within our languages, has resulted in the concurrent erosion of cultural and linguistic ways of being.

Indigenous languages erode when speakers no longer frequent the places for which they have names, when the activities once carried out are no longer done, and when no reason exists to explain certain skills and procedures, or to explain why something is done a certain way. Once the buffalo became extinct, there was no longer

any need to explain how to skin one, or how to tan a hide, make pemmican, or carve bone into tools. Not only was practical knowledge eroded with this discontinuation of traditional ways tied to land, so was Indigenous language use itself. Multiple authors detail the diminishing numbers of minority languages around the globe and the subsequent devastation to people's cultures and ways of life (Dalby, 2003; Harrison, 2007).

### Colonial governance and policy

*"Guns, germs and steel were not always the most potent weapons ... the pen had its uses too."* (Flannery, 2001, p. 310)

The imposition of colonial forms of government and colonial policies across Indian country<sup>10</sup> served as another devastating blow to both the peoples and their languages. Indigenous peoples' ability to self-govern was undermined by the introduction of the 1876 *Indian Act* by the Canadian colonial government of the day. Indigenous forms of governance prior to contact were varied, rich, and complex. There were Elders' councils, women's councils, and hereditary chieftainships, depending on the region. Compliance with the colonially imposed band council government structure, which mirrored modern-day town councils, was (and still is) enforced through government control over the distribution or withholding of funds and services promised by the treaties. Traditional forms of governance were conducted entirely in the local Indigenous language. However, adherence to Indian affairs policy through the band councils replaced the language of governance and commerce with one of the colonial languages. This meant the erasure of yet another realm of use for Indigenous languages and another category of obsolete vocabulary. The inability to continue their

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<sup>10</sup> This colloquial phrase is commonly used by Indigenous people to refer to the lands now known as Canada, as a reminder of a time before colonization when Indigenous people still lived and thrived on their lands.

way of governing was demeaning, defeating, and demoralizing to the spirits of Indigenous people. Other colonial policies, such as the suppression of Indigenous spirituality and mandatory colonial schooling, had additional disastrous effects on Indigenous people and their languages.

While many examples exist of the spiritual suppression of Indigenous people, the most well known are the ban of the potlatch on the west coast and the Sundance on the prairies (Dickason, 2002; Pettipas, 1994). Both of these spiritual ceremonies were conducted entirely in the language of the territory and contained rich, specific vocabulary. As part of the government's attempts to fully assimilate Indigenous people into the fabric of the new colonial Canada, these two ceremonies were outlawed for many years, and along with them the right and privilege of generations of children and youth to live them and learn the languages associated with them.

### Schooling



**Figure 4. Students at residential school mealtime, Norway House, Manitoba, 1956 (Used by permission)**

© Glenbow Archives

The policy with arguably the most widespread and lasting influence on the discontinuation of Indigenous languages has been the imposition of a mandatory

colonial education system on Indigenous peoples. Successive colonial governments realized that language shift (through education) was an essential component of their assimilation aims (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Milloy, 1999). In their relentless quest to assimilate Indigenous people, following the example set in the United States, Canada enacted residential and day school policies in the late 1800s (Milloy, 1999). This action had a drastic impact on Indigenous languages. It separated children from their parents, grandparents, and community and punished children for speaking their language, thereby causing them to psychologically lock the language away. Legislation enforced children's attendance with a penalty of incarceration for parents who did not comply, which neatly led directly back to state custody of their children. The schools severed the multigenerational passage of language, weakened children's connection to their land, their culture, and their people, and inflicted enduring psychological effects and consequential self-devaluing from being punished for speaking an Indigenous language.

In summary, many factors including introduced diseases, warfare, increased foreign immigration, loss of land, imposed governance structures, and colonial-serving policies have contributed to the decline of Indigenous languages. These are the historical events that have affected the strength and continuation of Indigenous languages in Canada.

### **Consequences of colonization**

The consequences of colonization in Canada are readily apparent. Indigenous people now deal with the worst health, highest death rates, and highest incidence of poverty of any ethnic group in Canada (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). While these adverse conditions may seem unrelated to Indigenous languages, they all have had a direct effect on the demise of Indigenous languages in Canada. The high death rate of Indigenous people means fewer speakers, and of those remaining, even fewer are in

good health. During a recent keynote lecture, British Columbia's provincial Aboriginal Health Advisor Evan Adams (2011) labeled the realities of poor health, poverty, and constant deaths "compelling distractions"— conditions that require immediate and often whole-life energies, effectively diverting focus away from saving Indigenous languages. Any lasting, adverse condition of Indigenous life in Canada is therefore also an assault on Indigenous languages.

### Urbanization

Land loss, resulting in the erosion of traditional means of prosperity, has resulted in a strong trend toward Indigenous urbanization in Canada. Currently, more than half of the Indigenous population of Canada lives off reserve (Statistics Canada, 2008). This trend toward urbanization contributes to the lessening of connections to homeland and cultural ways of being, which are motivators and supports for language learning and language maintenance. This diasporic trend also lessens the number of same-language community members living in close proximity, thereby lessening the possibility of resurrecting or continuing Indigenous languages (Baloy, 2011; Gregory & Garcia, 2011; Norris & Janzten, 2003).

### Dislocation

There were several causes of the dislocation of Indigenous individuals and families from their land and their people. Processes such as legal enfranchisement, the introduction of treaty status, gender discrimination in the *Indian Act*, the mass adoption of Indigenous children outside of the community, and the forced relocation and/or amalgamation of communities have all had a negative impact on the continuation of Indigenous language use in Canada. These practices created dislocation and divisions among and between families and communities which served to further weaken Indigenous language bases.

Enfranchisement created a very real separation from one's family and community through the process of becoming a Canadian citizen and denouncing one's "Indian status." Treaty status was a legally created category which was awarded arbitrarily and in a discriminating, gendered fashion that also severed language connections within communities. Designating individuals as "status," "non-status," or "Métis" divided families and communities. Many family members ended up with different surnames and were geographically divided by the artificial yet influential borders of reserve land, Métis settlements, and rural and urban living. These divisions weakened the languages as extended families became separated, living farther apart and often adopting the colonial language common to the region as a result. An unprecedented number of Indigenous children were removed by child welfare officials, particularly during the 1960s, but also later (Crey & Fournier, 1998), effectively dislocating them culturally and linguistically. Tribes were forced to combine with other tribes, creating intermixed language communities who often resorted to adopting the common colonial language. All of these events created mass dislocation among Indigenous people, weakening not only Indigenous languages but also the identity of many of our people.

### Identity

In addition to severing ties within families and communities, dislocation from family, community, and homeland has had hugely destructive psychological effects on many Indigenous people. It has also created generations of Indigenous people who were left feeling empty and unfulfilled both culturally and spiritually. Colonially imposed definitions of who was "Indian" and the collective shame attached to the widespread devaluing of our languages, our ways of life, and therefore ourselves, has culminated in enduring negative effects on identity.

Some Indigenous people have a powerful sense that the language is locked up tightly inside them, necessitating intense healing (when available) to release it. For example, Krauss (1998) quotes the late Eileen MacLean who said at a language-related gathering, “We don’t need more linguists—rather what we need is good psychiatrists” (p. 20).

For other Indigenous people, their language has no relevance to the world in which they live, leaving them with a sense of uselessness about the language. For example, in a northern BC *nîhiyaw* community, there is a term for the people who live and drink alcohol together in the bush at the edge of town, scraping together enough empty bottles to replace them with a full one. They are called *siskabushers*, a Northern Cree-English<sup>11</sup> pidgin word that has come to signify displaced knowledge-keepers who were once valued community members. They are often language speakers who are skilled in the old ways, left now to feel unneeded due to the massive destruction and erosion of traditional territory where their skills were once highly prized.

The consequences of both the loss of Indigenous languages and the effects of losing our languages are genuine and serious. Death, poor health, poverty, homelessness, addiction, dislocation, and weakened identities have contributed immeasurably to the current condition of Indigenous languages in Canada and around the world.

Turning now to the fourth and final era of Indigenous language history, the current condition, I begin by describing the current state of Indigenous languages in Canada.

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<sup>11</sup> Sometimes referred to as *Creenglish*.

## **Current condition**

### Canadian context

The first languages of the land that is now called Canada are among the most endangered in the world according to a UNESCO publication edited by Australian linguistic expert Stephen Wurm (1996). Norris (2007) reports that “over the 20-year period from 1981 to 2001, most Aboriginal languages, whether considered viable or endangered, experienced long-term declines in their continuity” (p. 20). Norris (2003) further asserts that unlike other minority language groups in Canada, Aboriginal people cannot rely on new immigrants to maintain or increase the number of speakers.

Patricia Shaw (2001), a UBC linguist specializing in Indigenous language revitalization, estimates there are currently 50–70 Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada; however, the precise number is difficult to determine because many languages are not standardized and there are complications in counting dialects (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). These 50–70 languages belong to eleven different language families (Norris, 1998), meaning that linguists classify some of these languages as having a shared historic root language. However, that does not make languages within a language family mutually intelligible, even to the best language speakers. For instance, the Algonquian language family spans almost all of the provinces and territories and includes Blackfoot, *nîhiyawîwin*,<sup>12</sup> and Anishnaabowin,<sup>13</sup> among others. Furthermore, some of the Indigenous languages in Canada are isolates, meaning they can be found nowhere else in the world. These include Haida and Ktunaxa, both of which are found exclusively in British Columbia and are considered endangered (First Peoples’ Heritage Language and Culture Council, 2010b).

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike other Indigenous words throughout the text, Indigenous language names are not italicized in this section to place them on an equal footing with English names such as Blackfoot and Haida.

<sup>13</sup> Ojibway is the commonly used colonial name for this language.



Mary Jane Norris (2007), a Canadian civil servant specializing in Aboriginal language research, reports that only three of the remaining Indigenous languages in Canada—*nîhiyawîwin*, Inuktitut,<sup>14</sup> and Anishnaabowin<sup>15</sup>—are expected to survive, a consequence of their relatively large population bases (Norris, 1998, 2007). Norris (2007) compels us to look further at the strength of languages by focusing not exclusively on the number of speakers but rather on the numbers of new speakers. Even more recently, Lil'wat scholar and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning, Dr. Lorna Williams, firmly stated, "All of them are endangered, no exceptions" (cited in Cardwell, 2010, p. 14). While Inuktitut, Anishnaabowin, and *nîhiyawîwin* are considered the most viable Indigenous languages in Canada (Norris, 2007), their long-term viability remains questionable as the growth in population for all three languages does not match the growth in new language speakers. The overall increase in the Indigenous population over a ten-year period (45% compared to the non-Indigenous growth rate of 8%), paired with slight declines (in both Inuktitut<sup>16</sup> and Anishnaabowin) to moderate growth (7% growth in *nîhiyawîwin*) in the three most viable languages in the same time period (Statistics Canada, 2008), leaves cause for concern about the long-term vitality of all of the Indigenous languages in Canada.

### Global context

Owing to an era of brutal colonial policies and their enforcement, Indigenous languages have become endangered not only in Canada but around the world. It is estimated that in the next one hundred years, more than half of the languages that exist today will no longer be spoken (Davis, 2009; Harrison, 2007; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

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<sup>14</sup> The languages of the Inuit, formerly called Eskimo by the federal government.

<sup>15</sup> Note that in the original source Norris uses the colonial names Cree and Ojibway.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that language vitality varies greatly by region and community. For example, while overall Inuktitut use amongst Inuit people is declining, those who can converse in the language range from nearly 99% of the population in the Nunavik region to just over one quarter (27%) of the population in Nunatsiavut (Statistics Canada, 2008).

It is also estimated that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by only 4% of its people (Bernard, 1996; Crystal, 1997). This means that most of the world's language diversity is in the stewardship of a very small number of people (UNESCO, 2003).

According to sociolinguist Stephen May (2000) and linguist David Crystal (1997, 2000), it is generally the socially and politically marginalized ethnic minority groups, including members of most of the world's Indigenous groups, who are the speakers of the majority of these threatened languages.

To further our understanding of the Indigenous-specific global language situation, a targeted look at the condition of Indigenous language in a sampling of global contexts is useful. Krauss (1998) estimates that the US has about 150 languages. He further predicts that, given current trends, within sixty years the number of languages in the US will be reduced to twenty. He warns, however, that even those languages predicted to survive are not ensured a future. Australia has already experienced this trend. According to Gamble (2011), "of the 250 indigenous languages spoken at the time of British settlement, fewer than 20 are still in daily use" (p. 1). While Australia enacted its first national Indigenous languages strategy in 2009 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009), the outcomes for their remaining Indigenous languages are undoubtedly grave at best. The Maori language of Aotearoa (also known as New Zealand) has fared much better. Bernard Spolsky, an applied linguist, explains: "After nearly two centuries of contact with Europeans, the Maori language of New Zealand was, by the 1960s, threatened with extinction" (Spolsky, 2003, p. 553). However, after nearly three decades of targeted efforts to revive their language, the Maori have been largely successful; a national survey reported that in 2006 nearly 25% of the overall Maori population at all age levels could converse in Maori (Te Puni Kokiri, 2008). All of these countries, where Indigenous languages were once rich and thriving, have been greatly

affected by the imposition of English, an important and increasingly pressing aspect of the global situation for the continuation and revival of Indigenous languages.

### English influence

The influence and impact of English within the global context, especially as it relates to Indigenous language suppression and revitalization, is significant. English is increasingly becoming a global language, with its prominence established in over eighty countries around the world (Crystal, 1997). English is now the most widely taught foreign or second language; 25% of the world's population is fluent or competent in English, and no other language matches this level or rate of growth Crystal (1997, 2000). One impact of the rise of English, especially in North America, has been the matching decline of Indigenous languages.

### Survival of the fittest?

Many linguists point to the commonly held Darwinian view of “survival of the fittest,” forecasting that minority languages will simply disappear (Crystal, 1997; Dixon, 1997; May, 2000). While that may be true to some extent, two important and unique factors will influence the outcome of the current decline of Indigenous language use: the general cause and the rate of decline. First, languages are not disappearing because of lengthy, naturally occurring patterns of migration and chosen alliances, but rather because of what could be described as a relatively short but brutal history of attempted conquest. The second extraordinary factor is the unprecedented rate at which languages are disappearing. Wurm (1996) explains that while languages certainly have “naturally” disappeared or blended with other languages over time in the history of humanity, never before has this phenomenon occurred at the current rate or volume at which literally “hundreds of languages [are disappearing] at the same time, and at a steady or increasing rate” (p. 1). Indigenous language loss is occurring at such a rate

that Krauss (1998) predicts “we stand to lose more [I]ndigenous North American languages in the next 60 years than have been lost since Anglo-European contact” (p. 10). Krauss blames this acceleration on both the “physical genocide, then linguistic genocide” of the past and the subsequent Indigenous “abandoning [of] ... heritage language in favour of English” (pp. 9-10).

In summary, the fourth era of Indigenous languages is the current condition. While the Canadian context is of greatest relevance to this study, it is also important to consider the global context, especially the globalization of English and the influence it has had in Canada and around the world. The dominant discourse about which languages will and should survive, and the rate of language demise around the world, are also cause for grave alarm.

Thankfully, many people, both Indigenous and otherwise, are concerned about the state of Indigenous languages and the impending loss of them. These people are working as policy makers, curriculum developers, language teachers, politicians, community members, and academics to change the course of the future—to see Indigenous languages return to their rightful and valued place in our homes, communities, institutions, and Canadian society at large. These people pioneered the Indigenous language revitalization movement and continue to combat the current condition of Indigenous languages in North America and around the world.

## ***Indigenous language revitalization movement***

Over the past 30 to 40 years, a movement to revitalize Indigenous languages has been developing in Canada and the US; the movement extends to other nations who have experienced similar colonization, such as Australia and New Zealand.<sup>17</sup> Hinton (2008b) states that “from the 1960s on” (p. 159) Indigenous people in the US began to organize around language revitalization, although references in the literature in terms of “a call for action” or documented approaches remained sparse for some time. Despite a few references throughout the 1980s (Bauman, 1980; Cummins, 1980; Fleras, 1987; Jamieson, 1988a; Jamieson, 1988b), recognition of the Indigenous language crisis did not noticeably increase until the latter half of the 1990s (Burnaby, 1996; Cantoni, 1996; Fettes, 1992; Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hornberger, 1996; Ignace, 1998; Kirkness, 1998; Krauss, 1998; Maurais, 1996; Norris, 1998; Reyhner & Tennant, 1995; Wurm, 1997). Two main activities have shaped and contributed to the Indigenous language revitalization movement: language policies and revitalization approaches.

### **Policies**

Beyond the multiple policies explored above in relation to the era of language demise, several policies have directly affected language revival efforts in Canada. The first and most influential was the outcome of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (hereafter the B&B Commission), which led to the enactment of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969 establishing English and French as Canada’s official languages (Burnaby, 1996). The B&B Commission process and its outcome of legislating two colonial languages as official represented the complete dismissal of Indigenous languages at the national level during nation forming. While Indigenous people were

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to acknowledge that similar movements exist elsewhere, such as the revitalization of Hebrew and Quechua, although for the purposes of this study I remain focused on the Indigenous movement primarily in Canada and the US.

neither silent during nor ignorant of this process, they had very little success in influencing language policy in Canada until several decades later.

The first success was the realization of the *Official Languages Act* of the Northwest Territories (NWT) in 1988, which awarded official language status to the area's (currently nine) Indigenous languages (Northwest Territories, 1988). Although certainly a victory, the legislation was specific to the NWT and was not repeated elsewhere in Canada for over a decade. The second success came in 2009 when the senate passed the Nunavut *Official Languages Act*, recognizing Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun as official languages of Nunavut in addition to the two existing colonial official languages. Nationally, that same year, a private member's bill for an "Aboriginal Languages of Canada Act" (Senate of Canada, 2009, p. 2) was put forward. The main purpose of this act was for "formal legislative recognition [to] be given to aboriginal languages" (Senate of Canada, 2009, p. 1). Although the act passed the first reading in Parliament, there has been no further movement on this initiative to date.

While these successes at the territorial level are cause for hope, several federal policies have had a negative influence on the language revitalization movement. First is the continued dismissal of Indigenous languages as official languages alongside English and French in the *Official Languages Act*. The effect of the continuation of this act is that it reinforces a colonial presence and power over Indigenous people and continues to demean Indigenous languages. Second, the continued quest for language justice in Canada ties up the energies and efforts of Indigenous people (similar to the modern-day treaty process in BC)—energies that are much needed elsewhere. Last, the denial of meaningful federal support for Indigenous languages drives the need for a strong and continuous grassroots focus on approaches to strengthen and revive our languages.

## Approaches

Many different approaches have been created over the past decades to revive Indigenous languages. These include but are not limited to documentation approaches, school-based programs, immersion programs, and community language classes. Of these approaches, the greatest emphasis has been on capturing the language knowledge that remains with our Elders through documentation initiatives and passing it on to our children through preschool and school-age programming. Examples include initiatives such as the FirstVoices™ project in British Columbia, a nation-wide digital repository for Indigenous languages (First People's Cultural Foundation, 2011), language nest programs focused on immersing young children in the language (King, 2001), and school-based immersion programs such as those developed by Indigenous Hawaiians (Wilson & Kamana, 2001) and the Maori (King, 2001).

Although at times adults learn alongside children in language nest and school-based programs, adult Indigenous language learning has not been a strong priority for the Indigenous language revitalization movement overall. However, adult Indigenous language acquisition as a separate goal, and the approaches developing as a result, are gaining prominence and attention within Indigenous nations. Yet many of our people struggle with accessing successful, research-based, meaningful, and useful learning experiences as adult learners in order to become speakers of our languages. The rise of, and need for, Indigenous adult language learning is a relatively new societal phenomenon, thus the development of theories and models in the field of Indigenous language revitalization and the emerging academic field of adult Indigenous language learning are in their infancy.

### ***Chapter summary***

This chapter explored four language eras: the time in history when Indigenous languages naturally thrived all over Turtle Island; a time following contact with early settlers when Indigenous languages were still valued; the dark days of the demise of Indigenous languages; and the current condition of Indigenous languages in the present day. Indigenous languages in Canada and around the world were considered.

The next chapter will review the relevant literature that informed this study. The subsequent chapters will include the methodological approaches, the narrative heart of this work, the “understandings” which arose from this work, and, in the final chapter, the implications of this study and future directions for research in this area.



## Chapter 2. *masinahikan kiskihtamôna*

(knowledge that is written or comes from books)



**Figure 5. Pioneers, mentors, activists, leaders: inspirations to this work (Used by permission)**

*from left: Waziyatawin, Leanne Hinton, Neyooxet Greymorning, Carolyn Ellis, Qwul'sih'yah'maht Robina Thomas<sup>18</sup>*

*In order to know where we are and where we are going, we must know where we have been. It is important to always respect those who have come before us and the knowledge and wisdom they have shared. To begin, then, a review of what has been written (and said) about the topics at hand. (Personal research journal, Spring 2011)*

This autoethnographic study of my Indigenous language learning journey aims to contribute to the greater understanding of the phenomenon of adult Indigenous language learning in Canada. This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks that inform this study. These frameworks include Indigenous second language learning, sociocultural second language acquisition theory, and decolonization theory. Following a discussion of these frameworks, a relevant body of literature is reviewed, establishing the context and providing a rationale for this study. This review includes current adult Indigenous language learning approaches, which have been classified as language classes, group immersion, or individually focused programs. Two language programs are given particular consideration because of their notable contribution to adult

<sup>18</sup> Although permission was gained for use of all of these photos, only that of Qwul'sih'yah'maht Robina Thomas (taken by Chris Marshall, UVic Photo Services) required credit.

Indigenous language learning and their use as the main language learning approaches in this study: the Master-Apprentice Program (MAP) and the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA)<sup>19</sup> approach. Next, the conditions needed for successful adult second-language learning are discussed, followed by identification of gaps in the adult Indigenous language learning literature. Then, the barriers to adult Indigenous learning are considered and several case studies of documented adult Indigenous language learning are analyzed. Last, comparisons are made between Indigenous language learning and other international ancestral language learning cases, providing a sample of ancestral language revitalization contexts and efforts from outside of Canada.

### ***Theoretical frameworks***

Three theoretical frameworks guided this work: Indigenous second language learning; sociocultural theory (within the field second language acquisition); and decolonization theory.

### **Indigenous second language learning**

The phenomenon of Indigenous second language learning (ISLL) began as a grassroots language revitalization movement within Indigenous communities. The development of ISLL into an academic area of study is a byproduct of this movement; it is largely due to the work of non-Indigenous linguistic pioneers and allies, but it now includes a growing number of Indigenous scholars as well (Galla, 2009; Greymorning, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004; Kirkness, 2002; Littlebear, 1999). Thus, ISLL is now a blended interconnection of the grassroots work of community language revitalization and the research and scholarly contributions to this field. However, ISLL as an academic field of

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<sup>19</sup> It was explained to be me by Dr. Greymorning that he has chosen to trademark and copyright his approach due to others adopting the approach as their own without crediting him as the author. I have chosen to leave off the symbols ™ and © throughout the dissertation for better flow of text; however, I acknowledge this fact here.

study goes beyond notions of “community-based action research.” Rather than being “engaged with” or “attuned to” community interests, this field has its *origins* in community.

From this intermarriage of community-based work and inclusion in the academy grew a body of academic literature that denotes this field as an emerging independent academic discipline while recognizing its links to linguistics, applied linguistics, education, political science, sociology, and psychology. From this body of literature, which has largely developed over the past fifteen years, a common set of principles has emerged.

The following underlying commonalities and theoretical principles of ISLL are drawn from a broad, multidecade review of seminal ISLL literature such as Burnaby and Reyhner (2002); Cantoni (1996); Fettes (1992); Grenoble and Whaley (1998, 2006); Hinton and Hale (2001); Reyhner (1997); Reyhner, Cantoni, St. Claire, and Yazzie (1999); Reyhner and Lockard (2009); and Reyhner, Trujillo, Carrasco, and Lockard (2003). The underlying commonalities and theoretical principles within ISLL include the Indigenous grassroots foundation in the revival of Indigenous languages; a growing emphasis on practices that create new language speakers; a social justice undercurrent which encourages self-determination, sovereignty, and cultural revival; attention to the colonial dynamic inherently present in Indigenous language learning; acknowledgement and encouragement of the spiritual connection and healing aspects of language knowledge and acquisition; and a privileging of writings from nations whose language condition has been largely shaped by similar colonial encounters (such as New Zealand, the US, Canada, and Australia).

Several connections are present between this doctoral study and the common principles found within the ISLL literature, supporting the inclusion of ISLL as a

theoretical foundation for this study. The three main connections are emphasizing practices focused on creating new speakers, encouraging social justice, and recognizing the uniqueness of second-language learning in Indigenous contexts due to the colonial dynamic. This study builds upon and contributes to the growing body of literature in the emerging academic field of ISLL.

### **Sociocultural theory within second language acquisition**

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is primarily the scientific study of second (or subsequent) language learning. Included in this field is the study of adult (additional) language learning. SLA has historically been based primarily on the acquisition of European languages, including English, in immigrant, migrant, and international study-abroad contexts. Attention to Indigenous language learning has therefore been uncommon in SLA. Despite the fact that the SLA field has developed largely to the exclusion of Indigenous interests, links to this field remain sensible and mutually advantageous, hence its inclusion as an additional area of theoretical grounding for this study. It includes many concepts and factors that have informed and influenced the shape of this study, such as age, aptitude, and learning environments (Ortega, 2009). In addition, the SLA field grew in the mid-1990s to include more new “social” aspects of language learning (Block, 1996, 2003; Lantolf, 1996; Norton Peirce, 1995) that had even greater relevance to ISLL. One particular area that came out of this expansion was sociocultural theory, which included concepts particularly useful for ISLL, such as attention to historical, political, cultural, and psychological contexts as well as motivations, links to identity, and affective factors (Atkinson, 2002; Lantolf, 2000).

Even more recently, sociocultural scholars in SLA have expanded the traditional focus on immigrant and foreign language learners (learning primarily European languages) to include heritage and ancestral language learning (Duff, 2008; Duff & Li,

2009; He, 2008) of historically less commonly taught additional languages, such as Chinese. The developing theorizing on heritage language learning makes valuable contributions to the understanding of ISLL through attention to common topics such as identity and the influence of the dominant language on attempts at learning. For example, He (2008) recognizes that heritage languages are in “constant competition with the dominant language in the local community” (p. 203) and that both Indigenous language and heritage language advocates share a concern with the maintenance of ancestral language and cultural continuation within the family and community.

Due to the urgency to revive Indigenous languages, it is essential that ISLL scholars embrace interdisciplinarity, despite differences that may exist, to learn all that we can from SLA and any other related disciplines and to contribute to theory development in those related fields. There is no time to waste reinventing practices or studying contexts of comparable language learning, about which much is already known. This doctoral study has undoubtedly been influenced by and is partially grounded in sociocultural theory, as well as other aspects of SLA research and concepts; hence their inclusion in this framework.

### **Decolonization**

The third contributor to the theoretical framework for this study is decolonization theory. Like ISLL, decolonization theory has remained firmly rooted in community-based political organizing while also growing into an academic area of study. Notable contributors to decolonization theory and its advancement within academia are Indigenous political science and education scholars Taiaiake Alfred (1999, 2005), Ward Churchill (1992, 1994, 1998, 2004), Jeff Corntassel (2008), Sandy Grande

(2004), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), and Waziyatawin<sup>20</sup> (2008). A collection of literature, which contains some common principles, has been established toward the creation of this field of study. The following are elements of those principles inherent in decolonization theory.

Decolonization theory is intrinsically political in nature. It is defined by its deconstruction of historic injustices and aims of social justice for Indigenous people. Decolonization theory also stresses the outcomes of colonial encounters (both historical and contemporary) as defining to the present-day realities of Indigenous people. Quechua scholar Sandy Grande (2008) introduces the concept of “red pedagogy” as a form of decolonization theory that acknowledges the colonial encounter as central to current Indigenous conditions in the Americas: “[Red pedagogy] is a space of engagement. It is the liminal and intellectual borderlands where [I]ndigenous and non[I]ndigenous scholars encounter one another, working to remember, redefine, and reverse the devastation of the original colonialist “encounter” (p. 234).

Decolonization theorists (Alfred, 2005; Corntassel, 2008; Grande, 2004) do not write for the purpose of repeatedly dredging up past injustices resulting from centuries-old colonization, but rather to recognize and honour Indigenous worldviews that were, and still are, ignored, misunderstood, and disrespected.

Another common principle within decolonization theory is a call for individual commitment to live the theory’s principles. Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (2005) provides an example in his latest book, stating, “I did not write this book *about* change, I wrote it from *within* change” (p. 17). Through this statement he asserts that Indigenous

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<sup>20</sup> Before using her singular traditional name, Waziyatawin was known as Angela Cavender Wilson. Two co-edited publications which are important contributions to the decolonization movement appeared under her former name. They are Mihesuah and Wilson (2004) and Wilson and Yellow Bird (2005).

scholars must work from a place of integrity, living this process through action, if the work claims to contribute to decolonization theory.

Decolonization theory is foundational to this study in a number of ways. This study is grounded in remembering pre- and postcontact history, times when Indigenous languages flourished, times of common multilingualism followed by the rapid decline of Indigenous languages. This study also carries an overt social justice aim to contribute to the revival of Indigenous languages as part of a larger movement to restore value in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Last, this study is grounded in integrity, researching through direct action, and setting an example as a form of academic activism, which are defining features of decolonization theory.

The following sections review the remaining literature that informed this study, including an analysis of adult language learning approaches, a survey of documented ISLL examples, an exploration of barriers and motivations to adult Indigenous language learning, and a brief consideration of “ancestral” language learning.

### ***Instructional approaches to adult language teaching and learning***

While a growing number of Indigenous adults are becoming interested in learning their ancestral language and increasing efforts are being put into developing programs and approaches for this age group, a search of the literature (particularly peer-reviewed articles) confirmed that this area of research is new. While literature pertaining to adult ISLL exists, it remains sparse, limited to fewer than ten sources, including recent dissertations and Indigenous community and organization newsletters. Most of this literature is largely descriptive in nature (literally describing what was done, e.g., “adults came together to learn the language one night a week for ten months”) with very few explicit research projects focused on examining the approaches,

experiences, or outcomes. This lack of literature in adult ISLL is apparent to several scholars in this field of study. Mohawk scholar Bonnie Jane Maracle noted in 2002 that “no formal collection or documentation of information pertaining to adult immersion programs is available nation-wide” (2002, p. 389). Seven years later, Christopher Gordon (2009) stated in his dissertation on an Anishnaabemowin<sup>21</sup> adult immersion program, “Adults as a focal group in [I]ndigenous language revitalization research in general are few” (p. 7).

The literature most directly applicable to this study focuses not only on an adult-centred approach, but more specifically on individually oriented language learning contexts rather than, for instance, cohort-based programs. This study also focuses on new language learning rather than latent language learning, thus narrowing the scope of relevant literature even more. However, owing to the scarcity of literature on this specific subject and in order to convey a broad sense of the present field, all the available literature on ISLL is covered, including the few sources that focus most specifically on this dissertation’s topic of adult Indigenous individual language learning.

While a multitude of approaches to Indigenous language revitalization exist, formal approaches specific to adult Indigenous language learning are of primary interest to this study. (Informal approaches include strategies such as self-study using books and audio/visual recordings.) From the formal adult Indigenous language learning literature, three prominent approaches emerge: language classes, cohort-based immersion, and individually focused approaches.

### **Language classes**

Perhaps the lesser of the three approaches in terms of its impact and its focus within the literature is the language class model. However, various authors provide

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<sup>21</sup> This is C. Gordon’s spelling. Spellings vary depending on region and dialect.



examples of this approach (Gardner, 2004; Hinton, 2008a; Ignace, 1998; Stiles, 1997), which normally consists of one to three hours of non-immersion classroom-based instruction per week. It is well documented that this approach has not generally created new speakers (Blair, Rice, Wood, & Janvier, 2002; Hinton, 2001a; Maracle & Richards, 2002). This outcome is mainly due to lack of exposure to accessible language input, but also due to approaches used (e.g., a primary focus on noun memorization with little opportunity to practice dialogue). However, it is recognized that the outcomes of adult Indigenous language classes may vary depending on the approaches used and their combined use with other approaches to learning.

Adult Indigenous language classes are sometimes designed for particular groups, such as parents of children in immersion programs or tribal office staff, and are sometimes open to all community members. Classes often take place in the evening to accommodate community members who work outside the home, but are at times scheduled during the day or over the lunch hour (as is the case for many staff-focused classes). Increasingly, these types of weekly language classes are being offered by universities or colleges for postsecondary credit, sometimes in partnership with the local communities they primarily serve (Bell & Marlow, 2009; Blair, et al., 2002; Boyer, 2000; Gardner, 2004; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007; Peter, 2007; Taff, 1997). Two examples from Coast and Straits Salish territory on the west coast of Canada are the WSÁNEĆ language classes being offered by the University of Victoria in WSÁNEĆ territory and the First Nations languages program at the University of British Columbia, which has offered various Indigenous language classes over the years.

There are some advantages to supporting the weekly language class model. It can be a catalyst for communities and a first step in a longer, more intensive journey toward language revitalization. These classes can also create interest in and

appreciation of the language from outside the community, which has advantages in raising the profile and value of Indigenous languages in society in general. Hinton (2001a) suggests that language classes can have positive side effects on individual learners, such as relieving shame attached to not knowing the language and increasing cultural pride.

### **Group-based adult immersion approaches**

The second adult-focused approach explored in the adult Indigenous language learning literature is that of adult-focused, group-based immersion. While these programs are rare in Canada, a few have been documented. Two types of this approach have been documented as summer immersion camps (Alexie, Alexie, & Marlow, 2009; Daniels-Fiss, 2005; First Peoples' Heritage, Language, & Culture Council, 2010a; Jacobs, 1998; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007; Peter, 2007) or school-year-based immersion programs (Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002; Maracle & Richards, 2002; Richards & Burnaby, 2008; Richards & Maracle, 2002), ranging in length from one week to ten months (Daniels-Fiss, 2005, First Peoples' Heritage, Language & Culture Council, 2010a; Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002; Richards & Burnaby, 2008). The main differences between this approach and the weekly language class are the volume of input, the potential frequency of exposure to learning and teaching experiences, and the method, which in this case is exclusively immersion.

The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people of southwestern Ontario have the most widely known group adult immersion in Canada; five documented programs ran "intermittently" (Maracle, 2002, p. 387) between 1985 and 2002 (Maracle, 2002; Maracle & Richards, 2002; Richards & Maracle, 2002). An updated publication lists just two of these adult immersion cohorts in Mohawk territory as "currently operating" (Richards & Burnaby, 2008, p. 236). In addition to the Kanien'kehá:ka examples, Gordon

(2009) examined an Anishnaabe adult immersion program that was offered through a Michigan tribal college.

While immersion language learning is reported to be successful with children (King, 2001; Wilson & Kamana, 2001), one could surmise that this success would be replicated with adults; however, very little has been reported about the outcomes of such programs in the adult Indigenous language learning literature. I speculate that this could be due in part to a lack of experience with and access to relevant language learning assessment models; however, whatever the reason, it is certainly an area in need of further focus in future Indigenous language revitalization research.

Last, while the immersion literature focuses on cohorts rather than on individual learners, it provides program recommendations as well as documenting the instructors' experiences, which in turn helps to inform individual adult-focused approaches. For example, both Maracle (2002) and Gordon (2009) report interviewing students about topics such as motivations for learning—a topic which is of great relevance to this study. Both studies report students being motivated for the following reasons: to become speakers of the language, to strengthen their cultural identity, to “save” the language, and to pass the language on to others, either at home or through becoming a teacher (Maracle, 2002; Gordon, 2009).

### **Individually focused approaches**

The final category of adult Indigenous language learning identified in the literature is that of individually focused, more self-directed adult Indigenous language learning approaches. While informal approaches to learning (using flashcards, listening to recordings, etc.) were an important part of this study, two formal individually focused language learning approaches rose to the fore in a search for such approaches and are therefore included for review in this section. They are the Master-Apprentice

Language Learning Program (MAP) and the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) approach to language learning.

MAP was co-developed by several Californian tribes and Dr. Leanne Hinton, professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley. MAP is a one-on-one immersion program which originated and was first implemented in California to develop the ability to speak an Indigenous language. Language learners are paired with master speakers to spend 10–20 hours a week together over a 2–3 year period exclusively speaking the language in order to develop basic speaking skills (Hinton, 1997, 2001b, 2002, 2008b). MAP is gaining momentum and is being taken up by many different groups across the US and Canada (Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, 2010; Ahlers, 2004; First Peoples' Heritage, Language & Culture Council, 2010a, 2010b; Gardner, 2004; Hinson, 2008); however, almost no published research has been conducted on this approach to date.

The other individually focused/self-directed ISLL approach, which has emerged more recently, is ASLA, created by Arapaho tribal member and professor at the University of Montana Dr. S. Neyooxet Greymorning. I first learned of this approach at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) held in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2005 (Greymorning, 2005). I have since attended two of Dr. Greymorning's three-day workshops (Greymorning, 2010a; 2010b) for training in ASLA and have been using this approach as part of this study for the past year and a half. ASLA is an immersion approach that focuses on developing comprehension and speaking abilities. The approach can be used with groups or individuals. It uses methodologically sequenced categories of colour images of people, objects, and scenarios which build on one another toward a working command of the language. ASLA can be used for sessions ranging in length from a few minutes to an entire school day (the latter as an immersion

approach). Greymorning shows compelling examples of the possible outcomes of his approach via video footage during the training workshops (some of which is available on his website.<sup>22</sup>) He also provides live demonstrations with his current university students and with participants in the multiday workshops.

Greymorning is recognized as one of the few Indigenous scholars devoted to Indigenous language revitalization. Although his publications show his dedication and expertise in the field of ISLL (Greymorning, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004), they concentrate on his previous work (1992–2004), mainly in tribal preschools and elementary schools rather than with ASLA. To date he has chosen to inform people about ASLA only through conference presentations, annual workshops in Montana, and community-held invitational workshops. He has so far chosen not to publish on the approach because of concerns about misunderstandings and improper implementation, as well as copyright issues. Only one publication that I have found, a journal article by Sarkar and Metallic (2009), references the ASLA approach specifically.

Sarkar and Metallic (2009) chronicle the Mi'gmaq people's path to language revitalization over the past forty-plus years and then focus more specifically on the Mi'gmaq's development and adaptation of the ASLA approach. They describe the adapted approach as a "teaching method ... based on a carefully selected sequence of key images, through which the learner is gradually introduced to Mi'gmaq vocabulary and grammar" (p. 57). Metallic attended an ASLA workshop in 2005 and began using the approach in her community shortly after, reporting that by 2009 "some learners ha[d] progressed to an advanced level" (Sarkar & Metallic, 2009, p. 57). Sarkar and Metallic (2009) add that through student testimony collected over a two-year period, this model achieved "success ... for learners whom other methods had failed" (p. 58).

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nsilc.org/index.htm>

Judging by the experience of the Mi'gmaq, the evidence of Greymorning's workshops, and the growing interest in the ASLA approach across Canada and the US (anecdotal information), it is clearly an emerging approach worthy of consideration.

This study included the use of MAP and ASLA because they are currently prominent approaches for adult ISLL in Canada and the US. Their unique contributions and their commonalities make them suitable and advantageous for use in this study. Their commonalities are the exclusive use of Indigenous language immersion, encouraging learning the language naturally without lengthy grammatical explanations in English *about* the language (Greymorning, 2010a, 2010b; Hinton, 2002), and a design or adaptation suitable for individual learners (as opposed to classroom- or cohort-only teaching approaches). In addition, these two approaches share a non-literacy philosophy, focusing exclusively on oral language at least until basic speaking skills are developed. This philosophy stems from their shared belief that a focus on spoken language creates new adult speakers faster. This exclusion of literacy, according to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), runs counter to widespread beliefs about successful adult language learning programs, most of which have literacy components.

The main limitation of MAP is that it is lengthy and costly, in terms of providing financial support for the learner and the mentor and the time-cost of devoting 10–20 hours a week over a 2- to 3-year period to achieve basic speaking skills. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) comment that the MAP model rarely develops speakers with “native-like fluency” and “does not attempt to revitalize speaker bases and make the target language a fully used system of communication in all aspects” (p. 63). The conclusion one could deduce is that speakers acquire only basic conversational skills on a limited number of topics. However, given the state of Indigenous languages today, one could argue that despite these limitations an outcome of adults with basic abilities to converse in the

language could be seen as a success rather than a failure. Clearly, basic conversation skills are an improvement to the widespread underuse of Indigenous languages in many Indigenous communities, and they can be an important step toward creating new speakers.

The drawbacks of ASLA are less obvious since the approach has emerged more recently and studies have yet to have published on it. However, my experience with the approach has led me to conclude that language teacher-mentors must be properly trained in the approach and may require ongoing coaching once they establish their practice, especially if they are set in their customary teaching methods. Many of our language teacher-mentors are elderly and do not have any postsecondary training in second language teaching, and it can be a challenge for them to learn and sustain a completely different approach to teaching, especially without ongoing access to qualified coaching or mentoring on the approach. An example of typical teaching approaches based on my experiences in various communities throughout BC over the past ten years is the memorization of written words and phrases, sometimes grouped by theme such as animals, weather vocabulary, and common greetings. This varies greatly from immersion approaches that require both teacher and student to communicate exclusively in the language throughout the lesson.

It is important to end this section with an acknowledgement that “a search for the best method” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 164), as the inclusion of ASLA and MAP in this study could be seen, is approached cautiously and with some trepidation by current second language theorists. Instead scholars such as Kumaravadivelu (2006) recommend moving toward a “postmethod” state, one that focuses less on “one magical method” (p. 164) and rather seeks to complexify the many factors that contribute to learning and teaching. While this approach is wise, the fact remains that Indigenous

individuals and communities require approaches and strategies for learning and teaching in which language speakers (who are also often Elders) can be trained to assist them in their efforts to teach their language. For the purposes of this dissertation and for the reasons previously offered, these two approaches were included and therefore their potential contributions, assets, and limitations were explored.

### ***Conditions needed for successful adult second-language learning***

Regardless of what approach is used for teaching and learning, it is important to recognize that adult language learners need certain conditions for successful second-language learning. The following conditions have been identified in the second-language learning literature as essential for success.

Time: Learners typically need thousands of hours of exposure to a new language in order to build familiarity to the point of high functioning. Programs and instruction must have sufficient quality, duration, and intensity to allow learners to gain this necessary experience.

Opportunity: Similar to but separate from the time factor above, learners must have the opportunity to hear *and* practice producing the target language in a variety of topics of interest alongside others with similar levels of investment in learning the language in order to progress in their learning (Ellis, 2005).

Accommodation: Individuals' prior language learning histories, anxieties, difficulties, desires, goals, and personal preferences for (styles of) learning must be assessed and considered by language teachers to expedite successful learning outcomes (Naimie, Siraj, Abuzaid, & Shagholi, 2010; Dörnyei, & Shehan, 2003).

Content: Learners must gain access to age-appropriate curriculum that is cognitively and socially relevant and appropriately paced with sufficient review,



reflection, and practice to retain the material learned. The second-language learning research underscores that this content must have an appropriate balance of focus on meaning and focus on form or structural aspects (grammar) of language (Ellis, 2005).

Given this information, future Indigenous language revitalization research might best serve learners if it focuses less on individual approaches and more on creating and adapting learning environments to assist in providing these optimal conditions for adult Indigenous language learner success.

### ***Gaps in the adult Indigenous language learning literature***

Many gaps exist in the research on adult ISLL. First, the great majority of language revitalization literature focuses on efforts with children and youth, leaving the adult experiences (although they exist) largely silent and therefore invisible. Second, the literature on adult ISLL is sparse. The existing literature is largely descriptive in nature, with very few case studies and little (if any) longitudinal research documenting the outcomes of adult-focused approaches. In addition, much of the published data on adult-focused ISLL is repetitious (the same authors publishing about the same program in various ways) and outdated; although there are publications up to 2008, they refer to programs from the 1990s and earlier, with the exception of a few very recent publications such as Gordon (2009) and Sarkar and Metallic (2009).

The ASLA approach remains largely undocumented in the research literature, and both MAP and ASLA are underresearched with almost no articles that empirically examine either approach. There are no published testimonies of learners' experiences with either approach, although Hinton (2011) does convey two success stories of former MAP participants who have become speakers and language revitalization leaders in their communities. This lack of published accounts of learner success with

using the approach should not be interpreted as a lack of success achieved by the approach, however, but rather a comment on research undertaken.

Adult ISLL is clearly underexplored and underrepresented in the language revitalization literature. Much of the adult ISLL literature is either published in First Nations/Indigenous/Native American newsletters or as unpublished thesis and doctoral work (for examples see Brennus, 2005; Gordon, 2009; Hall, 2003; Michel, 2005), leaving a notable void in postgraduate research on this subject. The shortage of publications, however, may leave the false impression that there is a lack of activity in adult ISLL. As Hinton (2003) recalled about the early days of language revitalization work, “people were so busy *doing* language revitalization that they were too busy to write about it” (p. 53). I concur that this remains true in regard to language revitalization efforts as a whole and especially for adult ISLL endeavours.

This lack of adult-focused literature may indicate a broader discounting of adult learners as a potential source for revitalization. I would argue, however, that this group is an underused resource for the uphill, urgent battle against Indigenous language loss in Canada. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) support this position, claiming that adults as a learning group in the Indigenous language revitalization movement have much to contribute to creating “domains for language use” (p. 57). An increase in the number of adult learners brings the additional benefit of shifting responsibility away from children and youth language learners to bear the burden of returning the language to common use.

### ***Barriers to adult language learning***

Certain challenges that exist for adult Indigenous language learners are shared with adult language learners in other linguistic contexts. Challenges common to many

adult language learners are time constraints or personal and work-related responsibilities which inhibit the ability to study or attend classes. Finding opportunities to speak the target language with other learners or speakers outside of the classroom is a common challenge. Sustaining sufficient motivation to continue learning also often plagues even the most dedicated of learners, and attrition is often a result. Quality teaching that accommodates individual learning needs is not always available to learners. These are just a few examples of challenges common to adult language learning that are not unique to Indigenous contexts.

However, additional barriers to adult ISLL in Canada are prevalent. The first set of barriers is associated with Indigenous language speakers/teachers/mentors. These barriers include a scarcity of healthy, available speakers, reluctance on the part of some to speak the language, speakers being out of the habit of speaking the language, and speakers' low skill level and knowledge base for second language teaching. Each of these factors is explored below.

The low number of speakers available to teach or mentor language learning, whether urban, rural, or on reserve, is a reality whose importance cannot be overstated. With each passing season, we are losing more and more Elder speakers and, with them, our most valuable language revitalization resource. Meanwhile, many speakers remain reluctant to speak the language, perhaps out of shame or perhaps due to apathy toward the language. Other speakers are simply out of practice. The reality is that most Indigenous language speakers in western Canada live in a nearly exclusive English-speaking world and have been living in this reality for many decades. Last, many Indigenous language speakers are thrust into the role or elevated within the community as "teachers of the language" without any training on how to mentor or teach, a horribly unfair and often unproductive situation.

The second set of barriers to adult ISLL involves individual adult learners themselves. These barriers include isolation, the impacts of migration away from reserve communities, a lack of skills for effective language learning, and a lack of time for learning. A common barrier for individual adult learners is the lack of a community of speakers in addition to their mentor/teacher with whom to practice and engage. In addition, the migrant nature of many Indigenous people's lives, the various historic factors separating Indigenous adults from their communities of origin, and the realities of a major demographic shift to urban living contribute to learners' isolation. Furthermore, many Indigenous adults' lives are no different from those of any other contemporary group of adults: they lead full, busy lives. They are often juggling career building and/or basic economic survival with family responsibilities to children, Elders, and community, an expected and essential part of any Indigenous reality whether urban or rural, on or off reserve. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) acknowledge this reality, noting that, besides being past the [supposed] "critical period" for language learning, the main difficulty for adults is the lack of sufficient time in their lives for language learning (p. 58).

Last, perhaps another factor is that for most Indigenous language learners, the motivation is more personal and cultural in nature rather than, for example, opportunities to study in postsecondary institutions, employment opportunities and promotions, travel, integration within desired social groups and networks, which are some of the pressing, highly motivating reasons for which adults often opt to learn other languages. As a result, adult Indigenous language learning may be perceived by the learners, instructors, community, and government as less urgent and therefore given less attention than it deserves.

Clearly there are multiple barriers to individual adult ISLL journeys. However, adult language learners are growing in prevalence and are a highly motivated sector of those involved in language revitalization.

### ***Learner motivation***

Many Indigenous adults across the country are interested in learning their language and are strongly motivated to find a way to make it happen, regardless of the barriers. Much of the literature on adult Indigenous language loss points to issues of identity as the main motivating factor for ISLL (Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002). Blair et al. (2002) and Norris (1998) explain that Indigenous languages are often recognized as one of the most tangible symbols of identity, both personal and collective. Kirkness (1998, 2002) and Gardner (2004) emphasize the links between language and identity, both arguing that language defines who we are and embodies a sense of our unique identities.

An adult learner of Dena'ina in Alaska said, "I want to know the language to understand it and to understand the culture ... I guess I'm not learning the language just so I can know another language" (Bell & Marlow, 2009, p. 9). This statement illustrates that the link between language, cultural knowledge, and the integration of cultural knowledge into one's identity is an important motivation for adult Indigenous language learners.

Many believe there is also an inherent emotional and spiritual connection between a person's mind, body, and soul and their ancestral tongue (Fishman, 1996; Kirkness, 1998). Dr. Mary Young (2003), an Anishnaabe scholar at the University of Winnipeg, quotes an Anishnaabe man who explains, "The way one speaks is the way one breathes. It's what we call izhikiizhwe" (p. 204). This spiritual connection to the

language is a powerful motivator for adult Indigenous language learners who may be searching for a spiritual connection to their people and their land (Daniels-Fiss, 2005; Fishman, 1996; Kirkness, 1998) and seeking to strengthen their cultural identity (Gordon, 2009; Maracle, 2002). Thus the motivations for Indigenous language learners are often different from those of more typical foreign language learners, which may include integrating into a new society or culture, increasing employability, or engaging in recreational world travel.

### ***Case studies***

The following examples of individual adults' ISLL experiences serve as a backdrop for this study and provide a picture of what has been done as academic study on this subject to date. Reviewing this literature provides further evidence for this dissertation's contribution, given the limited number of first-hand stories of adult ISLL found. Again, much of the available literature is in the form of theses and dissertations. None of the following examples concentrates exclusively on the writer's own language learning journey; instead, they either focus on others' journeys or include the writer's journey only as a side story to the work's main thrust. However, these examples are included because they focus, at least in part, on documenting individual adult ISLL stories.

Possibly the earliest published account of adult ISLL is that of "Richard," who was interviewed by UBC graduate Sandra Kouritzin (1999). Richard, a *nîhiyaw napiw* (Cree man), discusses losing his ability to speak his mother tongue as a result of the residential schooling system imposed in Canada and his journey back to the language in his adult life. While aspects of Richard's story, such as displacement from one's community and the journey (in his case, back) to language, are of interest to this

dissertation, the experiences of latent learners are complex and varied in ways that are somewhat different from first-time second-language learners (e.g., see Basham & Fathman, 2008), and latent language learning is not the focus of this study. That is not to say that latent language learners cannot contribute to our understanding of the journey to language. For example, Richard poetically expresses his experience of relearning *nîhiyawîwin*: “It was like falling in love again with an old lover, but a true love” (Kouritzin, 1999, p. 70).

In another study, Mary Groom Hall (2003) interviewed nineteen teachers and/or founders of Indigenous language revitalization programs in Montana, some of whom were adult learners of their language. While adult ISLL is not the main focus of her dissertation, she offers insights about adults’ motivations to learn, such as being able to speak with Elders and grandparents in the language, and impacts on identity, such as increased cultural pride and a more solid affirmation of who they were. Hall (2003) describes learners reporting a kind of personal “awakening” (p. 119) that often coincided with learning their Indigenous language. Unfortunately, similar to most other adult Indigenous language learning literature reviewed, very little was reported about the outcomes of these approaches to language learning.

Brennus (2005) was a non-Indigenous man who attempted to learn Oneida (a language spoken in the province of Ontario and the states of New York and Wisconsin). He offers some detailed accounts of the technical aspects of various approaches of the language learning journey, barriers he met along the way, the outcomes, and the effects of the process on him as an individual. Brennus describes being surprised about the difficulty of learning an Indigenous language, particularly as an English speaker. While he set out to learn Oneida and more about Oneida worldview, he reported learning more about himself and gaining new insights into English/western worldviews.

Interestingly, this process became a catalyst for a deepening of his inquiry into the degree to which he had lost his ancestral Irish identity throughout his life as an English-speaking American (Brennus, 2005).

In a small community in the BC interior, several Secwepemc adults learned their language and then together with their Elder-mentors started a Secwepemc language elementary immersion school. Michel's (2005) thesis looks in part at these adult learners' experiences of the language and the "personal impact of language learning," including an "exploration of the relationship between language and identity" (p. iii). Like Hall (2003), Michel observed that many of the participants in her study found learning their language as adults to be "a powerful and sometimes life-changing experience" (p. 88). In addition, Michel found that learning their language helped participants to develop a better sense of self and heritage, increase their feelings of self-worth, enhance their social and emotional well-being, and gain a sense of belonging.

Daniels-Fiss (2008) describes her personal experience of learning the *Nêhiyaw*<sup>23</sup> language as an adult, in part by organizing and participating in a *Nêhiyaw* immersion camp over two consecutive summers. She writes more about her motivations and the structure of the five-day camps than about the process of learning the language itself. However, she notes that, besides contributing positively to the development of her *Nêhiyaw* language speaking abilities, her experience at the camps "resulted in [her] becoming a whole and complete *Nêhiyaw*" (p. 233). In her thesis, Daniels-Fiss (2005) provides more insight into the language learning experience itself and strategies used toward this goal. The camps were intended to be immersion experiences, but she reports that language learning was more specific to daily activities, routines, and rituals, such as morning prayers, repetition of new songs learned, listening to (repeated)

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<sup>23</sup> *Nêhiyaw* (Cree) is Daniels-Fiss's spelling using the Plains "y" dialect.



stories (instructors used actions to convey meaning), direct vocabulary work on immediate activities such as cleaning up and making fire, and *Nêhiyaw* spiritual ceremonies. By the end of the second five-day camp, Daniels-Fiss found that her “Cree speaking abilities improved ... [and she was] less shy about speaking publicly” (2005, p. 80), which indicates that this approach to adult ISLL has its merits, at least perhaps for basic familiarity with the language. However, she says little about her language learning in the year between the two camps, and therefore it is difficult to determine what she was building upon or maintaining in terms of language.

Leanne Hinton (2011) offers brief accounts of two other successful Native American adult language learners. However, she provides no details on the structure of their language learning endeavours other than their participation in MAP in becoming speakers. Jessie Little Doe Baird (Wampanoag) and Daryl Baldwin (Myaamia) both received master’s degrees in linguistics after teaching themselves their languages using only archival materials, since neither language had been spoken for 150 and 50 years respectively (Hinton, 2011). Hinton reports that they have both become proficient enough speakers to make their respective ancestral languages “the language of their homes” (2011, p. 315).

### ***Exploring ancestral language learning***

Of the published research on Indigenous language revitalization as a whole, many of the examples of “best practices” and “successful models” originate from Indigenous Hawaiians and Maori. While these groups have undoubtedly had tremendous success in revitalizing their languages, they have two particular advantages that most in the other 49 US states and Canada do not. One is a relative critical mass population within a limited territory bounded by water; the other is their respective unification of a widely

accepted<sup>24</sup> single Indigenous language within their territory. This section reaches beyond the commonly referenced examples of Hawaiian and Maori successes to other ancestral language revitalization efforts, promoting these alternative examples as potentially advantageous for the advancement of Indigenous languages in the Americas.

Many of the realities and motivations behind ancestral language learning closely parallel ISLL contexts, such as identity and cultural survival, which are closely tied both to language learning and to the challenges of learning a non-dominant language. Yet, most North American Indigenous groups look mainly to other Indigenous groups for inspiration and direction and largely ignore or dismiss other potentially useful non-Indigenous examples around the world. Examining the literature on global ancestral language revitalization expanded this study's perspective, thus warranting its inclusion in this literature review. Of the ancestral language learning literature examined, two examples stood out—Manx Gaelic and Euskara (the language of the Basques)—as the most relevant to Indigenous language revitalization efforts in Canada.

Manx Gaelic is found on the Isle of Man located in the Irish Sea. This language, explains G. Wilson (2008), has “endured a slow decline over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” (p. 74). Similar to their impact on Indigenous languages in Canada, British assimilation policies and mass foreign immigration undermined Manx Gaelic until, by 1974, it was considered extinct (G. Wilson, 2008).

Nevertheless, over the past couple of decades, attempts have been made to revive the language. One part of the movement has been adult focused, although G. Wilson (2008) says it was “probably the least developed aspect of the current language education program” (p. 77). Ager (2009) reports that adult language classes began in

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<sup>24</sup> It is imaginable, however, that certain language or dialectal sacrifices have been made over time to arrive at this end.

the 1950s, but did not develop a significant following until the 1990s after a forty-year span during which they were focused mainly on school-based language revival approaches. Ager also reports that in the 1990s, “some families began to raise their children to speak Manx and English ... for the first time in a century” (p. 33). Now Manx Gaelic can be studied as a minor at a number of universities in the region. The history and current condition of the language are quite similar to those of most Indigenous languages in Canada, and therefore useful lessons could be drawn from the Manx adult language learning approaches that have been implemented over the past two decades. One limitation of this comparison is that, like Maori and ‘Olelo Hawai‘i (the Hawaiian language), Manx Gaelic is a unified language co-existing on an island with one dominant colonial language.

The other ancestral language revival that informs this dissertation is Euskara, the language of the Basque Country, an area that straddles present-day France and Spain (Etxeberria-Sagastume, 2006). The region’s colonial history and the treatment of Euskara bear striking similarities to Canada’s treatment of Indigenous peoples. Like several isolated languages found in Canada, such as Xaad Kil/Xaaydaa Kil (Haida) and Ktunaxa, Euskara is an ancient language that has no apparent link to any other language in the world (Arzamendi & Genesee, 1997; Lasagabaster, 2001). The Basque Country has a population of approximately 2.5 million people, about one quarter of whom are speakers of Euskara (Lasagabaster, 2001).

The Basque government has invested heavily in developing the Euskara proficiency of adults in their homeland. This has been done predominantly through a focus on certified teachers and civil servants, both of whom are offered up to three years’ full pay and release from duties to learn the language (Ager, 2009; Lasagabaster, 2001). It is estimated that 60% of current teachers have become qualified to teach Euskara in the

Basque Country through this program (Lasagabaster, 2001); however, an explanation of the approaches used to achieve speaking ability is not available through academic databases or Internet searches.

In addition, there seem to be two prominent difficulties within the Euskara revival efforts that are similar to some of the challenges to reviving Indigenous languages in Canada. One is that Euskara is seen as “a rural language suitable ... for domestic and rural purposes, but not for the modern world” (Lasagabaster, 2001, p. 406). A similar attitude is prevalent in Canada, where many Indigenous language speakers have difficulty making the transition from seeing their language as the language of their territory and only suitable for traditional activities, to seeing that it can be integrated and used in everyday contemporary life. Much of the Euskara revival has emphasized training professionals and thereby raising the status of the language to include modern and technological concepts; however, “language planners have not taken measures to foster [the language’s] social use” (Lasagabaster, 2001, p. 406). In other words, Basque language planners have had more success in creating professionals who can speak the language than in reestablishing Euskara as the everyday language in communities. Indigenous language revitalization strategists in Canada should heed this potential downside to a revival strategy.

While the Basque revivalists hold certain advantages over Indigenous peoples in North America, such as having a single language of focus in their revitalization efforts, the success they have had with adult language learning certainly deserves more consideration. The approaches and successes of adult language learning of both Manx and Euskara, among other ancestral languages, clearly deserve more attention from Indigenous language revitalization strategists in Canada.

### ***Chapter summary***

This chapter began with an outline of the three theoretical frameworks—ISLL, second language acquisition, and decolonization theory—that inform this study. The remainder of the chapter provided background for the study through a review of the literature on topics relevant to this dissertation. These topics include an emphasis on adult ISLL approaches, motivations for adult learners, and recent relevant case studies. Finally, the case was made for the Indigenous language revitalization movement's consideration of non-Indigenous ancestral language learning efforts from around the globe because some of these are being undertaken in similar contexts and likely have similar goals.

The next chapter addresses this study's methodology, followed by the narrative heart of this dissertation work, and finally, the concluding chapters outlining the implications and future directions of this research.

### **Chapter 3. *sihcikiwîna***

(the way or method of doing something)

*I was filled with indecision. After completing the first level of graduate studies, I felt compelled to continue. Yet, I wondered whether academia was my path to follow as my heart ached to be with the language. I had a strong sense that I needed to make a tangible contribution to the revival of the first languages of this land. Was it possible to reconcile these two worlds? Could these two seemingly disparate paths become one, a personal language learning journey that also enabled me to make a contribution? A serendipitous meeting with two creative, open-minded social justice scholars and one bold proposal later, the answer came. As I sat next to my lukewarm coffee cup and a hastily torn envelope, reading and rereading the words “pleased to inform you of your acceptance” on striking UBC letterhead, my path became clear.*

#### ***Study description***

This dissertation project has been a self-study of my journey, the journey of an urban *nîhiyaw* (Cree) *iskwiw* (woman) striving to become conversationally proficient in her matrilineal ancestral language, *nîhiyawîwin*, over more than a decade. The methods used blended autoethnography and Indigenous research methodology. The project’s primary aim has been to deeply reflect on my language learning experience in order to examine the motivations, effects, and outcomes of my journey into urban *nîhiyawîwin* learning. Additional aims of this study were to better understand the phenomenon of adult Indigenous second language learning (ISLL) in Canada, to provide informed commentary on two currently popular Indigenous second language learning approaches, to contribute to the development of a new academic discipline of

Indigenous language learning, and to make policy recommendations in regard to adult learners in the Indigenous language revitalization movement in Canada today.

This chapter provides more detail on the research methodologies chosen and how they were applied in this study. It also outlines the formal and informal language learning approaches used in this language learning journey and describes the role of the language mentors. Next, the chapter explains what records were kept to document the journey and the process by which the narrative section was created. Finally, it explores the generalizability of this research.

## ***Methods***

The guidance and structure for this project to become a research endeavour came from Indigenous-influenced and autoethnographic methodological approaches. A blending of these two research orientations provided the methodological foundation for this study. This chapter describes both autoethnography and relevant Indigenous research methods, and the overlap between them, in order to explain both their separate and integrated applications for the purposes of this study.

### **Autoethnography**

As an autoethnographer, I am both the author and the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller. (Ellis, 2009, p. 13)

Widely credited as those who popularized the method of autoethnography within narrative inquiry are US communication studies professors Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography is “an

autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Elsewhere they write that the goal of autoethnography is “to enter and document the moment-to-moment, concrete details of life ... [and then to] use your life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture” (p. 737). The main goal of this autoethnographic study is to better understand adult Indigenous language learning through the perspective of one language learner. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the understandings of other learners, as well as those of a wider audience, about the methods, approaches, barriers, challenges, successes, and possibilities for adult Indigenous language revitalization in Canada.

Assisting the further understanding of this method, Sparkes (2002) summarizes the characteristics of autoethnography as:

the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher’s vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical, and political consequences; an encouragement of compassion and empathy; [and] ... the seeking of fusion between social science and literature. (p. 210)

Autoethnography is, also, according to Ellis (2004), “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). While both of these quotes are rich in meaning on their own, a similarity between them that is important to this study is the political aspect of autoethnography.



Sparkes' (2002) "concern with ... political consequences" (p. 211) and Ellis's (2004) recognition of the political connection within autoethnography make an important link to decolonization theory, which is one of this study's theoretical foundations. One core component of decolonization theory is the practice of individual decolonization (Alfred, 2005). Learning and speaking Indigenous languages are acts of decolonization, and so the main act of decolonization in this study is learning and speaking an Indigenous language. This study includes an additional political aim of influencing policy pertaining to adult-focused language learning efforts at the provincial, territorial, and national levels. Aiming to influence policy is a political act, requiring strategic thought and intentional action. While not all autoethnographic research has political aims, the overt inclusion of political aims within this study aligns with this approach recognized and encouraged by autoethnographers such as Ellis (2004) and Sparkes (2002). In addition to its political aims, this study also follows autoethnography's encouragement of artistic research practices.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) eloquently frame autoethnography as the merging of art and science (p. 761). The scientific qualities of this autoethnography are the research and scholarly contributions made to the Indigenous language revitalization field of study. The merging of science with art in this dissertation is manifested by the use of first-person memoir writing and photography as creative forms of expressing the research. Ellis and Bochner (2006) declare "the term 'autoethnography' should be reserved for work that ties sociology to literature [and] expresses fieldwork evocatively" (p. 445). Although "sociology" could be replaced with any number of other different disciplines, given the growth of autoethnography beyond the borders of that specific discipline (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006), the call for evocatively expressed findings within autoethnography remains constant. Through the use of

narrative writing and photographic images, this dissertation aims to evoke from the reader emotion, compassion, and action, which are all objectives of autoethnography (Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Autoethnography is becoming increasingly popular, and through this growth, different approaches have developed (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). My study remains close to Ellis and Bochner's (2000) philosophies and practices in creating autoethnography. They describe themselves, along with a small group of others, as "first-generation autoethnographers" (Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Goodall, Pelias, & Richardson, 2008, p. 310). This group (and others) advocates for the legitimacy of remaining solely focused on the self in creating the narrative; while others promote various forms of autoethnography such as being an insider-researcher within a group of interviewed participants (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008).

In summary, the following qualities of autoethnography drew me to the method: using one's own story for the wider benefit of understanding a phenomenon deeply; an overt political agenda in the work; and the acceptance and encouragement of the artistic expression of research work. Of course, while many positive and useful aspects of autoethnography exist, as with any method, it presents drawbacks and encounters challenges as well.

### **Autoethnographic challenges**

Ellis and Bochner (2006) explain that autoethnography is "a mode of inquiry ... designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative" (p. 433) and an "alternative to traditional, realist ethnography" (p. 436). Ellis et al. (2008) demark the late 1980s as the time that autoethnography formally emerged in the literature, noting also that autoethnography is still often misunderstood and dismissed in many academic circles. Chang (2008) echoes the point that at times scholarly peers question the rigour

and validity of autoethnography. These acknowledgements expose the underlying conservative tendencies of academia and its lingering trepidation about accepting narrative inquiry and arts-based research as valid academic work. Thankfully, arts-based research is becoming increasingly accepted because of the growing body of scholarly work within this genre. This is allowing the new concerns to be less about the merit of the methods and more about internal discussions of “what constitutes artful expression” (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1227). However, certain risks remain for autoethnographic and arts-based researchers in terms not only of professional acceptance and advancement but also of personal hazard.

Ellis’s (2009) colleagues confessed they were “uneasy reading these materials” and “embarrassed by [Ellis’s] ‘emotional nakedness’” (p. 95). Autoethnographers make themselves vulnerable when they expose their story in an environment where their colleagues are often fiercely private about their personal lives and belief systems. The risk exists that others could use these stories, family histories, exposed politics, and other areas of vulnerability to hurt the autoethnographer or that person’s career, especially junior scholars in a place such as the academy that rewards individualism and encourages competitiveness.

There are also risks within autoethnography for “others intimately connected to” the autoethnographer (Chang, 2008, p. 56). I exist within a community of people and, no matter how cautiously and ethically I conduct myself, I cannot tell my story without exposing some of my family’s story. My story is their story and, while I do my best to protect them, my exposure, in some ways, is also their exposure. Ellis (2009) describes this work as writing from an “ethic of care, where the focus is on protecting those we write about from undue harm” (p. 16). In her autoethnographic scholarly writing, she provides numerous examples in which she reveals intimately the pain and suffering of

her family members, although, as in the case of living with her terminally ill partner Gene, with their full endorsement. As another form of handling this “ethic of care,” Ellis on occasion elicits responses from those connected to her autoethnographic stories and includes them alongside her own.

Moving now from the autoethnographic contributions and challenges of this study, below I explain the use of Indigenous research paradigms within this study. Following this, I explore the harmony between autoethnographic methodology and Indigenous research paradigms, as well as their joint application to this research study.

### **Indigenous research paradigms**

*The ability to use (rather than having to invent) Indigenous research methods is a privilege I have inherited from the good (and hard) work of those Indigenous academic pioneers who precede me. I have the benefit of drawing inspiration, gaining direction, and applying and adapting their methods, and through demonstrating their effectiveness and necessity within the academy, thereby adding to their strength and credibility. (Personal research journal, 2011)*

While Indigenous research paradigms vary in many ways, certain Indigenous scholars have particularly inspired and influenced the path of this research study with their approaches to research and academic writing. These Indigenous research approaches share a number of themes that are fundamental to this research project. While there is diversity amongst these Indigenous research approaches, the strength of their inclusion is in the weaving of their commonalities, an outcome which in turn provides a solid foundation for this study.

The themes relevant to this study that are found in Indigenous research paradigms are as follows: (i) the use of storytelling as method, (ii) cultural locating (positioning oneself culturally and stating one’s personal connection to the research),

(iii) the goal of Indigenous-based decolonization (defined broadly to include, among other orientations, honouring and reverence for Indigenous knowledge, advocacy for including Indigenous knowledge and ways of being in the academy, and recovery and recognition of Indigenous governance and law), and (iv) the overt acceptance of intuition and Indigenous spirituality. While aspects of these themes within Indigenous research methods may exist within other research paradigms, it is the combination of these qualities as well as their Indigenous content (Indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and governance) that makes these particular approaches distinct from (but not superior to) other research approaches.

Two Indigenous authors provided tremendous examples and inspiration for this study in their use of Indigenous storytelling research methodologies: Qwul'sih'yah'maht Robina Thomas (2005) and Q'um Q'um Xiiem Jo-ann Archibald (2008). Coast Salish scholar Qwul'sih'yah'maht (Thomas, 2005) weaves her own stories and those of her grandmother with the stories of her research participants in a way that contributes to new theory and knowledge creation. Stó:lo scholar Q'um Q'um Xiiem (Archibald, 2008) introduces the concept of Indigenous storytelling as a research method which she calls "storywork." She advocates for "stories and storytelling for educational purposes" and for finding a "respectful place for stories and storytelling in education" (p. iv). While Q'um Q'um Xiiem focuses primarily on others' stories (Archibald, 2008), she quietly includes many of her own, gently teaching us about journeying and storying, and about how to honour and include Indigenous ways of knowing and our own stories within the academy. This research project is largely a storytelling undertaking: I offer my story, deeply understood and conveyed to the reader in an effort to contribute to a greater understanding of adult Indigenous language learning and thereby to make a theoretical contribution to this emerging field of study.

In addition to this dissertation's autoethnographic approach (which necessitates my journey being the focus of the research), there is also an Indigenous aspect to this methodological design: that of culturally locating myself within the research (e.g., Kovach, 2009b, p. 3). Acknowledging ancestral and land connections has become commonplace and almost expected among Indigenous scholars, yet this practice remains distinctive from most mainstream academic literature. Anishnaabe scholar Jan Hare (2001) provides an excellent example of this custom:

I am officially registered as a member of the M'Chigeeng community, and although I have not resided there, my family ties and connections remain strong. A good number of my immediate family were born here [Manitoulin Island] and continue to reside here, and I spent summers on the "rez" when growing up both here on Manitoulin and in the Temagami area located in Northern Ontario.  
(p. 26)

Similarly, Sandy Grande, a professor of education of Quechan descent living in the US, begins her book *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* with, "I am a Quechua woman. This is not only who I am but also, in these 'post-colonial' times, an identity I feel increasingly obligated to claim" (2004, p. ix). Hare and Grande ground themselves deeply within their research, creating a path for the authentic, integrity-based meaning making and theorizing work they so ably carry out.

Opaskwayak Cree scholar Oyate Tawa Shawn Wilson provides another powerful example of including oneself centrally in research. Not only does S. Wilson (2008) culturally locate himself within the research, he also includes his experience, perspective, and stories through personal letters to his sons throughout his exploration of research from an Indigenous perspective. S. Wilson's living example of how to include

oneself centrally in the research as an Indigenous person provided guidance and inspiration for my work.

Another important aspect of Indigenous research paradigms that has influenced this study is the aim of decolonization (Alfred, 2005; Grande, 2004). Grande (2004) explicitly calls on Indigenous people to be “revolutionary agents” (p. 8). She invites Indigenous people to unite across nations to free themselves and others of exploitation and dedicate themselves to “the principles of sovereignty, emancipation and equity” (p. 8).

UBC-based Stl'atl'imx scholar Peter Cole (2002, 2006) makes an important contribution to decolonization-focused work within Indigenous academic research. Cole uses Indigenous-focused poetic prose as a tool to critique traditional western scientific approaches and, particularly, western ways of doing research, which he theorizes as simultaneously dismissive of Indigenous knowledge and exploitative in nature.

Last, one of the most influential Indigenous academics to overtly include the aim of decolonization in their research, providing further inspiration for this research, is Kanien'kehaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred. In his writing, Alfred (2005) advocates for a nation-wide decolonization revolution and declares this process as necessarily beginning in one's own mind. Seeing the process of decolonization as beginning *within* is an important foundation for this study. The political aim of advancing the decolonization movement as well as self-as-research and self-in-research are central to this study's methodological approach.

### **Blending two methodologies**

Although autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms are distinctive approaches, each with their own strengths, both were used to develop and guide this study. While the blending of these methodologies made this study more robust, perhaps

what is of greater importance is the challenge these methods provide to decentring western, dominant paradigms of research. However, it is important to understand how autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms co-existed and complemented each other in the development of this study. The three main points of synergy between autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms are (i) storytelling as method, (ii) the inclusion of the “self,” and (iii) the championing of arts-based “reporting” practices. Owing to their similarity in these essential components, blending the research approaches of the two methodological paradigms was fairly effortless.

The first point of synergy between Indigenous research methodologies and autoethnography is the shared modality and intentional use of storytelling as a method. It is a fundamental aspect of autoethnographic approaches and a traditional part of oral Indigenous societies, and hence has become an important part of many Indigenous research approaches. Autoethnography is about telling stories, and specifically one’s own story ( Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Storytelling, both one’s own and others’, has become a central Indigenous research method as Indigenous knowledge and epistemology gain increasing acceptance in the academy (Archibald, 2008; Thomas, 2005; S. Wilson, 2008). As research methodologies, both Indigenous storytelling and autoethnography extend beyond the realm of storytelling for entertainment, with the greater purposes of teaching, learning, and creating new knowledge.

The second site of synergy between autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms is the inclusion of self in research. A strong personal presence and personal-political connection to the work is almost always evident in the work of Indigenous researchers and is necessary for autoethnographic approaches. While not all Indigenous research is autoethnographic in nature, it is culturally congruent and often culturally necessary for Indigenous researchers to introduce themselves, draw links to their



homelands and their people, and explain their personal connection to the work.

S. Wilson (2008) further centres the “self” in Indigenous research by advocating for an approach in which all the participants are co-researchers, with no distinction made between “researcher” and “subject,” and that interprets and then shares back the information from a personal place. This personal connection to one’s research and scholarly work is a powerful area of overlap between autoethnography and Indigenous research methodologies.

I have come to see evidence of this “self-as-example” approach in both Indigenous research paradigms and autoethnography as “integrity-based research.” This is not to imply that other forms of research lack integrity; rather, what I mean by this term is that, instead of becoming an Indigenous scholar who *knows about* and studies Indigenous language revitalization, I wanted to become a *living example* of the phenomenon being studied. As Ellis (2009) articulates, “I was interested in writing from the inside about a bigger picture” (p. 85). I knew I needed to be at the heart of the revitalization movement in more than just an academic, analytical, and theoretical way (even though these outcomes of scholarly work have immense value). I am committed to language revitalization perhaps in the same way a literacy scholar might be committed to reading daily to young family members, or a dentist devoted to frequent brushing, or an environmental scientist to cycling.

It was essential to build this study on a foundation of lived experience in order for me to feel it had integrity to the cause. I have oft heard leaders criticized (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, at all levels of government) who speak strongly about the need to save Indigenous languages but demonstrate very little personal commitment or political follow-through on the sentiment. The harsh reality is that if our languages are to survive, we must speak them. To speak them we must know them. To

know them we must learn them. It is not enough to say that Indigenous languages must be saved. If we did not have the gift of our ancestral language given to us as children, then we must work hard to regain it as adults. *We must save our languages.*

The last point of synergy between Indigenous research paradigms and autoethnography is their mutual encouragement and modelling of creative ways of reporting research. Both paradigms accept a wider range of presentation modalities as evidence and representation of findings than do conventional research methods. Modalities accepted in autoethnography include (but are not limited to) poetry, plays, novels, conversational-dialogue writing, and photo-journal essays (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Burdell and Swadener (1999) call this new genre “a movement away from distanced theoretical writing” (p. 22).

Indigenous examples of this new genre include S. Wilson’s (2008) work, which weaves academic theory building with personal letters to his sons, interpreting for them what he hopes they will learn from his research process. Stl’atl’imx scholar Peter Cole (2002) introduced groundbreaking richly layered, deeply meaningful, poetic prose that is strikingly and purposefully void of punctuation or capitalization. He explains that the “practice of academically certified punctuation” distances him from his “connection with the earth and its natural rhythms” (p. 449). Indigenous scholars Cole (2002, 2006) and S. Wilson (2008), together with autoethnographic researchers such as Ellis (1999, 2004, 2009) and Sparkes (2002), contribute richly to arts-based research reporting with their diverse examples of how scholarship can be creatively expressed. This is not to convey that autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms are the only research genres that include or advocate for the inclusion of alternative forms of scholarly expression—which is certainly evident in many kinds of arts-based research practices (Sinner et al., 2006)—but rather to say that this is another alliance between

the two research paradigms and to acknowledge the precedents within each that provided inspiration for this study. These examples, among others, allowed me to record my story in a creative manner without constraints of what is “acceptable” to record and without the necessity for predetermined outcomes.

In conclusion, autoethnography and Indigenous research paradigms provided the methodological foundation for this study. The overlap of the two methods is significant and purposeful and their integration smooth, owing to ample synergy between them. Another important aspect to the process and outcomes of this research study is the language learning approaches employed.

### ***Language learning approaches***

As outlined in the literature review, two formal language learning approaches, Master-Apprentice Program (MAP) and Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), were foundational to this language learning journey. Here I describe how each of these approaches was used in this study.

MAP made an important contribution to this study through its philosophies and instructional guidance on how to gain conversational speaking abilities in an environment of access to few speakers. Most MAP “programs” are funded through federal, provincial, state, or philanthropic support. Receiving funding formalizes the program and creates outside accountability for time spent with one’s mentor, the kinds of activities undertaken, and the speaking ability outcomes for the learner. My experience with MAP has been informal; I learned the approach on my own and applied it in my life to the best of my ability without financial or practical outside support. I have been using the MAP approach informally since 2006 with my life partner, who has also been a language mentor. I have also used this approach since early 2011 with a

second-language mentor, a Woodlands *n̄hiyaw* Elder. MAP has greatly influenced my approaches to language learning and the outcomes of my learning plans over the past five years in the following ways.

MAP is a model for one-on-one pairing of language learners (apprentices) with speakers (masters). It focuses on developing oral comprehension and speaking abilities. Hinton's (2002) guidebook provides many useful strategies to "get into" and "stay in" the language through examples of typical sessions and suggestive sequences for language learning activities. The model prescribes that the learner and mentor spend time together immersed exclusively in the target language doing everyday activities such as laundry, cooking, gardening, cleaning, and shopping (Hinton, 1997, 2001b, 2002, 2008b). Hinton (2002) details potential pitfalls and barriers to language learning, such as the strong desire to communicate in "a language of mutual understanding" (p. 9), for example, English, and recognizes that the speaker may be out of practice at using the language in everyday activities and may require some coaxing, coaching, and encouragement. She explains that the approach is aimed at "re-creat[ing] a speech community" (p. xv), even if that community is only two people (i.e., master and apprentice).

Although I had learned of this approach some time earlier, my first experience of training in MAP in preparation for using it in this study was in 2006, when I had the opportunity to attend a three-day MAP workshop facilitated by Dr. Leanne Hinton. In 2011, I had the good fortune to attend another two-day workshop facilitated by Dr. Hinton and one of the method's co-founders, Nancy Steele of the Karuk Nation in northern California. Both workshops focused on understanding the origin of the approach, its intent, and its founding philosophies, but the greater part of the time was focused on practical applications: rehearsing with language mentor(s), building skills at

staying in the language, and creating real-life experiences intended to allow the learner to understand the language being taught, such as hands-on instruction to set a dining room table or being read a wordless book.

I first learned of the ASLA approach in 2005, when Dr. Greymorning presented it at an international conference in New Zealand. However, it was not until April 2010, when I traveled with my partner to the University of Montana to train in the approach, that I began to really understand it. I have since attended two additional multiday ASLA training workshops offered in different First Nations communities on Vancouver Island. I have been using the ASLA approach since April 2010 in my own language learning journey with the help of my partner as well as through self-study (using audio- and video-recorded sessions). Although I have attended several of Dr. Greymorning's training sessions, it would be unethical for me to share his approach in detail because it is copyrighted and also because he is reluctant to publish it. Regardless of my opinion on his decisions about sharing the approach, I respect his choices and therefore will write about it only in general terms and, more specifically, about my own use of the approach, commenting on its contributions to my personal language learning journey.

Greymorning developed the ASLA approach for use with his children and also in a tribal preschool setting in his home nation of the Arapaho. He now teaches the approach to Indigenous language teachers, mainly in Canada and the US, as well as continuing to use the approach with his adult children and in teaching an undergraduate course at the University of Montana. The ASLA approach can be used either in one-on-one learner-speaker teaching scenarios (as Greymorning has done with his children) or in group/classroom settings (such as the regular course he teaches at the University of Montana). ASLA uses the concept of Indigenous language immersion in its exclusion of English and is focused on listening and speaking, with no writing

permitted. Like MAP, ASLA focuses exclusively on developing oral comprehension and speaking abilities.

As my partner trained in this approach, we often used it for short language learning sessions ranging from just a few minutes to 1.5 hours. I found most useful the philosophy behind ASLA of moving beyond vocabulary memorization to *thinking* in the language and independent manipulation of the language (Greymorning, 2010a, 2010b). I have also appreciated its specific focus on orality, owing to the belief that one should not attempt to learn to read and write a language before being orally proficient (modeled after the natural progression of most first-language learners).

It is important to explain that although the use of both MAP and ASLA in my language learning journey has contributed significantly to furthering my language learning and understanding the process of adult language learning, neither approach was the focus of examination or evaluation. However, in the narrative portion of this dissertation as well as in the implications section, I comment on how they contributed to my pursuit of becoming a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker while in an isolated urban context, as well as the successes and challenges I encountered with each of the two language learning approaches.

### ***Language learning journey***

The following section serves to provide the context of the language learning journey to be presented in the upcoming chapter as well as to explain the origins from which the research records were created. Since 1999, I have tried various approaches to learning *nîhiyawîwin*. The approaches I have used were largely driven by what was available to me at any given time. For the first five years of my quest, this consisted mainly of informal approaches such as self-study from print materials, labelling items in

my home, and attending infrequent beginner-level community-based weekly language classes. The last seven years have included more dynamic approaches, including spending time with different speakers, building a learning community, and using the aforementioned MAP and ASLA approaches.

### **Learning rhythm**

The time I have dedicated to language learning has varied greatly over the past twelve years. At times, my practice and study have been extensive and consistent; at other times there was very little language learning at all. I describe the peaks and valleys in my learning more extensively in the narrative heart of this dissertation; however, to enable the reader to better understand the study, I provide a summary here.

My first attempts at language learning involved attending a *nîhiyawîwin* class organized by a Métis organization in Victoria, BC. This learning opportunity was short lived because the instructor left the area, but it definitely helped to boost my interest and commitment to learning. The following four years I see as a low point in my learning as I did not know any *nîhiyawîwin* speakers in Victoria or the surrounding area and no language classes were offered during this time. The majority of self-study materials I had access to were print materials, and using print materials (as a primary method) is a difficult and often unsuccessful way to learn to speak a language. In 2004, a new *nîhiyawîwin* speaker moved to Victoria and classes began again. The period from 2004 to 2006 I would describe as a peak time in my learning, largely because of the presence of a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker in my life, the building of a community of learners, and the arrival of my first child—which provided even more incentive. In 2007, I experienced a brain hemorrhage, and seven months later my second child was born. Ten months after her birth, in the fall of 2008, I returned to work. Hence, the time from

2007 to 2009 was another low point in my language learning. Since 2009, I have once again intensified my language learning, in part for the purposes of this research study.

I had hoped to dedicate 10–15 hours per week to language learning over the past couple of years, but this proved to be too ambitious and unattainable for a number of reasons: the demands of my paid work, my family responsibilities, and limits on my mentors' time. Time for language learning over the past few years fluctuated from 2 to 5 hours per week, which were spent in the following ways:

- weekly language classes (using the ASLA approach)
- spending time with mentors
- self-study listening and comprehension activities using various audio and video recordings, pronunciation practice, rote memorization of some vocabulary lists and short paragraphs (such as prayers and speeches), practicing songs, practicing prayers and speeches, review of ASLA images
- incorporating speaking time in family life.

These activities were driven by the language goals I set for myself; these are detailed below.

### **Language learning goals**

The language learning aims of this study were as follows:

#### ***Short-term goals (the last few years)***

- build vocabulary (toward basic speaking skills)
- build on phrases (toward basic speaking skills)
- advance to spontaneous production of short phrases
- engage in basic conversation
- learn to pray



- learn to produce longer and more complicated introductions (of myself and others)
- improve pronunciation
- learn more songs
- be able to describe the things that I see around me (in phrases) and things that I may have seen in my day (simple stories)
- tell simple stories to my children
- read simple picture books to my children
- become more consistent and comfortable in speaking in private (at home)
- become more confident in speaking:
  - in public spaces such as restaurants, parks, ferries, grocery stores, social outings (to my partner and to my children)
  - in formal settings such as professional introductions
  - around other *nîhiyawîwin* speakers.

***Long-term goals (into the future)***

- be able to understand *nîhiyawîwin* speakers in conversation with each other
- create a *nîhiyawîwin*-speaking home with my partner and my children
- encourage my children to speak *nîhiyawîwin*
- code-switch between *nîhiyawîwin* and English rather than revert fully to English when other English-only speakers are around.

Many of the goals I set for myself were made possible by the involvement of two language mentors in my life, as I describe below.

## Mentors

*ninanâskamon (I am deeply grateful) for the incredible good fortune of having two language mentors in my life and on this journey with me. They are both amazing people and very different from one another! I am honoured to have them both in my life and for the tremendous contribution they have made and continue to make to my language learning journey.*

The inclusion of two language mentors in my language learning journey is an important component of this study. My first mentor is my life partner, *âciw*.<sup>25</sup> He is a speaker of Northern Cree, a variation of the “y” dialect. He became bilingual in *nîhiyawîwin* and English in childhood because his maternal grandmother raised him exclusively in *nîhiyawîwin* while his teenage and young adult “siblings” (biological aunts and uncles) taught him English. He remains a speaker of *nîhiyawîwin* and can understand several other dialects of *nîhiyawîwin* as well. He has spent much of his adulthood living away from his community, yet his family, cultural, and spiritual ties and connection to the land remain strong. Despite this, he has never made *nîhiyawîwin* the primary language of his home; however, he does use the language intermittently with his children (who range from preschool age to young adult). He has given me permission to share a couple of his reasons for these choices. One is that his connection to *nîhiyawîwin* is spiritual and very much tied to his home territory; he finds the language difficult to use when he is away. Second, he describes speaking English as a bad habit, and he experiences feelings of defeat and frustration with an English-dominated world. Last, he doubts the relevance of his language for his children’s future and feels it is not welcome in today’s fast-paced, swiftly changing world. The world in

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<sup>25</sup> In an effort to honour my life partner/language mentor by “including” him in a more human way in the story while respecting his request for privacy I have used his *nîhiyaw* nickname, *Acô*, given to him by Elders in his community.

which he was raised and learned to speak *nîhiyawîwin* is nearly gone. He describes life in northern BC just 40–50 years ago as stepping back in time. Cars have replaced horse and wagon, televisions have replaced campfires, and now, English is rapidly replacing *nîhiyawîwin*.

Despite *âciw*'s decision not to make *nîhiyawîwin* the first language of his home, he has been repeatedly called on throughout his life to teach *nîhiyawîwin* in group settings at all levels (preschool, K-12, and adult) and to develop *nîhiyawîwin* learning curricula, both written and oral. As a recording artist, he writes and performs music in *nîhiyawîwin*. Despite his demanding career, he supports my desire to learn our language and has been willing to assist me in my language learning journey in the ways that he is able.

Since January 2004, I have studied language with *âciw* in a variety of formal and informal ways. He has taught a variety of community-based language classes where I was a learner alongside other community members. He has been my mentor in our own informal MAP pairing. He has provided various recordings to assist with my self-directed language learning; other recordings we have created together. We have attended various language training events together over the years and worked on a variety of language-related projects, including the production of a children's *nîhiyawîwin* language learning CD.

The other language mentor in my life is Jacqueline (Jackie) A. Ballantyne from Sandy Bay, Saskatchewan, now living in Victoria, BC. I have known Jackie for many years, but only in the last year has she become a formal language mentor to me. She is a wise, caring woman who was raised in northern Saskatchewan—in her words, “on the trapline, speaking nothing but Cree”—until she was sent to residential school for eight horrific, gruelling years. Although she has lived away from her home community for

most of her adult life, she remains a speaker of her language. She easily converses with other *nîhiyawîwin* speakers and laughs heartily at their jokes! She speaks a different dialect of *nîhiyawîwin* than my partner, but they can understand each other with relative ease, and I am learning both dialects concurrently.

Although my friendship with Jackie dates back to the spring of 2004, we have spent many years building trust and our relationship, and although *nîhiyawîwin* has always been a part of our time together, Jackie's contribution to my language learning journey has been most pronounced since early 2011. Together we practice speaking, play cards, pray, and listen to audio recordings of music and stories in *nîhiyawîwin*, creating our own version of a master-apprentice program.

As an aside, while the *nîhiyawîwin* resources may be considered prolific compared to those available in other smaller Indigenous languages in Canada, I still found them to be quite limited and difficult to locate or access.

## ***Records***

My *nîhiyawîwin* self-study began years before my relationship with UBC; I entered the doctoral program with more than five years of experience and documentation of my journey into and with *nîhiyawîwin*. I now have more than ten years of records documenting my personal language learning journey. While this journey will no doubt continue beyond the life of the dissertation, the records used to develop this autoethnography date from *sîkwan* (spring) 1999 to *takwâkin* (autumn) 2011.

The records I have kept from 1999 to 2011 have been varied, but all have contributed in some way to the compilation of this research. The main records kept were language learning notes, audio and video recordings of language learning, and

written reflective journals. Other artefacts that were either influential or were outcomes of this journey include family photos, genealogical research, art projects, class presentations, published language learning aids (e.g., dictionaries, curricula, websites), and language self-assessments. Before 2005, this record keeping was for my own purposes. Once I entered the doctoral program, my record keeping became more intentional. The MAP guidebook (Hinton, 2002) provided useful guidance for documenting my language learning journey. Although the book is mainly about planning, implementing, and maintaining a successful one-on-one master-apprentice language learning experience, it also covers topics such as keeping a journal, creating curriculum materials (for yourself and to be used later with others), and audio and video recording strategies for the purposes of enhancing one's learning—all of which were useful for creating records for this autoethnographic study.

Ellis (2009) describes the process and value of keeping records of certain formative experiences in her life: "I began keeping notes about these experiences.... These notes were therapeutic for me and I thought sociologically insightful as well" (p. 85). While certainly there are therapeutic elements in the documentation of my own journey, the greater outcomes have been the progress made toward an ability to speak *nîhiyawîwin*, the better understanding of myself, and my excitement about my contribution to second language learning theory and language revitalization policy development. Next, I explain the role of records used in creating the self-narrative as well as the approach taken to autoethnography in this study.

I have taken a purposeful stance to describe the process and outcome of this dissertation in accordance with the genre of autoethnography created and encouraged by Ellis and Bochner (2000). I have avoided the language and many of the processes of traditional qualitative research (such as data, data collection, and analysis) in order to

create an autoethnography that would be viewed by “first-generation autoethnographers” (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 310) as authentic. To accomplish this, I have honoured “the story” and its development through organic and emerging processes of life writing from the heart. While some aspects of Chang’s (2008) approach to autoethnography, such as discussions of data collection and analysis, do not align with the type of autoethnography that this study adheres to, the study borrows from Chang’s proposed method of organizing records because it is useful.

Four types of sources, adapted from Chang (2008), informed the creation of this self-narrative research study: personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and external sources. Of these, personal memory stands alone as a process that was continuous, emergent, and encouraged and supported by the other three sources. Self-observation records are those which “record your actual behaviors ... as they occur” (p. 90). In this study, self-observational records mainly manifested as language learning records such as language class notes and independent language learning notes. Next, self-reflective records “result[ed] from introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation” (p. 95), which manifested in this study as journal writings about the desire to learn and the processes of language learning and self-assessments of progress in language learning. Last, external sources were artefacts such as photographs, both new (of the last ten years) and old (childhood and archival family photos), family records from national archives, genealogical information, relevant family videos, audio and video recordings of my language learning journey, and language learning materials (e.g., dictionaries, commercial recordings, websites). Further details of the records used as sources, other than personal memory, and their contribution to the creation of the self-narrative are indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Records used as sources

Record Type		Research Purpose
<b><i>Self-observational records</i></b>	<b><i>Language learning notes</i></b> Notes kept during language learning sessions with mentor, during self-study, or in group learning sessions.	For record of various language learning methods and strategies used over the years.
	<b><i>Assessments</i></b> Self-assessments of my language learning progression using three different models: European Self-Assessment (Common Curriculum Framework, 2000); Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs (Alberta Education, 2007); and Master-Apprentice Program self-assessment (Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, 2011).	Reflecting on language learning progress over the 10-year language learning journey.
<b><i>Self-reflective records</i></b>	<b><i>Reflective journals (2005–2011)</i></b> Written and audio-recorded journals since the start of doctoral program.	Used for reflection in building the narrative. Review focused on entries that explored language learning, identity, and family history as they related to language learning. Reviewed for “critical moments,” highlights, lowlights, and common threads.
	<b><i>Historical reflective journals (1999–2004)</i></b> (prior to the start of doctoral program)	Although these journals were kept prior to the undertaking of this research study, they were used for reflection in building the narrative. Review focused on entries that addressed language learning, identity, and family history as they related to language learning.

Record Type		Research Purpose
<b>External records</b>	<b>Historical sources</b> Historical family documents (e.g., Hudson's Bay archival materials, family photographs, great-grandfather's journal)	For better understanding of my family history as it relates to language and identity.  For inclusion of my "past" and honouring my family's story as part of my story.
	<b>Audio and video recordings</b> Recordings of self-study sessions or language learning sessions with mentors	For reflection and observation of various language learning strategies and approaches.  For reflection and observation of myself as a language learner.  For reflection and observation of mentor relationship.  For reflection on language learning progress.
	<b>Photographs</b> (e.g., photos of myself studying/learning, screen shots of video recording sessions with mentor, group language learning sessions [with permission], images of language learning materials, etc.)	Used to trigger memories. Used as mental and emotional reminders of various activities, strategies undertaken.  For inclusion of select images in dissertation.
	<b>Language learning materials</b> Dictionaries, curriculum materials, commercial recordings, websites, and online resources	For reflection on various types of language learning resources used over the years, their purpose, and their usefulness.

While all of the records I kept about my language learning journey contributed to the creation of this autoethnographic memoir, only samples of those records have been included within the dissertation to assist with telling this story. At times during the writing of the memoir, a particular image or journal entry would come to mind and so I



would retrieve and include it. At other times, the memoir writing, in its various forms, would emerge from the process of reviewing all of the various kinds of records from a particular time period (see, for example, the poem in *pipon* within chapter four that emerged from this process). Journal entries and family photographs were the primary sources that most often made their way into the text. The reasons for this are two-fold. One was the ease of using them compared to video and audio records and lengthy notes from learning sessions. The other is that they were the most prolific types of records and seemed to be the most useful in creating this narrative in its present form (as a chapter within a dissertation versus other ways in which I could have chosen to tell the story, such as through a website or as a film). Although in lesser volume, recreated events and poetry were also included in the narrative that emerged from memories, reviewing photographs and journal entries, and listening to and watching audio and video records. Last, different kinds of records were more dominant in some seasons than in others. For example, the first season, *kaskatinâw*, where I explore my family history with language and identity, is rich with photographs because that is mostly what I have from that time, whereas later seasons are richer with examples of language learning strategies and notes from language learning sessions.

### ***Creating the self-narrative***

*"So you just write about your life?... That doesn't sound too difficult."*

(A graduate student in conversation with Ellis, 1999, p. 671)

*takwâkin (fall) 2011. UBC First Nations longhouse: an Aha! moment. Although I had been comfortably using "autoethnography" to gather my "field notes" and document my journey for many years, it never occurred to me that I would use them to construct "my story." While that may sound absurd given the essence of autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling research paradigms, tapwiy (It is true)...*

*All the "should haves" and "could haves" were running through my mind, but as I began to relax into what was before me, this mantra appeared: "It is what it is." The mantra began to play over and over, replacing the "should haves" and "could haves," and soon I could not hear anything else except "It is what it is"...*

*Returning home, standing on shaky ground, still unconvinced I could do it, I surrounded myself with others' autoethnographies, life stories, autobiographies, life writings, films, and art shows, seeking not so much inspiration as assurance that it could be done...*

Creating the narrative for this study from the records I kept was an intuitive and emergent process. Due to the variation in the narrative genre, no seminal guidebook or step-by-step instructions exist for creating autoethnography; rather, there exists a variety of examples and philosophies on how to construct one. As Chang (2008) says, creating an autoethnography is a "highly individualized and personalized process" (p. 113).

While conceding that there is no “one way” to create autoethnography, Ellis (1999) suggests a three-part process for new autoethnographers. The first is to begin by “pay[ing] attention to ... physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions” (p. 671), a process she calls “systematic sociological introspection” (p. 671). Second, she uses personal memory and emotional recall to reconstruct events and understanding of an experience. Last, she advises “writing a draft of your story. Think of it as making retrospective field notes on your life. Include every detail you can recall” (p. 675). She explains a process of daily writing followed by daily review of what has been written and filling in the gaps for a period of time. Ellis explains that the process of emotional recall can be supported by the use of field notes but that field notes are not necessary. In the case of this autoethnography, records were kept of the language learning journey, and they contributed to the construction of the self-narrative in the following ways.

Records kept (as described in the Records section of this chapter), such as the reflective journals, language learning notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, and genealogical family archives, were used to support the creation of “my story.” Reviewing the records for patterns, growth, progress, change, motivations, emotions, strategies, and memory triggers generated “critical moments,” highs and lows, and outcomes which culminated in a first-person account: a multidimensional, richly layered understanding of this journey.

The self-narrative that emerged from the brine of these records and from recalling personal memories is a multimode expression that Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) describe as a “layered text”—“a strategy [of] putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social science” (p. 974). This text emerged as a memoir which was enriched with direct excerpts of journal entries and layered with references to the literature when it seemed to improve the story. This

work is also in part a photo-essay as it includes photographs and video screen shots as visual representations of the journey undertaken.

To borrow from an evocative book chapter title, you may be thinking...

*"Nice story but so what?"* (Arras, 1997)

Some scholars believe that "personal narrative is useful only when it is subjected to some form of cultural criticism or when it is theorized, categorized and analyzed" (Bochner, 2001, p. 133). Bochner, however, discusses the "narrative turn in the social sciences" (p. 134) as a move

away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories ... away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. (p. 134)

Ellis and Bochner (2006) further describe personal narrative as a "desire to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation" (p. 434).

This style of writing is so much more connected to my lived experience.

Sometimes though I need to show that I **can** write abstractly; after all, the scholarly community makes up the largest part of my audience. I want them to take me seriously. (Ellis, 1997, p. 117)

Creating autoethnography is not about analyzing data but rather about constructing meaning (Ellis et al., 2008) through writing one's story. "Analysis can come through the [writing of] the story," Ellis (1999, p. 676) writes, an approach supported by Richardson (2000). The goal of autoethnography, Ellis explains, is "not so much to portray the facts ... but to convey the meanings ... [of] the experience" (1999, p. 674).

### ***Exploring generalizability***

“Generalizability? Is that a concern?”

“Oh yes, though again not in the usual sense. Our lives are particular, but they are also typical and generalizable.... A story’s generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they ask if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know.”

(Graduate student in conversation with Carolyn Ellis, 1999, p. 674)

The choice to focus this research study on one Indigenous story in a particular context is both purposeful and significant. This project contains one important design feature pertaining to the issue of generalizability that warrants description: the emergence of the concept of “specificity” in Indigenous research. Specificity is a move toward acknowledging the diversity among Indigenous people as a reaction to the homogenization that has been imposed through colonization. Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer (2008) points to her deep knowledge of her language, culture, and herself as a Hawaiian woman to explain that “specificity leads to universality” (p. 217). Understanding oneself and an experience from a particular cultural and geographic location allows for deeper and, in some ways, more authentic understanding of a wider phenomenon. The notion of specificity broadens the concept of generalizability; it advocates for (first) understanding individual cases deeply to then understand more generally a broader range of an experience.

Chandler and Lalonde (1998) provide a good example of moving toward specificity in their research work on youth suicide rates in BC First Nation communities. While, overall, First Nation communities in BC have higher rates of youth suicide than the rest of Canada, when Chandler and Lalonde applied a variety of criteria to the study of individual communities, they were able to nuance particular attributes of

communities which had suicide rates that were well below the national average and learn from them some protective measures to keep youth safe.

Beyond the reasoning that a focus on specificity can actually further a general understanding of a phenomenon, another factor in choosing to focus on one story is the potential that story has to resonate and connect with others who will see parts of their own stories in the one they are encountering. Cree/Saulteaux academic Maggie Kovach (2009a) illustrates this concept as she writes about being an Indigenous scholar in a mainstream institution, which is at times a lonely, isolating, and culturally incongruent experience. Kovach writes, “This chapter integrates my experiences of being Indigenous within the academy, though I trust that I am not alone” (p. 51). Similarly, although this dissertation is the story of *my* journey, I know I am not alone. While this study is based on the experiences of one urban *nîhiyaw iskwîw* (Cree woman), it serves as a starting place for the untold stories of all adult Indigenous people who did not have the opportunity to learn their language. My story is also someone else’s story; others may see parts of themselves in the story and may be inspired to take a similar journey. Many other Indigenous adults now find themselves in a life stage where they are eager to acquire this knowledge and ability. My sincere wish is that this study will offer some hope, insight, and direction for other learners on their journey into language, as well as providing insight and understanding of the importance of adult Indigenous language learning and Indigenous language revitalization to a broader audience.

In summary, the combination of the Indigenous worldview of honouring and encouraging specificity in one’s cultural location and autoethnography’s approach of using one’s story to understand a wider phenomenon works to address the issue of generalizability with this research. Applying Meyer’s (2008) specificity theory in combination with autoethnographic approaches to this case of one language

(*nîhiyawîwin*), one context (urban), one people (*nîhiyaw*), and one life stage (adult, mother, worker) suggests that what was learned in this study will have relevance for others and will make a meaningful contribution to the inclusion of Indigenous adults at the heart of the language revitalization movement across Canada.

### ***Chapter summary***

This chapter described the study and the questions that guided its development. The methodological foundations for the study were examined and a description provided as to how they were used. The strategies followed in the language learning journey were explained. The types of records kept over the past twelve years and their role in creating the narrative were described. The role of mentorship was explored, and generalizability and specificity were considered. Next, the study's narrative heart will be revealed, bringing this account of Indigenous adult language learning to life.

## Chapter 4. *nitâcimowin* (my story)

*Stories are what we have, the barometers by which we fashion our identities, organize and live our lives, connect and compare our lives to others, and make decisions on how to live. These tales open our hearts and eyes to ourselves and the world around us, helping us to change our lives and our world for the better.*

(Ellis, 2009, p. 16)

The first three chapters of this dissertation set the study out in a fairly traditional academic manner. Chapter 1, *kayâs*, provided history and context—a backdrop and overview for the thesis. The literature review, *masinahikan kiskihtamôna*, synthesized and critiqued relevant academic literature from which this study emerged and which informed the study. The methodology chapter, *sihcikiwîna*, included an overview of the two research methods, autoethnography and Indigenous research methodology, which were interwoven to create this study. The chapter also detailed methods by which the self-narrative portion of the dissertation came into being. This chapter, *nitâcimowin*, houses the self-narrative. It is a memoir of sorts, interweaving and unfolding my journey to and with language, which is also embedded in my maternal family history. A memoir is the telling of a certain aspect of a person's life (Barrington, 2002) focusing more on pivotal points and epiphanies than a complete chronology of an entire person's life, as is often the case with autobiography. In this case, memoir is signified by the inclusion of parts of my story, a highlighting of moments and memories within a chronological framework. This method of creating the narrative results in a set of stories and artefacts that contribute towards the coherent understanding of my journey with identity and language. Although this journey spans from my family's



history to my present-day life, the narrative focuses on one (albeit important) part of my life, that of my journey with and to *nîhiyawîwin*. The memoir herein is the culmination of my deep and purposeful observation of that journey over more than ten years.

### ***atahakohp—Creating a star blanket***

The creation of this memoir is informed by the work of Joe Kincheloe (2005), among others, whose concept of bricolage encourages interdisciplinarity and insists that researchers reveal their “social location” (p. 324.). Bricolage also embraces complexity and works to “transcend reductionism” (p. 327) for researchers who are firmly committed to the creation of new knowledge. Kincheloe admits that “learning the bricolage is a lifelong process,” and by this measure I am an infant in the spectrum. Yet, I am drawn to its declaration for the need of “new ways to understand the complications of social, cultural, psychological, and educational life” (p. 327). The bricoleur has been at times referred to as “quilt maker” (p. 344), a metaphor which resonates with me due to the honour and value placed on *akohpa* (blankets) in *nîhiyaw* culture (and by many other Indigenous peoples). My mind takes this metaphor one step further to think about my work as *atahakohp* (a star blanket) a traditional kind of blanket made by many prairie Indigenous peoples even today. Indigenous peoples are known to have used dyes and adornments on the clothing and other goods they made prior to contact with Europeans. The introduction of trade beads and coloured cloth simply allowed Indigenous people to expand their creativity. However, the connection to the earth and the reflection of the natural world in colours, images, and patterns continued. The star blanket is a quilt, with a large star sewn in the centre. The star image is created by many small diamond-shaped pieces that are sewn together. The pieces are often of different

colours and patterns but are arranged to create an overall symmetrical effect, with the patterns and colours repeating evenly throughout. Creating a star blanket is very time consuming, and the cutting and sewing involved require great skill to create a blanket that is geometrically aligned. The star image on *akohpa* most often has eight points, but some blankets are made with just six. I have come to think of this narrative as an *atahakohp* (star blanket) with six points, each point signifying a season in a *nîhiyaw* worldview as well as a phase in my language learning. The patterns within the blanket repeat themselves predictably just like the seasons, yet create an overall effect of complexity and wonder. The borders that run along the outside edges of the *akohp* create a larger blanket for wearing or sleeping; they also surround and protect the star within. I have come to think of the chapters of this dissertation as metaphorical borders that surround and anchor the narrative within.

As noted above, the different time periods of my language learning journey within this narrative are signified by the six seasons<sup>26</sup> of the *nîhiyaw* calendar: *kaskatinâw* (freeze-up) represents my foundations; *pipon* (wintertime) represents my childhood; *miyôskamin* (break-up) represents my young adulthood; *sîkwan* (springtime) signifies new beginnings in my journey; *nîpin* (summertime) represents challenges; and *takwâkin* (autumn) signifies the present. The passing of the seasons is a significant part of *nîhiyaw* worldview; as with many Indigenous groups, seasonal changes in the environment were closely observed and noted. Each season held significance for *nîhiyaw* people in both practical and spiritual ways. The seasons dictated subsistence activities, for example, the summer harvest of berries, medicine, and *môswa* (moose), who are most plump at this time of year. Spiritually, there were

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<sup>26</sup> Seasons are named for what occurs in the environment at that time of year. For this reason, the season names (and their number) differ among *nîhiyaw* tribes due to the vastness of *nîhiyaw* territory and the subsequent regional variations. I have followed the calendar of the Northern *nîhiyaw* whose dialect is the main one I am learning and to which I am most closely connected by marriage and proximity to territory.

different observances, ceremonies, and celebrations at different times of the year, including the Sundance, which was celebrated around summer solstice, and winter stories that were only to be told at that time of year. The seasons were marked by changes in the environment and therefore signified changes in ourselves, in the ways we conducted ourselves practically or spiritually at each time of year.

I used the seasons both metaphorically and practically to organize my experiences with language learning as well as my identity journey, which reaches back into my family history. Just like the seasons in *nîhiyaw* worldview, all of the seasons of my language learning have been significant. However, the final season, *takwâkin*, is the longest because it includes the most substantial learning period of my language journey to date.

As explained in the methodology chapter, while all the records I kept contributed to the creation of this memoir, only fragments of those records are included in this chapter. Those chosen assist in telling the story by providing an example or direct insight into my thinking or process at a particular time. For this reason, many of the journal entries are more “raw” in nature and less refined than the rest of the writing. The various primary records used in this chapter include original journal entries (indicated by italics), family photographs, excerpts from historic family journals, and notes about language learning or activities undertaken. In some cases, scanned images of primary sources are included as figures because their aesthetic quality captures the context of the piece, thus they become pieces in the *atahakohp* (star blanket).

I begin *nitâcimowin* (my story) now with the season *kaskatinâw* (freeze-up time), an exploration of my maternal family’s history with language that ultimately led me to my own.

### ***kaskatinâw* (freeze-up)**

This season signifies the foundations of my journey with language. While winter hunting and trapping continues, *kaskatinâw* is a time in *nîhiyaw* territory when the earth rests and *maskwak* (bears) slumber in their winter dens. Families travel less; rather, individual family members go out to set the trap line. A thick layer of ice forms on the rivers and lakes. This time is referred to as *kaskatinâw*, literally meaning “freezing over.” In my maternal family history, the once-vibrant *nîhiyawîwin* began to go to sleep, and rested there for several decades.

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While this story is mine, it does not begin with me. It begins with those who came before me—their life circumstances, their choices, and that which was chosen for them. My ancestors have had a big impact on who I am and who I have become; they paved the path for my journey. They also have a strong influence in my daily life; they are with me in prayer and in spirit. I have conversations with them, sometimes containing harsh words but mostly gratitude. Here I share with you some parts of my family’s story. It was a time before I was on this earth, but it is in no way less important to this story than my living memories.

This story focuses almost exclusively on my mother’s side of my ancestry. My father’s family is of mixed western European ancestry, although he identifies most strongly with his Scottish heritage. Many generations ago there was Gaelic language loss, but almost no one on my father’s side of the family has taken an interest in this loss. It is hard for me to say exactly why I identify more with my mother’s side of the family. Perhaps it is because we have a mother-daughter bond, and therefore I see myself as more like her, or perhaps it is because she primarily raised *nîstîs* (my older brother)

and me<sup>27</sup> and therefore her cultural identity was most prominent in my psyche.

However, I also believe that it goes deeper than this; at a cellular level my ancestors live in me and through me, and therefore I do not so much choose this path as align myself with it. The best way I can explain my connection to my *nîhiyaw* ancestry is that it “just is”; I just am the way I am because this was a path set out for me by the ancestors. This is in no way meant to disrespect *nohtawiy* (my father) or his family. I hold all the members of my family equally dear. My father and I are fortunate to share a very close bond, and he is very supportive of my identity development and life path.

My maternal ancestors were almost exclusively First Nations women who married Scottish men who immigrated to Canada to work for the Hudson’s Bay Company. More recently, more of the men in my maternal family were Métis<sup>28</sup> and fewer were Scottish born, but all continued to marry *nîhiyaw-iskwiwak* (Cree women).

Below are several excerpts from William Campbell’s journal, which is catalogued with the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. “Big Bill” Campbell, as he came to be known, was one of my great-great-grandfathers on my mother’s side. He immigrated to Canada in 1885 at age 17 on a voyage from the Orkney Islands to York Factory on Hudson’s Bay. His memoirs offer vivid images of the time, the geographical location, and the intercultural intermingling from which my maternal family arose. In this 1891 excerpt (included below in its original form), he describes his marriage to my great-great grandmother Nancy Munroe of Oxford House:

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<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, my parents separated when I was just six months old. Although I am sure their separation has shaped me in immeasurable ways, it was not a traumatic memory (for me) due to my age at the time of their separation. I have always remained close to my father despite being raised primarily by my mother.

<sup>28</sup> It is important to recognize, at this point, that Indigenous identity is often complex. Although I have Métis, European, and Cree ancestors, and therefore recognize all three groups as part of my ancestry, I do not identify politically as Métis; rather, I identify as a *nîhiyaw-iskwiw* (Cree woman).

On the 26<sup>th</sup> November my wife presented me with a daughter. I should have commented on my wedding which was only excelled in splendour by the marriage of the Marquess of Lorne to Princess Louise. I had all the notables from the surroundings Lakes and Rivers attend. Princess and Princesses of the great Saulteaux Nation, dressed according to the custom of the country, painted and feathered. The wedding breakfast was held in our Hall, where the Braves sat down with their squaws to gorge on Bannock and Tea sweetened with sugar...

X On the 26th November my wife presented me with a daughter. I should have commented on my wedding which was only excelled in splendour by the marriage of the Marquess of Lorne to Princess Louise. I had all the notables from the surrounding Lakes and Rivers attend. Princess and Princesses of the great Saulteaux Nation, dressed according to the custom of the country, painted and feathered. The wedding breakfast was held in our Hall, where the Braves sat down with their squaws to gorge on Bannock and Tea sweetened with sugar. Plum Duff cooked with bacon fat instead of suet though a little soggy was appreciated, Venison was also served. I enjoyed the display especially to see a brave stick a junk of venison in his mouth and with one sweep of the scalping knife past his nose and lips out through the meat, this has to be practiced from youth to be expertly or safely done. Later on in the winter my wife being unwell I had an old Indian conjurer and medicine man (and murderer, see:- Sugarr pids, Page 23) bring me some medicine. Next day he was back to tell me that his Bowagons revealed to him that some bad Indian was conjuring and casting a spell on us. I suppose that in me asking him for medicine he thought I was turning Indian and would



Figure 6. Excerpt from William Campbell's journal (Campbell, 1885–1910, p. 23)

In earlier accounts of his experience in northern Manitoba, Big Bill describes his efforts to learn to speak *nîhiyawîwin*, a reminder that in those days it was not uncommon for immigrants to learn the languages of the land; in his case, as for many, he did so for the aims of trade and marriage.

November 1886

We now had time to do some work in the office but the days were short, and Cubby did not care to do much work in the afternoon, I had much spare time and spent it learning the Cree language. (Campbell, 1885–1910, p. 9)

Two years later, in September of 1888, he describes his improved language skills: “I could talk the Cree language enough to do business with the Indians, and had the work of the Post attended to” (Campbell, 1885-1910, p. 12).

While William Campbell’s journal tells a fascinating story of an extremely formative time in this country’s history, its importance to my story is the reminder that, within living memory of just a few generations, *nîhiyawîwin* was the language of commerce and was taken up by many European immigrants to enable them to integrate into their new communities and, in many cases, including my grandfather’s, to attract a wife. An Elder in my family remembers this couple and describes Nancy Campbell (née Munroe) as “never having spoken English her whole life.” Nancy was the last person in our family who was able to avoid learning a colonial language. She died in 1961. Sometime during the lifetime of her daughter, my great-grandmother Jessie Campbell, the environment and context for languages shifted, and just as Jessie was raised bilingually, so did she raise her children (including my grandfather) this way.

A story like William Campbell’s also exists on my maternal grandmother’s side. Her mother Bella (née Hart), whose first language was *nîhiyawîwin*, only came to learn English later in life, likely because of her marriage to Andrew Mowat, my great-grandfather. Although Andrew was Métis, he did not speak Cree. Like my grandfather, my grandmother was raised bilingually, but neither she nor my grandfather passed the language down to my mother and her siblings, and thus the language was lost in our family within one generation.

It took me a long time to understand that during the time my grandmother was growing up, poverty in northern communities was extreme. While it is important to recognize that this was the Depression era elsewhere in Canada as well, various sources acknowledge that the poverty in the north and amongst Indigenous peoples was severe,

even by the standards of the day (Morton, 1997; Robertson, 1991). The subsistence lifestyle was lost as a result of land theft, flooding due to hydro projects to power the south, and the introduction of a wage economy in which few northern First Nation families could participate. It was not easy to be Indian in Canada in the 1940s. This reality, together with the poverty and lack of opportunities for young people, drove my grandmother, at age 16, to leave her home community of Norway House with a minister and his wife to work at Sioux Lookout Residential School. No one is quite sure what *nohkom* (my grandma) did there; her only living siblings were simply told that she went there to “teach”; however, given that she was a teenager and had no teaching credentials, it is likely she was a caregiver for the pupils.



**Figure 7. *kohkom* (back row, holding a child) circa 1940 at about age 16, Sioux Lookout Residential School**

Meanwhile, my grandfather, a few years her senior, had enlisted in the army to assist with World War II efforts overseas. He spent over six years as a gunner in Northern Africa, Italy, and France before returning home to reunite with his waiting bride-to-be, my grandmother. The years overseas were not kind to him. After his return from the war, he drank a lot and often broke down when he tried to talk about that time. His drinking and emotional pain seemed also to be related to his dislocation from his



homeland and his people, according to my mother. He eventually settled into family life as a miner in a northern Ontario town, and, between his drinking and the health effects of war and mining, died at age 56.



Figure 8. *mosôm* George, front left, enjoying down time with a friend during WWII

My mother remembers hearing *nîhiyaw* spoken by *mosôm* (my grandpa) only when he was drinking. When he would start speaking to *nohkom* in *nîhiyawîwin*, she would sharply yell “George!” meaning “enough!” This happened often enough for *nikâwi* (my mother) to remember the occurrences, but infrequently enough that she could not make sense of it. That was until she finally made the connection during one of their (rare) trips home to Norway House. While her grandmother (Bella Mowat) and others were speaking this strange tongue; somewhere deep inside, my mother realized this was her heritage. Unfortunately my grandmother was not able to pass on the strength and beauty that lay within her *nîhiyaw* heritage, leaving my mother instead to overcome second-hand shame. How could *nohkom* have known that her language,

culture, and life ways held value and beauty when the world around her was so hostile, inhospitable, and disparaging of First Nations people and their languages?

My mother's life, her family history, and her eventual meeting of my father obviously led to my own life. I continue this story now with the start of my living memory, my childhood, and some of the ways this family history has shaped me.

### ***pipon (wintertime)***

The season of *pipon* signifies my childhood (*awâsisiwin*). In northern Canada, winters are long, dark, and cold. Yet *pipon* was a cleansing time for trees, rivers, and lakes. Traditionally, it was a time for slowing down. The summer and fall harvests were complete, foods were preserved and treasured in hopes they would last until spring. Families were large but homes were not, and so it was a time of family closeness. This was a time for telling *âtayohkana* (sacred stories) told only at this time of year, often at night by fire or candlelight. The night sky seemed brighter and the northern lights danced, a magical phenomenon known to most as aurora borealis but to us as *cîpayak nîmitowak*, literally “the spirits are dancing.” We felt close to the spirit world at this time, humbly reminded of our humanness and vulnerability: Mother Nature’s frost patterns are so beautiful, yet so strong. Children were bundled and held close. This season within my story signifies childhood and the experience of growing up. I am compelled to include this formative period of my story because of its implications for my identity journey and because it is the starting place of my lived memory.

\* \* \*

Growing up, I was always aware of our “Nativity” as a family. Yet, we lived far from our homelands and far from our extended family, which made it difficult to develop a sense of Native<sup>29</sup> identity. My identity came to be formed mostly around that for which I was rewarded: excelling academically, being “pretty,” and having an outgoing personality. Both my mother and my older brother, with whom I was raised, are more visibly Native in appearance, whereas my racial origins are less obvious. The racial marker I carried with me, however, was my first name, Onowa. It often drew

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<sup>29</sup> The commonly used societal term that I identified with most strongly as a child and adolescent.

curiosity as well as a tripped tongue. Most interactions with my name went something like this:

*The newly introduced:* “Well, that’s different!” or “What a beautiful name!”

*Me:* [Polite Canadian nod coupled with a polite smile] “Yes it is” (to the first comment) or “thank you” (to the second).

*Newly introduced gets more curious, delves deeper:* “Where is it from?” or “What kind of name is that?” or “What nationality is it?”

I had my cache of answers available for quick retrieval. I would usually say it was First Nations or Native (if they were not Canadian) or Cree (because even though the name is not Cree that is really what they were asking).

Next would come their surprise: “*You* are Native? You don’t look Native...” or “Gosh, I was going to guess you were Italian or Mediterranean of some kind...” or (if it was a phone conversation) “Oh, I was going to guess Japanese or Hawaiian.”

I am sure none of these people (teachers, friends’ parents, strangers) realized the role they were playing in the development of my identity. Unbeknownst to me, I was internalizing this feedback that I did not “look Native” (causing confusion and identity damage that would later have to be undone) and, on the other hand, self-confirming, through repeatedly having to explain my name, that I *was* Native.

Although my experience with my name had an important impact on my identity development, perhaps what had an even bigger impact was the place in which I grew up. I was born in north-central Saskatchewan and remained within a one-hundred-kilometre radius of my birthplace until I was 19 years old. This territory where I grew up always felt like home to me. Of course it would, since I didn’t know any other place. However, as I got older, I started to realize that we were not “from” there. Even though I had never been to northern Manitoba, and since my grandparents had both passed on

to the spirit world, I thought about going to Manitoba and pondered such questions as, Why would I go there? How would I get there? Who would I know there? Who would know me?

The closest city to where I lived (Prince Albert, Saskatchewan), where we would shop for groceries and clothes and which was the place to which I was eventually bussed to attend high school, is known widely as one of the most racist cities in Canada. It has close to a 50% First Nations (mainly Cree and Dene) population and the racial tension was intense. There are enormous misunderstandings about the two main “racial” groups, “whites” and “Natives.” Economic development has pushed both groups to work more with the other, so a lesser divide exists now than when I was a child and a youth. However, the racial divide when I was growing up was palpable, dangerous, infuriating, and confusing.

At age twenty, I moved to Victoria where my father, stepmother, and two younger brothers lived. I experienced a culture shock that left me feeling more out of place even though I was safely nested with members of my immediate family. The following poem was written in the fall of 2011 during the creation of this narrative as I thought about the impact those experiences have had on my identity.

## Out of Place

off-reserve but not urban—out of place  
on Cree territory but not my own—out of place  
northern Saskatchewan magic—dancing northern lights  
chasing rainbows across fields of stubble  
laying in wheat fields, daydreaming, staring at the endless blue skies  
vivid distinction of every season...  
crunchy puddles, sledding down “hills” left by the plough  
brightly coloured leaves swaying, gently falling in the warm September winds  
growing girl knowing herself as “Onowa”—reader, student, Sunday school teacher  
teenage girl standing waiting for the bus lights to appear down the dark gravel road  
frozen—sockless, toque-less, keeping “cool”  
growing, changing, searching, moving—west coast wet  
slugs! grandfather spiders and mountains to climb  
fish out of water—student—alone—out of place  
who am I? why am I here—in this place—when my heart is in Saskatchewan?  
searching... yearning... learning... Coast Salish territory  
poster reads, “Are your ancestors of Aboriginal and European heritage?”  
community gathering—is this who I am? Red River jig, Métis sash, Michif language  
it does not *feel* right, “I am Métis” does not flow from my breath, the words do not fill  
this emptiness  
my heart is with my Cree family, the loss is deep in my bones  
my spirit leaps, my heart swells when I hear our language, hear our drum, smell our  
medicines and feel them wash over me  
There, I feel at peace. I feel at home. Like the place I have always belonged.



Figure 9. *niya* (me) at age 3, with *nikâwiy* (my mother)

The formation of my identity was largely influenced by my mother's identity and history as an Aboriginal person. I came to understand that my mother had also been robbed of the experience of learning our traditions and growing up in our homelands. Her mother was intent on leaving their homelands as early as she could, and after my grandfather returned from World War II, they took up permanent residence in a small mining town in northwestern Ontario. While my grandparents' move from northern Manitoba to northern Ontario was not as dramatic as moving across the country or to a big city, it was still a move out of territory, and it caused great longing within my grandfather. My mother often describes her father's continuous longing for his homeland and his excessive drinking to ease his heartache, likely due to both the effects of war and loneliness for his people. While my mother did visit their homeland periodically in her childhood, she never developed the connection that her father had to that place. Yet she somehow knew deep in her bones of her Aboriginal heritage, no matter how hard my grandmother tried to erase it or scrub it away with those relentless Saturday morning family cleaning sessions and her vigilance about keeping

the white picket fence neat and tidy. And so it goes: one generation's circumstances and choices, or lack thereof, change the course of their children's lives, which in turn influences the shape of their grandchildren's lives, and down the line it goes. The following journal entry describes some of my experiences and expresses my processing of this family history.

*Journal Entry, December 2010*

*When I was a child, my mother would tell us stories about her parents and grandparents and trips back to their home territory. She would say, "You are Aboriginal<sup>30</sup>; always be proud of it." She encouraged us to develop a sense of cultural identity and yet had such limited means to assist us in this journey. Although we lived in Cree territory, it was not our territory, and all of our living relations lived hundreds and thousands of miles away.*

*I would come to know later that even if we had lived closer to our living relations, it may not have made a huge cultural impact. In fact, it may have had the opposite impact to what we would have hoped. You see, my mother's family (for the most part) had seemingly renounced their Aboriginal identity. It was there, but just under the surface. Rather they strove to "become" white and be awarded all the rights and privileges with which this comes, the least of which is the entitlement to respect, and the least of that, dignity intact.*

*I remember vividly a trip to our homeland in northern Manitoba in 2001 with one of my grandmother's sisters. She had been the school secretary for many years. Every member of the community knew her, as she had greeted them all either as a child, as a parent, or as a grandparent. As we spent time in the community (my first trip there), everyone spoke to her in Cree. She smiled, laughed, and showed that she completely*

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<sup>30</sup> The term with which my mother seemed most comfortable and most frequently used during my childhood.



*understood their conversation but answered back only in English. Like my grandmother, who passed away when I was 12 years old, my auntie would never speak the language—a box of treasures, locked up tight.*

Upon reflection on this journal entry, living through that experience with my great-aunt was a formative experience in my language learning quest. Although my own grandmother had gone on to the spirit world, witnessing that her sister clearly understood the language, while politely denying it with her English responses, made me simultaneously sad and angry. These two feelings were the main emotions that emerged in early adulthood for me as I began to explore my family history in greater depth while also learning more about the largely untold history of Indigenous-colonial encounters in Canada.

### ***miyôskamin (spring break-up)***

Spring break-up, known to *nîhiyawak* as *miyôskamin*, is a time when the earth begins to thaw after a long, cold winter. The ice cracks and separates, then flows down the rivers and streams in broken sheets. It is a time marked by the returning of *niskak* (geese) and later, the singing of *ayikîsak* (frogs) whose habitat is also starting to thaw. This season marks young adulthood (*oskinîkiskwîwin*) in my journey with identity and into language learning. I would like to think it is a time when the language, frozen in our family for two generations, also began to thaw.

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In my early twenties, I began to gain a perspective on the world that had been missing during my life so far in north-central Saskatchewan. Learning more about Canada's history (the *real* history, not the K-12 social studies version) helped me to better understand why our family had turned out the way it did. I made a decision then that the shame, loss, unravelling, and dislocation from my family's embarrassment about language, tradition, and *nîhiyaw* culture was going to end with me. I was going to work for the rest of my life to strengthen these parts of myself, to heal these intergenerational losses, and to expose my children to as much language, culture, and cultural identity as I could in my lifetime. I saw myself as the turn-around generation, stopping the losses in their tracks and turning the train around. I wanted my children to look back at their ancestors and know where they came from, and to know who they are, rather than spending their life searching, seeking, and longing.

My first experience of feeling accepted as a member of a *nîhiyaw* community was through attending gatherings held by a local Métis organization in Victoria. I was warmly welcomed there and enjoyed meeting many Elders and tasting bannock for the

first time! Eventually, this organization offered an informal language class taught by a *nîhiyaw-iskwiw* from Saskatchewan. My dear *niwîcîwâkan* (friend) Cheryllee insisted that I go. This was my first introduction to *nîhiyawîwin*, where I learned the first word that everyone learns in our language, “*tânisi!*” (often shortened to *tânsi*), which literally means “how are you?” but is often mistakenly used by language beginners to mean “hello.” The class was short lived because the Elder-teacher moved back to the prairies not long after the first set of classes ended. I can honestly say that I did not learn very much there, as it was truly just an introduction, but it did provide an important spark for the possibility of something more. From that class forward, I have never looked back. My quest to learn *nîhiyawîwin* has never waned since.

There is no doubt that, driven by the longing of my early adulthood to fill the void I felt within, my early motivations to learn my language were a search for stronger identity and a sense of belonging among *nîhiyaw* people. I was also learning a lot at that time about the *Indian Act* and other colonial policies in Canada. Striving to learn my language seemed like a more worthwhile aim than seeking Indian status through the arbitrary and inconsistent *Indian Act* process (although “having status” seems to most Canadians and to many Indigenous people I have encountered as the golden standard and “ultimate proof” of one’s Indigeneity). Knowing that my grandparents and great-grandparents spoke our language seemed like a more genuine link to my ancestry and a better way to honour it than chasing a treaty number, although I did dream of “community” membership and acceptance in our homelands, from which we were now two generations removed. The following journal entry re-creates a conversation I have had many times with new acquaintances and reflects on those encounters.

*Journal Entry, December 2003*

*Where are you from? Well...(big breath in, this could take awhile)*

*(interrupted) Do you have status? Well, no—because....*

*(interrupted again) So, you are Métis? Well, no...*

*(their inner thoughts...) Then, how do I know you are real?*

*I continue to wonder if I should chase the “golden egg” [status] so that I’ll “fit in” but will it really change my life? Is how people perceive me how I perceive myself? Is colonial recognition of Indianness what we are all about? Is it blood quantum that matters? What about my children? Will it matter to them how brown they are or if they have status?<sup>31</sup>*



**Figure 10. Norway House**

In 2001, I had the opportunity to visit my ancestral communities of Norway House and Cross Lake in northern Manitoba for the first time. The time was spent mainly in my grandmother’s community of Norway House, where we have the most living relatives. This trip resulted in some of the most pivotal moments of my language learning quest and deepened my conviction to learn. The following is a story about a moment on that trip.

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<sup>31</sup> Indian status, as described in the “Consequences of colonization” section of this dissertation, has many layers of implications for Indigenous people, including but not limited to recognition by the Government of Canada as an Indigenous person, assigned membership to a community, health benefits, and potential education and housing benefits.

Near the end of our trip, when we headed back to the cable ferry that would transport our car to the other side of the Nelson River so that we could begin our twelve-hour southern descent back to Brandon, we stopped in my grandfather's community of Cross Lake to visit a relative. While we were there, my mother asked me to buy her some headache medication at the community's lone grocery store. I walked into the store and found the scant pharmaceuticals section. Once I had made my selection, I made my way to the front of the store to pay for the purchase. The cashier scanned the item and then told me in *nîhiyawîwin* the total owing. I was (pleasantly!) shocked but tried to maintain my cool. It was the first time in my life that someone had made the assumption by looking at me that I was *nîhiyaw* and that I could speak our language. I just handed her a five-dollar bill as if I had understood. It is difficult to explain the impact this small interaction had on me. I carry with me the hope that one day, given the opportunity again, I could answer in our language.

Upon returning to Victoria and for the next three years, I continued my quest to learn *nîhiyawîwin* almost entirely on my own.<sup>32</sup> This time in my language learning journey was marked by informal self-study in which I mainly relied on print materials. I know now that this is not the best way to learn a new language. However, this was all that was available to me at the time, and I was determined not to give up. So in the face of scarcity, I made the best of what was available: books, books, and more books.

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<sup>32</sup> If it is helpful for the reader to understand my language proficiency starting point as well as the progress that was made during the course of this dissertation study, it can be read in the Success/Progress section of chapter five, which houses the outcomes and meaning making of this journey.



### ***sîkwan* (springtime)**

*sîkwan* (springtime) is a season characterized by *oski mâcipayiwina*—new life and new starts. The *nîhiyaw* moons that occur within *sîkwan*—*sâkipakâwipîsim* (leaf-budding moon) and *opâskahopîsim* (egg-hatching moon)—are vivid descriptors of changes in the natural world at that time of the year. This season in my journey signifies a time of new beginnings when, after nearly five years of striving to learn my language, I received new opportunities to learn and experience the language. It was also a period in my life of a new marriage and the birth of my first child, all significant indicators of new life and new beginnings.

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Following the initial five-year period (1999–2003) of attempting to learn my language, the period from early 2004 to *sîkwan* (spring) 2007 was the most sustained and invigorating language learning time since the start of my quest in 1999. The year 2004, particularly, felt like a new beginning in this journey. Prior to 2004, I had taken one briefly offered language class, self-studied from print materials, and travelled home to Manitoba twice to visit Elders in my *nîhiyaw* family, both times practising and recording as much language as I could. In 2004, a new Cree speaker moved to Victoria and was contracted to provide language classes to a small, private group through a local Indigenous organization. I was lucky enough to be included in this group. That spring our class became a language learning community. We used the language in whatever ways we could, and we also learned our first song in *nîhiyawîwin* (with which we were thrilled!).

Although more recently I have worked toward avoiding language learning through written means, 2004 was early days in my language learning attempts. Even

MAP supports a minimal amount of writing to memorize “common or survival phrases” to assist the learner and the speaker/teacher to stay in the language, thereby not reverting to English. Figure 12 below is a sample of my language learning notes from that time. This archive brings back memories for me of excitement and hope as I began to hear, learn, and speak some very useful everyday questions and phrases.

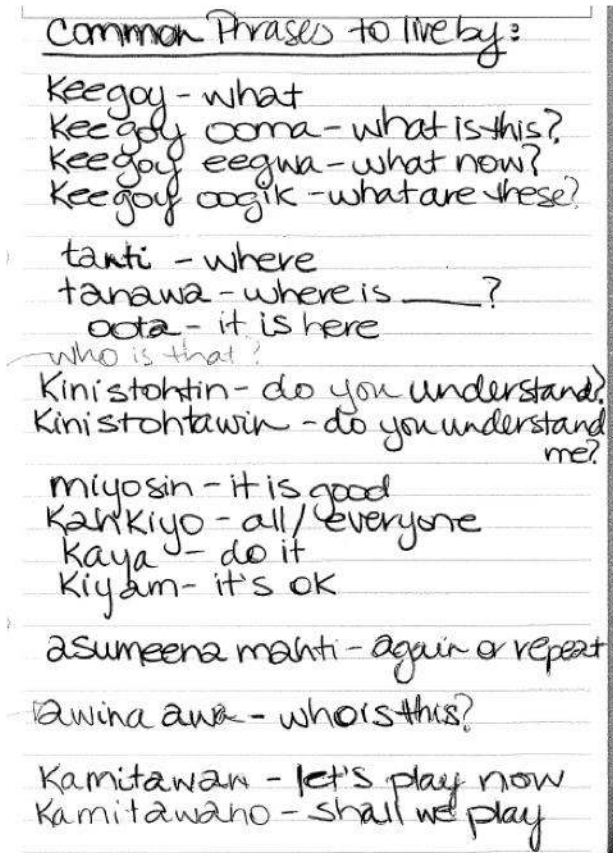


Figure 12. Sample language learning notes, *miyôskamin* (spring) 2004

These years of 2004–2007 were marked by other new beginnings. I began a new life with *âciw*, whom I met while learning *nîhiyawîwin* in 2004. The following year, in 2005, *niwîciwâkan* (a friend) and I began a non-profit urban *nîhiyaw* society targeted at boosting language and cultural programming for urban *nîhiyawak* (Cree people), which helped to continue the community language classes we had begun in 2004. I also became pregnant in 2005 with my first child.

The following journal entry conveys the connection I was feeling to *nîhiyawîwin*



during this exciting time of language learning opportunities and new beginnings.

*Journal Entry, pipon (winter) 2006*

*Although it is not the first language learned in my conscious life, it is the language of my spirit, my cells, and those who have walked before me, the language of my heart. I have been on a lifelong quest to uncover, rediscover, connect with, reconnect with, learn about, live in, and feel belonging as and develop knowledge about my Aboriginal self.*

*At last I start to learn my mother tongue, and though my mouth and lips fight to make the sounds, it is as though I have always spoken it.*

As my personal connection to *nîhiyawîwin* deepened, I prepared my heart and spirit for my passage into motherhood, another new beginning. The impending birth and arrival of *nitânis* (my daughter) in early 2006 provided a huge boost in motivation for me to continue learning our language, as indicated in the following journal entry.

*Journal Entry, miyôskamin (spring) 2006*

*nitânis' (our daughter's) arrival certainly has motivated me to learn more and more. Yet, I feel so frustrated, empty, and disappointed not to be able to speak to her in Cree as I cannot (yet) form any sentences. I know the names for many "things" but cannot even make "baby talk" with her.*

*I am learning some nîhiyaw songs to sing to her, which feels good. At least I can sing to her in our language when I am putting her to sleep.*

kaya mâka mâto-cîcits (*don't cry baby*)

kaya mâka mâto (*don't cry*)

kamiywâsin asamîna

kaya mâka mâto (*don't cry*)

*I made posters for beside her change table as I did not have anything in Cree—they are hand drawings of creatures that are found in our territory, such as ayîkis (frog), sîsîp (duck), amisk (beaver), etc., and I did them like a counting chart: piyak piyisîs (one bird), niso ayikîsak (two frogs), etc.*

*This was more for me than for her, as a way of saying something to her in nîhiyawîwin, but it felt better than putting up the jungle-themed animal print wallpaper border that is so readily available but shows animals for which I have no words, since they are from another continent.*

The poster in Figure 13 provides an image of the kinds of language learning activities I was doing to continue my learning and to be able to speak *nîhiyawîwin* to *nitânis*. Even if it was just numbers and animals, I felt I had to do something. This photo also reminds me of how far I have come in my language learning, how much more I can say now, how desperate I was to say *anything* to *nitânis* at that time, and how meagre our beginnings in language learning can sometimes be.

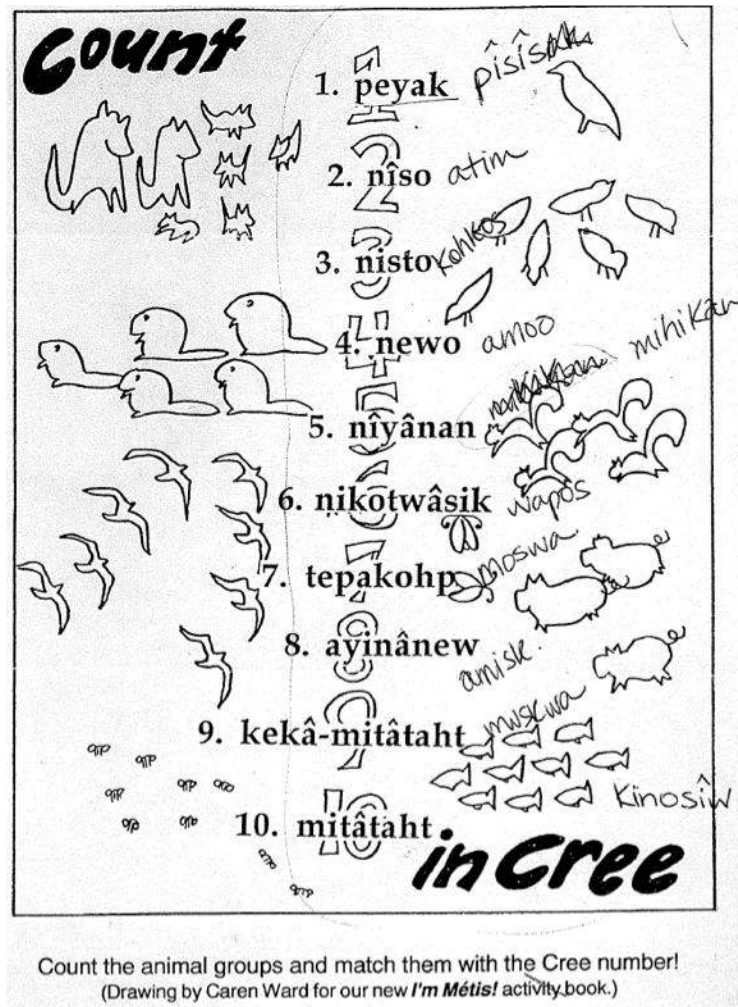


Figure 13. A language learning poster made for *nîtânîs ikwa niya* (my daughter and me)

The birth of my first child also brought anguish and confusion about what language to speak to her. Much of the research I had read and the public health advice we received advised new parents of multilanguage households to speak to their children in the language they knew best. While these materials are generally created for new immigrant families whose first language is not English, it caused me some anxiety. As would any new parent, I wanted to do what was “best” for my child.



Figure 14. *niya ikwa nitânis* (me and my daughter) when she was a few days old

I recall being filled with angst at the time, wanting to use as much *nîhiyawiyân* as I could with *nitânis*, but being aware that I was far from an L1 speaker, wondering whether I would harm her language development.

*Journal Entry, pimon 2006*

*The research tells us to speak the language we know best to our children, but what about all the Indigenous parents trying to learn their language? At what point do we try to speak our language to our children? Is there a day when we will be “fluent enough”? We may never know our ancestral language (L2) better than our first language (L1—in my case, English). If we speak our ancestral language, are we harming our children, stunting their language development? How will our homes become Indigenous language speaking if we do not begin to talk our languages? Meeting ourselves where we are at?*

I am certain that my concern is common to many new Indigenous language learners who are also parents of young children and who want to pass on their language. What is the answer? Only we can discover, as we are the pioneers.

During this time of new beginnings I began my doctoral studies, within which I had the opportunity to take a graduate-level course on second-language acquisition. I

learned much in this course; it opened the door to a body of knowledge that I had been seeking for some time. It taught many concepts, theories, and ideas about second-language acquisition, while also bringing to the fore major differences in approaches needed for Indigenous second language learning, such as the small number of L1 speakers to teach our languages, a lack of curriculum resources due to large number of languages in Canada, etc. However, one of the ways this course helped me in my learning was by validating my experience of the effects of insufficient language input and the value of receiving input at a level and speed that matches where you are in your learning. It also taught that we have to make mistakes, which frees us to get closer to speaking by *trying*. It taught me that while we celebrate young children's attempts to learn a language when they say things like "teddy go bye-bye" and "me eated," as adults we pressure ourselves (and are sometimes expected) to produce perfectly pronounced, grammatically correct, and entirely complete sentences from very early on in our learning. Taking this class allowed me to speak in "baby talk" (which I still sometimes do). I would code switch, saying things such as "*tîpakohp* teeth" for "seven teeth" because I knew the word for "seven" but not for "teeth." Another example would be simply using nouns when I didn't know the phrase, saying, for example, "*maskisina*" for "shoes" instead of the longer and proper "*pôstasksinîy*" for "put on your shoes" if I wanted *nitânis* to put on her shoes.

While this "season" in my language learning journey was filled with hope, new beginnings, and increasing motivation, it was also a time of realizing limits to the full integration of Cree into my daily life, as I wrote in the following journal entry:

*Journal Entry, Spring 2006*

*Learning about "speech events" in 2<sup>nd</sup> lang learning theory makes me realize that I will never make a doctor's appoint, open a bank account, renew my library card, have a*

*job interview or write an academic paper in Cree. It is depressing and reinforces a sense of uselessness & devaluing of our languages in mainstream Canadian society ... but at least I can talk to my daughter.*

This period of language learning was filled with more formal language learning opportunities, effortful self-directed learning, trying out various strategies, and using my (pre-verbal) daughter as a conversation partner. *sîkwan*, this season of new beginnings, built a foundation for subsequent language learning in later years. However, my learning was interrupted by another series of unexpected life changes that derailed any significant language learning for more than two years, as described in the following season, *nîpin* (*summertime*).

### ***nîpin* (summertime)**

The season of *nîpin* involves much hard work and many *âyimisiwina* (challenges). It is a time to harvest and preserve both plants and animals, of picking *mînsa* (berries), picking *maskihkiya* (medicines), and humbly pleading to *kisîmanitow* (Creator) for the offering of *môswa* (moose) so that we may survive another winter. As this is a season of relative abundance, it is a time for giving thanks for all that is offered to us and all that we have. *nîpin* (summertime) signifies a time of great challenge in my language learning journey, but also of tremendous gratitude. It was a time when I was humbly reminded of my humanness. The inclusion of this season is important to me as a reminder to us all that we are only human, but it is especially important for adult learners of an Indigenous language to know that our human limits and our commitment to language learning will be tested again and again. Unexpected life bends often get in the way of language learning. However, I am living proof that a derailment does not have to be permanent.

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This time period, from early 2007 to *takwâkin* (fall) 2009, marks the second of two lengthy breaks from any substantial language learning in my twelve-year language learning journey (the other was discussed in *oskinîkiskwîwin* [young adulthood]). While this season tells the story of this period in my life and the effect it had on my language learning, its importance lies more in its symbolic value as a reminder that breaks from second-language learning in adulthood are not atypical.

The following journal entry was created near the beginning of the *nîpin* period of my language learning journey. It indicates the sadness and discouragement I experienced at that time.

*Journal Entry, sîkwan 2007*

*Discouraged, overwhelmed, lost*

*how to begin*

*no road map, no guide*

*no brochures, no tours*

In 2007, I experienced a sudden, unexpected brain hemorrhage. I was fourteen weeks pregnant at the time. Miraculously, the baby and I both survived. I spent the next six months in acute recovery, the end of which was marked by the birth of my second daughter. My healing continued into the next year as I began my new life as the mother of a 21-month-old toddler and a newborn baby. Ten months after my second daughter's birth, in the fall of 2008, I returned to full-time doctoral studies and took up a high-responsibility academic position that I had accepted prior to the news of my second pregnancy. My engagement in this tri-part life—young family, full-time studies, and part-time work—inhibited significant language learning for yet another year (through to the fall of 2009).

This season in my language learning was also marked by reflection. While this part of my journey may seem to move away from narrative and include more research and academic terms, these are a reality of this part of my language learning journey: I was a doctoral student studying second-language learning, and this inevitably had an impact and found a place within my story alongside all the other pieces. Near the end of this “season” of setbacks in language learning, my journal entries reflected on the previous ten years of learning *nîhiyawîwin*. I intently contemplated the causes—besides the obvious ones in the immediately preceding two years—for my overall lack of progress towards becoming a speaker of *nîhiyawîwin* after ten years of effort. Was I lazy, slow, or simply distracted? Through that period of contemplation I identified two



factors that eventually greatly influenced my subsequent season of language learning, which came to be much more successful. These two factors were mental and emotional blocks, and a lack of exposure to sufficient opportunities for language input and practice.

Through accessing second-language learning research in the previous few years, I came to understand that I had experienced throughout those ten years some mental blocks and related anxiety that I needed to work through about my family's history with language to fully open myself to language learning. In addition, I have had many cognitive and emotional distractions, both good and bad, during the last twelve years of my life, including three university degrees, two marriages, and two children, to name a few!

My second insight related to the lack of exposure and opportunities for practice needed to be a successful L2 speaker (Ellis, 2005). My lack of progress in my previous ten years' efforts was a direct result of the relatively small volume of opportunities to hear or practice the language. I had been focused on trying to learn through literary resources and language classes that emphasized mostly noun and short phrase memorization rather than dyad dialogue or speech repetition. In addition, despite various conversations and other attempts on my part, I had been unsuccessful in making the language of our home *nîhiyawîwin* as I could not get *âciw* to use *nîhiyawîwin* regularly as his first language of communication with our daughters. Therefore there were few opportunities to hear *nîhiyawîwin* in our home and in our relationship. *âciw* would use the language periodically, but not often enough or regularly enough for me to get the level of repetition I needed to acquire significant understanding. This is not to say that my lack of progress is his fault (or anyone else's), but rather to be honest (and gentle) with myself about one of the major factors in my lack of progress. Also, I did not

have any other *nîhiyawîwin* speakers or language mentors in close proximity during that period, and my access to audio or visual resources was very limited.

In addition to all of these considerations, in retrospect I think I was always waiting for the “perfect” time for language learning. I often put off language learning opportunities with “when this...then that....” thinking, until one day I realized that the time will *never* be perfect, that the *only* time for learning is right now—all that I can, each and every day. I *must find* any way to work it into my daily life: through e-mails, text messages, phone messages, and communicating with my children, my partner, and anyone else who will listen.

The following story is one that I heard Leanne Hinton (co-creator of the Master-Apprentice Program) tell during a public lecture in 2003. It tells of an innovative way that one adult language learner found to make space for his language within his daily English-dominated life. The story greatly inspired me; I share it here in hopes that it will inspire other adult language learners who are experiencing challenges in finding the time and space to practice their language in their daily life.

A man was trying to learn his language but did not know any speakers other than his language mentor; he therefore had very few others with whom to talk. Yet he was determined to learn his language. So, he began a practice of talking to everyone in his language! He responded to every question he was asked and initiated conversation in his language, then followed with the English translation. He reported that this practice also helped him to make note of what he did not yet know, and he then focused on that vocabulary area with his language mentor. His tremendous dedication and creative way of finding a way to speak his language regularly was truly admirable.

After hearing this story, I was inspired to adapt this approach in small ways. I began offering my greetings and closings in e-mails in my language. I told the people with whom I was working that because I was trying to learn my language I was going to try to use *nîhiyawîwin* at work (followed by the English translation) as much as possible. So when one of them asked me a simple question, I would answer either “*îhiy*” or “*namoya*,” followed by the English translation of “yes” or “no.” Of course, it wasn’t practical in every conversation, especially because my job can be extremely technical and involve large volumes of information at times. But for the times when it fit, it was a great way to integrate *nîhiyawîwin* into my day and gain more congruence between my work and the language learning part of my life.



Figure 15. my second *nitânis* (daughter)

While this season of *nîpin* could certainly be seen as a dark time in my life and a serious regression in my language learning quest, it was also a time filled with life: the grace of my life continuing and the miraculous arrival of another *tânis*<sup>33</sup> (daughter). And, I did not quit completely. During my maternity leave, my health improved and I slowly

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<sup>33</sup> *tânis* is the generic form of daughter; the prefix ‘*ni*’ in *nitânis* denotes ‘my’ daughter.

began striving to learn new words and phrases to use with *nitânisak* (my daughters).

Figure 16 below is an example of a chart I created during this time using “baby signs”—images to remind myself of words and phrases for everyday language use with them.

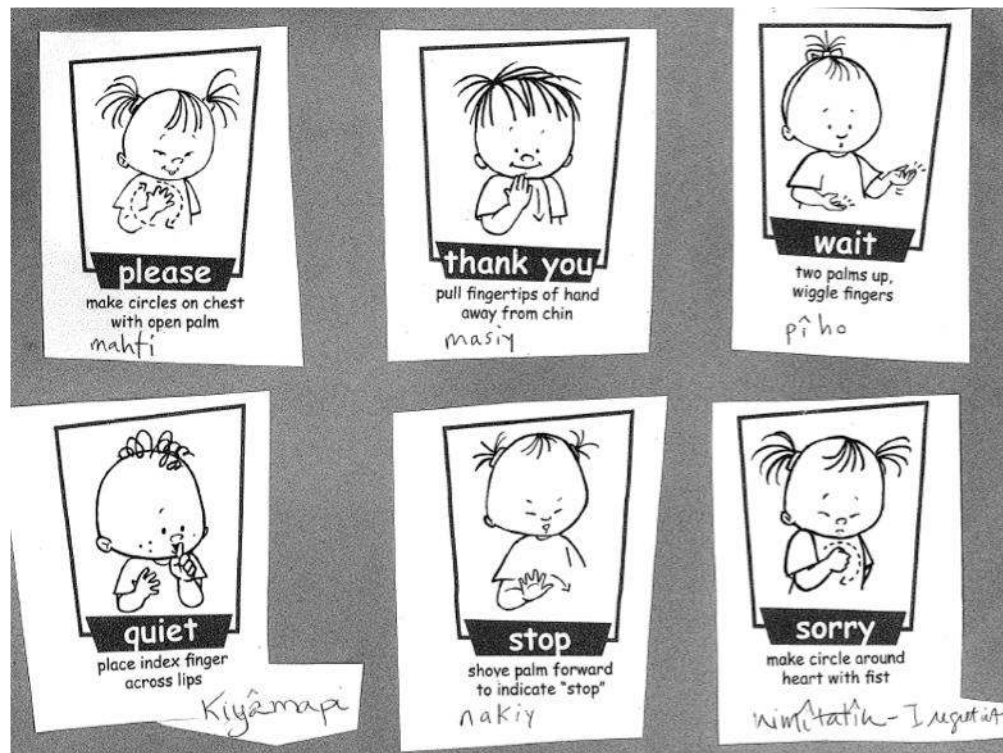


Figure 16. “Baby signs” posters

The most important lesson I received during these challenging times in my language learning journey was that it is okay to be derailed now and then; it *will* happen, but when it does, you must get back at it, and, most importantly, *kaya powiyo* (never give up)!

### ***takwâkin* (autumn)**

*takwâkin* is a time for preparation. The days are beginning to shorten and the nights are getting cooler. *takwâkin* is a gentle reminder that *pipon* is on its way. It is also a time of year in the natural world that signifies maturation, another cycle of growth coming to an end, which ultimately signals another cycle beginning. *takwâkin* represents the past two years of my journey, from early 2010 to *takwâkin* (fall) 2011, leading up to *anoch* (today)—the completion of this dissertation research. The following journal entry expresses my excitement at the start of this period of intensive focus on language learning.

*Journal Entry, January 2010*

*It is happening. It is really happening! My comps are handed in. Waiting to hear but will move on in the meantime. Spent my first real day setting up my “language lab.” Interesting that I am starting to see that this “language learning space” is necessary for me to BOOST my learning, while the ultimate goal is to integrate it in my home and with my family. For now, there is too much busyness there, phone ringing with English speakers on the other end, mail to read (in English), kids climbing over me (speaking English!) like I am an anthill. I eventually need to work toward home integration, but for now I need solitude to focus and get the fundamentals down.*

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The season of *takwâkin*, which comprised the two most productive language learning years in my journey to date, was strongly characterized by formal language learning. By my own self-assessment, my comprehension level and language production have increased as much in the last two years as they did in the previous ten years combined. For example, I am now able to understand high-frequency phrases,

communicate simple and routine instructions, and carry out tasks in familiar domains (mainly confined to the home).<sup>34</sup>

In February 2010, along with a small group of other dedicated adult *nîhiyawîwin* learners, I began another round of informal, community-based language classes led by my life partner/language mentor. This informal class was one factor behind the improvement in my language acquisition over the past two years. In this class, I experienced immersion-style lessons for the first time. We also were fortunate enough to have other *nîhiyawîwin* speakers periodically join our classes. Our hearts were filled and our spirits nourished by this opportunity to witness and experience our beautiful language being spoken in real time in our presence (a rarity for many Indigenous language learners in southern Canada). In fact, watching (and listening) to *nîhiyawîwin* speakers converse was one of the most useful experiences I have had in any language learning setting. Our teacher also included periodic grammar lessons about *nîhiyawîwin* (taught in English) in addition to the full immersion sessions. All of the learners in this group were working professionals and the mothers of young children; because our language learning needs and desires were fairly similar, we could create opportunities to focus on phrases that were congruent with our group members' lives. We focused on everyday commands related to eating, sleeping, bathing, playing, and general care giving. We also practiced ways of introducing ourselves publicly (as this was required by all of us for work) as well as phrases our teacher called "Survival Cree," such as:

*tânsi* \_\_\_\_\_ *îtwîn*? (How do you say \_\_\_\_\_ [in *nîhiyawîwin*]?)

*ninistohtîn*. (I understand.)

*namoya ninistohtîn*. (I don't understand.)

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<sup>34</sup> As a reminder, my full language self-assessment is included in the Success/Progress section of chapter five.

*kihtwâm itwiy mahti?* (Can you please repeat that?)

We also practiced greetings, but often just recited them rather than putting them into action in pairs. As a learner, I often craved more time to practice in class, but when I would suggest such ideas I would be told I am a bossy learner! This was a good reminder that, even though I was earning a doctorate in Indigenous second language learning as I learned our language, I am a lifelong student of our cultural ways; an important teaching is that respected knowledge keepers in these circumstances are in charge. Humility is an important teaching in *nîhiyaw* worldview, and showing respect for knowledge keepers is another.

During this season, I felt myself gaining confidence in the language and entrenching some of my basic language use at home and work. I was also beginning to see linguistic patterns in the language that I had not noticed before, something children learn unconsciously and adults tend to learn more consciously. Also, during my time in class, I began to seek out more resources to further my learning. I was particularly thrilled whenever I located resources that I thought I could use with my family, too. Sometimes the resources I located were useful, and other times not, as illustrated by the following story, which occurred in *miyôskamin* (springtime) 2010.

I was thrilled to discover on the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) a wonderful claymation program called *Wapos Bay*, made by a *nîhiyaw* couple from Saskatchewan. They sell the DVDs and the audio can be played in either *nîhiyawîwin* or English. What is even better is that, unlike a lot of First Nations language dub-overs, there are actually different actors playing the various roles (rather than the usual one voice for everyone), so the quality of viewing is equal in *nîhiyaw* and English. As I watched these videos I was excited by the possibilities of using them as a language

learning tool and having something child-focused to share with *nitânisak*! Now, for the story of introducing *Wapos Bay* in *nîhiyawîwin* to my family:

Our oldest daughter asked, "What is this voice, mama? Is it Spanish?"

"Darn that Dora," I thought! That cute little cartoon preschooler with her clever little Spanish word infusion has my daughter believing that any language that isn't English is Spanish!

I explain to her that the program is in *nîhiyawîwin* and that I am excited that we can watch it together and learn.

Later that day I told my partner, "DO NOT let them find out that you can also watch it in English. Let them believe it is only in *nîhiyawîwin* so that they have no choice but to watch it that way with me."

Later that week, I came home from work to find my partner watching *Wapos Bay* with *nitânisak*, translating every line into English! I thought I would lose my mind! So I asked him, "Why are you doing that?" And he said, "Well, because they don't understand and this way they enjoy it more!" He couldn't help himself from translating throughout the whole episode! Arghhh!

[Now do you see why they call me the bossy learner?]

Further foiled, a few months later I came home and *nitânis* came running up to me: "MOOOOOOM!!!!" she said, "GUESS WHAT????"

"*kîkway ôma* (What is it)?" I answered.

*nitânis*: "*Wapos Bay* is in English, too!"

I peered at my mom. "Mom," I said, "you weren't supposed to let them watch that DVD in English!"

Her reply: "What DVD? This program is on APTN."



And that was the end of *nîhiyawîwin Wapos Bay* at our house. Chalk one up for English dominance!

Following the intensive *nîhiyawîwin* class which ran that spring, *âciw* and I travelled to Montana to learn the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition approach (ASLA). We came home highly enthusiastic about what we had learned and started putting it into practice right away. I noticed myself making huge strides immediately because ASLA is structured to assist in developing sentences without reverting to using English. My journal entries indicate that I began thinking more in *nîhiyawîwin* at this time as well as challenging myself more to create sentences based on what I observed each day (in the house, on walks, etc.). The following photograph and journal entry illustrate this time when we integrated the ASLA approach both in our home and in our language learning and teaching practice.



Figure 17. ASLA approach on display in our living room

*Journal Entry, June 2010*

*Finally learned Greymorning's method! Much to report ... making HUGE strides in language learning since (with less concerted effort).... THINKING more in Cree, stopping myself from answering in Cree now (more and more often) when speaking to a non-Cree person (especially at work!), realizing that I am still saying some things in English (to the kids) that I know how to say in Cree (mental note!).*

Further to the infusion of ASLA into my self-directed language learning program, I also came to understand that while approaches such as these can assist with learning, there is no end-all, cure-all, one-stop solution for gaining the ability to speak in any second or subsequent language. The following journal entry emphasizes this realization.

*Journal Entry, June 2010*

*I realize now too, there is no magic bullet. Even if I am able to come up with a "plan" that is useful/helpful for other adult learners, I believe I will discover that the key elements will be **dedication/perseverance AND sacrifice**. If your life is already FULL, and you have a hard time taking up new hobbies or getting enough time for yourself (self-care, exercise, etc.), SOMETHING WILL have to be SACRIFICED. I am not saying give up your family or give up on your health, BUT IF your life is already full or overfull, SOMETHING will have to give as learning anything new (to play an instrument, a new craft, etc.) takes time, dedication, and focus. You will never learn your language by "fitting it in" wherever. You will have to cancel meetings and trips, sacrifice (some) time with your family, maybe give up TV or gaming, but remember that soon your family can be a part of it, you can begin to integrate what you are learning into your family life OR draw them in...*

According to my records, my language learning continued in this manner for the remainder of the winter and then waned a little as I pushed to complete my doctoral proposal. However, *miyôskamin* (early spring) 2010 brought another bright light of

hope! At that time, I serendipitously reconnected with *niwîcîwâkan* (my friend) Jackie who is also a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker. We started to have *maskîhkîwâpoy* (tea, literally medicine water) regularly until one day when the time was right I asked her, in *nîhiyaw* custom (with a tobacco offering), if she would help me learn our language by being my mentor. I was nervous and shy, but I was thrilled when she agreed! Jackie had never “taught” anyone the language before, and we journeyed together through the growing pains of learning how to both teach and learn, and we are still learning. The following story illustrates this learning from our early days as language master and apprentice.

I asked Jackie if she could help me to learn a simple prayer so that I can begin and end each day in our language during my smudge (prayer) time. Since she leads a prayerful life, she happily agreed. I asked if I could video-record her so that I could play the recording back and follow along as I committed the prayer to memory. She happily agreed to this, too. She stood up and became very serious. I stood up, too, and started to record. *Four minutes* later she ended the prayer. Those may have been the longest four minutes of my life! I was sweating bullets thinking, “*How* in the world I am every going to repeat that?” We have a good teasing relationship (as is the custom in *nîhiyaw* culture) and so I teased her, saying, “*Hola! Four minutes long!*” To which she replied, “*What? I don’t mess around when I pray!*” Indeed. She subsequently recorded another *four-sentence* prayer for me to practice, but I really enjoy listening to the “four-minute prayer” when I want to be washed in the language or have a good soul-cleansing laugh.

Around this same time, *âciw* was preparing to leave on a one-month work trip. I frantically followed him around until all hours of the night with a video camera recording various vignettes and trying to get ahead on the ASLA learning sets. In retrospect, this period served as a good example of a time when I was overly ambitious

(and likely overly tenacious) about my language learning. I often believe I can do more than I can (in many areas of my life). I am sure I have driven my mentors crazy at times with this blind ambition, and yet I know it is this same persistence that has helped me to continue with my language learning journey even in the face of adversity or less-than-favourable conditions.

Later in 2011, my language learning journals showed a noticeable increase in my verbal abilities to describe items and situations. My vocabulary set was increasing and I was moving from one-word utterances to short sentences. I attributed this progress, in my journals, to two main factors: the time with my female language mentor and the addition of the ASLA approach to my language learning strategies. My time with Jackie allowed me to practice speaking, to create situations for repetition, such as making her tea and toast, asking about her children, and playing cards in *nîhiyawîwin*. The addition of ASLA to my strategy seemed to benefit my learning in its use of photographs rather than written text and/or abstract oral input without tangible points of reference, as well as the oral practice and comprehension repetition built into the approach. The main benefits to me of this approach were a rapid increase in vocabulary and the ability to speak in sentences rather than single nouns or verbs. For example, in the past I could point to a dog and say *atim* (dog). After using ASLA, I could say phrases like *atim kâ pimpahtât* (the dog is running) and apply this to anything that is running. Yet, throughout this past year of documented language learning (and all of the years since my first daughter was born in 2006), the goal of creating a *nîhiyawîwin*-speaking home—my ultimate goal—continued to evade me.

The following journal entry, written last year during the latest period of more rapid progress in language learning, explores this goal I continue to hold and the relationship with language between *âciw* and me.

*Journal Entry, June 2011*

*My relationship with [âciw] developed out of mutual respect and love. I was not attracted to him simply because he was a speaker of our language. My dream since that time (and probably long before) was to have a Cree-speaking household because I knew that recreating a "language nest" in our home was the only hope of raising our children to understand and speak our language.*

*For a long time, I have felt like I have failed nitânisak. I never realized how difficult it would be to make nîhiyawîwin the language in our home regularly and consistently. English has remained dominant (for a number of reasons, including that our home is âciw's place of business, which he conducts entirely in English, our caregivers are all non-Cree speakers who use English with nitânisak, we have many English-only-speaking relatives who visit regularly, etc.).*

*But I know my language knowledge is increasing, as is my accent and my ability to use the language. Our eldest nitânisinân is at an age now that she is starting to openly resist learning when I try to teach her. But she has a good heart and aims to please, and so I just have to get her on board, keep finding ways to make it FUN (games, songs, etc.) and also foster her love of learning. Reminds me of a time not long ago when I was playing dollhouse with her and osîmis (her younger sister) and I made my character only speak Cree. She did not like it and kept getting frustrated, saying, "NO, MOM! We speak NORMAL here!"*

There are numerous other examples of how English continues to dominate our house and of our children's resistance to learning the language. However, I will share just a few here to illustrate the reality of our (often uphill) battle. The following journal entry is a typical example of my partner's habitual use of English and my attempts to

continue using *nîhiyawîwin* as much as possible, both to aid my learning journey and to immerse our children in the language in our home.

*Journal Entry, August 2011*

*A typical day at niwâskahikanân (our house):*

*âciw to the girls at breakfast: Would you like milk or water?*

*Onowa echoes: iskwîsisak, tohtôsâpoy ahpo nipiy (girls, milk or water)?*

*One answers tohtôsâpoy, the other nipiy.*

*Onowa: mistahay (BIG, meaning a lot!) tohtôsâpoy? (using body gesture for HUGE) ahpo (or) apisis (a little) tohtôsâpoy? [pinching my face and fingers together to indicate small]*

*Our youngest nitânis: apisis tâtôsapoy... (along with a mistahay smile)*

These kinds of moments are an important reminder that we have to make language learning fun or the girls will see it as a chore!

Near the end of my formally documented language learning journal, I continued to reflect on the progress I was making in the final two years and what was making such a difference. As mentioned, besides the addition of the ASLA approach, the equal if not more notable influence on my language learning cumulating in the fall of 2011 was the inclusion of a more formal master-apprentice program throughout that year. Although I attended a MAP workshop in 2006, none of my current mentors attended with me, and so up until the fall of 2011, despite providing both mentors with the MAP guide, I felt I was implementing the approach on my own. However, in the fall of 2011, my two language mentors were able to attend a MAP training workshop with me near Vancouver, BC. The approach seemed simple to them (and me): just spend time together in the language. What could be easier than that? However, it has proven over the years to be more difficult than I expected.

The biggest challenge I have had with MAP has been getting my mentors to speak *nîhiyawîwin*, stay in *nîhiyawîwin*, and undertake activities that are straightforward enough that I could understand the concepts and ideas they were conveying. Communication is such a strong, basic human desire that I have found it very challenging to work with this approach over the years because it is extremely unnatural (for them) not to communicate with me in the language we both already know. I needed to learn skills to politely and appropriately counteract my mentors' tendencies to communicate with me in English. Neither of my mentor-teachers has learned another language in their adult life, and therefore they have difficulty understanding the challenge of learning a new language. Additionally, although they both have an appreciation for our language, they both already know it, and I sense sometimes that they find teaching it to someone else a bit boring. I doubt this is uncommon for second-language teachers who, although they have a great love and appreciation for their L1, may grow weary of the labour-intensive work of teaching another adult, starting with beginner-level language.

The following journal excerpt provides an example of my observations of the master-apprentice program following some sessions with my mentors.

*Journal Entry, June 2011*

*It seems that both mentors prefer natural flow and spontaneity, and therefore the MAP is a bit odd to them because it is completely contrived. However, there does not seem to be another way. To describe things so explicitly (for example, making stew: "I am cutting the potatoes, now I am putting in the carrots, now I will stir the pot," etc.) is not the way Cree people naturally behave. In fact, most Elders hardly speak unless they are visiting with someone or telling a story while doing something.*

*However, the MAP training my mentors and I were able to attend together in the fall of 2011 did improve the use of the method between us greatly. The privilege of attending a two-day master-apprentice program training workshop with three fluent speakers (my two mentors and my sister-in-law) was an absolute highlight for me in this language learning journey and yet another “new beginning.” While I have attended MAP training in the past, I have never had the opportunity to do so with a mentor (let alone three!). The strength was in practicing techniques to stay in the language, eliciting language from my mentors, and learning activities to do together such as “reading” wordless books, playing cards, playing dolls, etc. This training has allowed my work with my mentors to flourish to a whole new level, enriched with much more language and more nîhiyawîwin communication.*

*I notice now that my language use at home is really increasing. This is the ultimate site for language continuation in my life, and it feels fantastic.*

Although the quality of learning and efficacy of effort spent in formal language-mentor sessions with âciw improved due to this training, it remained difficult to convince him to use the language regularly at home, and he was not the only member of my household who needed to be convinced, reminded, and cajoled into using nîhiyawîwin. I now have two very intelligent, articulate, and chatty young ladies who share our household and who both have preferences and ideas of their own about what language they would like to learn and speak. The following story is a conversation I had in takwâkin (fall) of 2001 with nitânis (my eldest daughter).

nitânis was showing some resistance to learning nîhiyawîwin, so I tried to explain to her how it made Mommy feel not to know our language as a child and a young person, and that I did not want her to feel this way.



Her answer: “It’s okay to me.” This was her way of saying, “It’s okay, Mom. I don’t need what you think I need. I am okay with this Disney-princess, Barbie-girl, English-speaking, I-want-to-go-to-the-mall-on-the-weekends-with-my-friends-world. It’s you who isn’t.”

And she’s right.

However, don’t we all want to pass on our values, beliefs, culture, and traditions to our children? How was this different from the fervent efforts of my partner and me to instill in her values of caring for the earth and helping an elderly person to cross the road?

So, I try again. “OK, honey. I respect how you feel. But *Mommy* really wants to learn *nîhiyawîwin*, and if I talk to you, read to you, and do other things with you in *nîhiyawîwin*, it helps me to learn. If you could let me talk to you and read to you in our language, it would help me to learn. You don’t have to answer back if you don’t want to. Would that be okay? Can you be Mommy’s helper?”

“Yes, mom, I will help you.”

Phew, one more battle won in the fight to bring our language to light in our family. Thankfully she is still at the “pleasing” stage of child development.

It does make me realize that this is *my* project, for me and not for her. At least that is the way she sees it. I don’t know (yet) if I can change this, but I do hope that someday it *will* matter to her. That perhaps she will someday benefit from my efforts.

More formal language learning signified this season of my journey. It continued to be driven by the motivation of creating a *nîhiyawîwin*-speaking home and offering *nitânisak* access to a language and culture that I believe will strengthen and enhance their lives in immeasurable ways. The successes I found in this season of my language

learning journey are largely due to the presence, patience, and perseverance of two language mentors to whom I will be forever grateful.

***ikosi (that is all)***

My language learning journey began with a tribute to and acknowledgement of my ancestors and my children's ancestors on their father's side of the family. I come full circle here to honour and give thanks to two other sets of people who have provided both motivation and challenge throughout my journey: my children and my language mentors.

Mentorship has been a huge part of this final stage of my journey; without it, I would not have progressed to have the ability to carry out short conversations, follow many instructive commands, and direct my daughters' daily routines in *nîhiyawîwin*. While programs like *Rosetta Stone* exist (albeit for fewer than a handful of Indigenous languages in North America and at a huge cost), I simply cannot imagine being able to learn *nîhiyawîwin* without a speaker (or two!) to listen to, learn from, and communicate with in the language. Because of this and the significance of the two language mentors in my life, my story would not be complete without the inclusion of their stories.

I am compelled to write about my mentors with what Ellis calls "an ethic of care" (2009, p. 16). It is always far easier to detect and point out others' shortcomings than it is to examine our own. For that reason I have made every effort to place the majority of emphasis in this autoethnographic account of my language learning journey, particularly the failures, on me. However, for our languages to continue we must also consider the perspective of our language teachers, mentors, and other helpful speakers and the difficulties they may have in being a part of keeping our languages alive. It is in this light and from a place of utmost respect and honour that I offer these vignettes of my perspective on the contributions and challenges of my two language mentors.

Both of my mentors had primary caregivers who spoke *nîhiyawîwin* to them exclusively from birth, yet neither made *nîhiyawîwin* the language of their home while raising their children. Both express some regret about that. It makes me angry when I see this regret because, for example, Jackie spent eight years in residential school where the love for and worth of her language were taken away. She experiences feelings of loss for not having passed the language on to her children, and then she is hard on herself for not having passed it on. All roads lead to “blame the victim.” Canada’s apology for the residential schools in 2008 came with no commitment to the survivors for how the government was going to take responsibility for returning the languages.

As mentioned, my male language mentor *âciw*, is also my life partner. Many may see having a speaker in the same house as a distinct advantage to learning a language, and undoubtedly in many ways it is. The main advantage I have found is the opportunity to realize the goal of creating a new site for language use: the home. However, I am conscious of the challenges and difficulties this arrangement poses. For example, our home is also the main site for our children’s care, and they and their caregivers converse in English. In addition, patience and communication can be the most difficult aspects of any life-partner relationship, and adding to it a language learning project that often involves a high level of frustration for both parties at times calls for developing an even more heightened set of skills.

Both of my language mentors bring many gifts into my life, of which the language is just one. I am extremely grateful to both of them for their willingness and dedication to helping me learn our beautiful language. I cannot imagine another way to learn an Indigenous language in an urban situation that would result in meaningful, sustainable, and useful language learning than having a speaker from whom to learn and with whom to talk. This is not to discourage those who do not have access to a speaker. Much can be

done, increasingly with internet and digital learning tools. I think the language will become more accessible for independent learners as time goes on. However, I was not able to make any meaningful progress in my language learning until my mentors came into my life. Before that, I was learning more *about* the language than I was actually *learning* the language. My ability to create sentences, to actually communicate in the language was so limited that I would not be anywhere near where I am today without them both. *ninanâskomitinâwâw* (I am grateful to you both).



Figure 18. My language learning mentors, *âciw* and Jackie

For new learners and for striving, seeking learners whose goals are to learn to speak your language, my best advice is to learn all you can about second-language learning so that you can create the most effective learning experiences that you can, and find a mentor (or two!) who is willing to work with you, either near or from afar (on the phone, over Skype) so that you can HEAR the language and have someone to practice speaking with.

And so the cycle begins again. I am *living* my children's childhood history that they will reflect on in *their* adulthood. This story will become my grandchildren's ancestry, another layer of soil on which they will stand and someday ponder. This

knowledge continues to motivate me to do the best I can with this life I have been given, for my children and for generations to come. And perhaps the most important question I am left with, the question we all must answer is, *What story will my children and their children tell?*



**Figure 19.** *nitânisak*

## Chapter 5. *kîkwaya kê miskamân*

(what I have found)

This dissertation documents the journey of one *nîhiyaw-iskwiw* (Cree woman) with ancestral language learning. The introduction, literature review, and methodology chapters were followed by the autoethnographic story of my journey with Indigenous language learning. This chapter's intention is to engage with that story, and the records that were used to create it, in an exercise of meaning making, highlighting what can be learned from this story. This is a process and product that Ellis (2009) calls meta-autoethnography, whereby the autoethnographic author reflects on her story and draws out findings, often interweaving these conclusions with relevant scholarly literature. Ellis (2009) describes her process of creating meta-narrative as seeking "to provide a framework that marks and holds the scenes in place ... one that moves from beginning to end and circles back to the beginning again" (p. 13). I see congruence between her process and results and the process I followed to create this meta-autoethnography; I designed the dissertation to mirror the seasons.

The dissertation is grounded equally in autoethnographic traditions and Indigenous research methodology. Therefore, while following the research genre of meta-autoethnography to present the knowledge that emerges from the story, I have attended to Indigenous research methodology principles as well. While a dissertation bears a responsibility to make a scholarly contribution toward the creation of new knowledge, Indigenous scholarship also bears a responsibility to present this knowledge in a way that is accessible to Indigenous people beyond those in academia (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Therefore, this chapter is intentionally written in the most accessible manner possible, while remaining in dialogue with the scholarly literature.

The specific audience within the Indigenous community that remained firmly in my thoughts throughout this chapter's creation was other adult Indigenous language learners, particularly those in urban settings. My hope is that relating my experiences to the academic literature will, for these learners, debunk myths, demystify the language learning process, normalize adult learners' experiences, reduce anxiety, provide hope and encouragement for what is possible, and empower them through access to second language acquisition (SLA) research.

Each of this chapter's sections relates to an understanding that emerged from this research. The sections include both analytic summaries and responses to patterns and epiphanies that emerged from the records I kept of my journey. Taken together, this chapter's sections create a meta-narrative that gives meaning to my story, which I have presented throughout the dissertation but most specifically in chapter four. Each section is a conversation between the literature and my reflections on the understandings that were offered to me over the course of this autoethnographic language learning study. I use the word "offered" purposefully because, although the understandings arose from various layers of reflection on my research records, much of what has resulted was offered to me as gifts from my ancestors; therefore, I cannot take personal credit for all that I have learned from this journey. New knowledge often comes as an offering rather than something we "create."

This chapter was heavily influenced by three sets of creative autoethnographic/narrative scholarly works: those of Carolyn Ellis (2009), Patti Lather and Chris Smithies (1997), and Erica Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, and Carl Leggo (2009). As in Ellis's example of meta-autoethnography, I sought to "to reposition readers of social science research, evoking feeling and identification as well as cognitive processing" (p. 140). Lather and Smithies use angels as a metaphor to create an



“intertext” they position between sets of stories of women living with HIV/AIDS; in similar fashion, the sections within this chapter are meant “as both bridges and breathers” (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvii) from and with the previous chapter. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo’s narrative styles of interweaving poetry and storytelling with academic literature was also formative in my creation of this chapter, with its focus on creative and scholarly meaning making. The chapter is offered as meta-commentary on the preceding autoethnographic chapter, as well as a demonstration of conversation with the academic literature in the areas that are covered in this study.

Congruent with the interdisciplinary nature of this research, the understandings that arise from this study relate to various fields. Several are grounded in SLA concepts, while others relate to decolonization or to Indigenous language revitalization studies. Some are more organic in nature and particular to this journey. The understandings relate to motivation, age, identity, affect, barriers and challenges, the urban reality, decolonization, promising practices, success/progress, assessment, and learner characteristics (headed “What does it take?”).

### ***Motivation***

Through observing my own journey and through personal communication with others on similar journeys, I have come to understand that adult Indigenous language learners have to be highly motivated to succeed, for two reasons. One is that very few adult Indigenous language learning programs are readily available for one to engage with; therefore, for the learning process to begin and continue, self-initiation is essential. The other is that most Indigenous adults who are interested in learning their language tend to be busily engaged in other activities, such as full-time work and family care giving (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Adults who undertake language learning must

recognize that it requires sacrifice and often life changes to open up space for this endeavour.

Research shows that very few second-language learners develop the ability to speak the target language if they are not highly motivated (Newcombe & Newcombe, 2001). Moreover, beyond whatever initially motivated the learner, there must be factors that *continue* to motivate. Although it is plausible that the same factors that provided initial motivation could remain the primary motivators, researchers note that motivations to learn a second language often evolve (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). Regardless of whether the motivations are new or old, one or more factors must be found that will sustain the language learning effort and override the tremendous struggles and time sacrifices of the language learning process. The process can be uncomfortable, owing to an aching brain or a twisted tongue, or even painful because of healing that must take place. To express this more simply, the benefits must outweigh the sacrifices, a process that Ortega (2009) recognizes is mutually reinforcing: once one begins to notice benefit(s) from the language learning efforts (such as the enjoyment of speaking, satisfaction from learning something new, or hearing improvement in one's pronunciation), the motivation to continue will strengthen.

While motivation is a key to success, recent research questions how *much* motivation is necessary and investigates whether the *qualities* of motivation matter more in learning outcomes (Ortega, 2009). To expand on the concept of quality versus quantity in motivation research, several authors identify the following motivators for adult second-language learning: to expand work prospects; to increase opportunities for travel; to be able to speak to family members and friends who speak the target language; and to gain access to or acceptance in a particular cultural group (Basham & Fathman, 2008; Newcombe & Newcombe, 2001).

I have observed throughout my language learning journey and through conversations with other adult Indigenous second language learners that we (as a learning group) are almost always motivated to learn our languages by one of three factors: to fulfill a cultural identity emptiness that exists due to a historic dislocation from land, family, or community; to be able to understand and communicate with Elders in their first language; and/or to be able to speak to one's children or make the language of one's home the Indigenous language. Basham and Fathman (2008) support this understanding in the conclusions they draw from a language survey they conducted with Indigenous adults. The three main motivations they cite are "preservation of the language and culture, desire to teach children and desire to communicate with Elders" (p. 589).

Motivation has also been a topic of great interest within the field of SLA research. Gardner and Lambert (1972) published the first research in this area, and their ideas remained prominent for several decades before coming under scrutiny for being too narrow in scope (Dörnyei, 2009; Ortega, 2009). This revisiting of motivation research brought new perspectives that culminated in many useful findings. One that is most relevant to Indigenous adult language learning is the juxtaposing concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Intrinsic motivation, understood to be learning "for the sheer sake of learning" (Ortega, p. 176) is considered to have the best outcomes for language learning (Vansteenkiste et al.). The alternative "means-end" (Ortega, p. 176) type of motivation is extrinsic, with aims such as opportunities for foreign travel, better jobs, or higher pay. This type of motivation is considered to be the least successful in producing impressive outcomes in language learning (Ortega, 2009). The implication of this research for adult Indigenous language learners is that because very few extrinsic motivations exist, the motivations of most

Indigenous language learners are almost exclusively intrinsic in nature. That bodes well for future initiatives involving adult Indigenous language learners given the research on successful outcomes of intrinsically motivated individuals. Yet, motivation is only one among a number of factors that contribute to the outcomes of second language learning attempts. In the following sections, other factors such as identity, age, and affect are explored.

### ***Identity***

Thomas Ricento, like other SLA researchers such as Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004), recognizes language as the “prominent marker of group membership and social identity” (Ricento, 2005, p. 896). While discussing the concept of “ethnic revival,” Bernard Spolsky (1999) asserts, “language is fundamental in defining identity” (p. 181). Spolsky provides the example of the Zionist program for the resurrection of Hebrew for those of Jewish descent, citing the slogan of the time, “You’re Hebrew, speak Hebrew” (p. 183). This point is well illustrated by Zuengler and Miller’s (2006) contention that for some language learners there is “much more at stake than merely developing competence in an additional linguistic code” (p. 43).

Whether we recognize it or not, the language(s) we speak clearly has a huge impact on our identity and sense of self. Bonny Norton (2000) was one of the first second-language-learning researchers to connect identity with language learning. Her early work focused on new immigrants, and therefore identifies some issues that do not apply to Indigenous language learners, such as resisting second-language learning (in the case of immigrants, the dominant language) as a strategy of maintaining current cultural identity. In contrast, Indigenous learners are actively seeking second-language learning to maintain their cultural identity. Further, while new immigrant language

learners may experience opposing urges to resist the dominant language but to integrate into the mainstream society for purposes of economic survival or other reasons, Indigenous language learners who are grounded in the self-determination/decolonization movement are often attempting to detach and distance their spirits from the dominant colonial society (through language learning, among other means), rather than seeking to be accepted by or integrate with it (Kipp, 2000; Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005). Following a long history of battles with assimilation, Indigenous second language learners are a population that is at best tolerant of dominant society, and at worst, strongly resentful of it. Still, there are many aspects of Norton's work and that of others who followed from which Indigenous language learners can learn a great deal, such as the strong connection between language and cultural identity and the strategies with which to either pursue or maintain identity through language.

Clearly cultural identity was a huge and important factor in my language learning quest. In her book about mixed-race Indigenous people, Bonita Lawrence (2004) observes that "many urban Native people, whether they are mixed-race or not, are insecure about their identities primarily because of loss of language and culture" (p. 177). Many Indigenous people, including myself, feel a deep sadness at not being able to speak our language, and at times we feel that we are judged as "not real Indians." Researcher Margaret MacDonald (2009) records Halq'eméylem language teacher Bibiana Norris saying, "My mom always used to say that without your language you are only half a person" (p. 59). Anishinaabe author Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (2003) recalls an Elder's testimonies collected for the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

What kind of Indian are you? Don't know the language. Can't even speak the language. You're not Indian unless you speak the language. Only real Indians

speaking the language. You will never understand what it is to be Indian unless you speak the language. (p. 96)

Including these statements in this discussion on identity does not imply that I agree with the charge that you are not Indigenous if you do not speak your language. However, it is a point of view that is not altogether uncommon; therefore, it is important to acknowledge its existence and potential impact on learners.

In regards to the impact of my early attempts to learn *nîhiyawîwin*, my first efforts were so unsuccessful that it is difficult to imagine that they had much impact on my identity development. I really did not have much success with language learning until about five years after my first attempts to learn. However, as the years passed by and I was expressly reconnecting with my culture by visiting my homelands and Elders in my family, my cultural identity became increasingly stable. Still, I found myself often seeking and longing for more.

Patrick and Tomiak (2008) offer an explanation for this phenomenon in their article about urban Inuit people in Ottawa: “Language is often a key to reclaiming Indigenous identities” (p. 66). Through my desire to be more connected to my ancestors and to my people, language learning has no doubt played a large role in the development of my cultural identity. I no longer feel culturally empty and lost, nor is my journey complete. Rather than a huge gap, I now feel as if I have a strong web within me (and around me) and that my processes and life efforts now just fill in the spaces in the web or spin new threads. While my journey with language has contributed positively to my cultural identity development, the relationship between language and identity in my life is now mutually reinforcing—because my cultural rootedness is stronger, my language learning is more successful, and because I am becoming a better *nîhiyawîwin* speaker, my identity as a *nîhiyaw-iskwîw* (Cree woman) is strengthening. In conclusion,

both the quest and the language learning itself have contributed significantly to strengthening my cultural identity, an outcome that has important implications for other adult Indigenous language learners. Appreciating the power of strong cultural identities and the role that ancestral language learning plays in building them holds great potential for Indigenous people.

### ***Age***

It has been commonly believed that there is a “critical period” for language learning in childhood, the implication being that adulthood is an inferior life stage for second or subsequent language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006) due to perceived neurobiological limitations. While there is evidence, such as non-native-like accents, to support less “success” in post-pubescent language learners, evidence also exists which demonstrates that adults are capable of becoming highly functional and proficient in another language, given the right conditions. However, the second-language proficiency levels attained by adults are highly variable in terms of both conditions and outcomes. This misperception of a critical period for language learning that makes it impossible for people to learn a language as well as children often occurs at the expense of adult learners’ belief in themselves and therefore deters capable learners from attempting to learn a new language. In addition, this commonly held perception undoubtedly has impacts on funding decisions made by government and other organizations when forming policy on the types of language programs to support.

While the experience and outcomes of adult learning of *any* language vary widely, documented cases of highly successful adult language learning do exist (Leonard, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Ortega, 2009). In fact, Lightbown and Spada (2006) report that some studies of adult second-language learning have found that “older learners are

more efficient than younger learners” (p. 69). By using their “meta-linguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem-solving skills,” older learners “make the most” of second-language instruction (p. 69).

Despite these potential advantages, as an adult learner I definitely sense limitations to my learning that likely were not present in childhood. Beyond the actual or perceived limitations of language learning itself, such as memorization capacity, accent development, and ability to integrate the pattern of the new language, one of the greatest challenges to language learning as an adult is time. The reality is that language learning takes time and effort. The luxury of being able to learn an Indigenous language in Canada in a “real” immersion environment (comparable to an immersion experience living with a Spanish-speaking family in Mexico or a French-speaking workplace in Quebec) is rare. Consequently, every adult who wants to learn an Indigenous language in southern Canada today must make time for that learning in their everyday English- or French-language life. We are a time-starved society, however; time is the new currency. Young to middle-aged adults, who are often the keenest adult learners, are also in their prime career-building, earning years and their prime child-rearing years, both of which add additional time pressures (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). These circumstances certainly resonate with me. As described in chapter four, the realities of raising children while engaging in part-time work and university studies (typical of this life stage) were tremendous challenges for me in meeting my language learning goals. Further, demographic trends show that Indigenous people have larger families than other Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2008), which means that the caregiving responsibilities of many would-be language learners are even more onerous.

One message I hope that other adult learners, program designers, and funding bodies will obtain from this dissertation research is that we—this generation of adult



Indigenous language learners, the generation between the last living speakers of our languages and the children who are the greatest hope for the continuation of our languages—needs to be seen as the *missing* link, not the *weakest* link.

## ***Affect***

Affect in second-language learning “refers to feelings, motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 37). These states both influence the learning and are influenced by the experience and outcomes of second-language learning (Ortega, 2009), which creates an internal feedback loop. Ortega uses the following words to explain common affective responses to second-language learning: “threat to one’s ego ... vulnerable ... embarrassed and frustrated” (p. 192). Throughout my language learning journey, I have experienced all of these emotions and states of mind (and more!) and have witnessed the effects on my language learning efforts. While there are many aspects to research on affect as it pertains to second-language learning, I have focused on just a few that most prominently surfaced in my study.

My first encounter with affective factors in language learning was during a “predecisional phase” (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008), during which I undertook a necessary journey to mentally, spiritually, and emotionally prepare for my language learning journey. This included healing family-of-origin wounds through counselling, incorporating regular spiritual practices, such as smudging and praying, into my life, gathering language learning resources, and attempting to make space in my mind and my life for language learning. This period allowed me to lay the foundation for a more favourable (internal and external) environment for undertaking the learning of my maternal ancestral language. Beyond this initial period of preparation, once my intensive language learning began in 2004, I experienced various emotions which I

observed affected the language learning itself: anxiety, embarrassment, vulnerability, frustration, self-defeat, hopelessness, and despair at the seemingly impossible task of learning my language in the city, out of territory, in a relentlessly English-dominated world.

Most of the anxiety I have felt has been about trying to “remember everything” and “get it right.” I most often felt embarrassed when I couldn’t understand what a speaker was saying to me, or when I attempted to say something and got it wrong (sometimes horribly wrong in the case of unintentionally saying something offensive).

Vulnerability, on the other hand, for me has been a two-sided affective factor. In the early days, I was vulnerable about my cultural identity, which manifested as an internal dialogue that every correction made to my speech was “an attack” on my “Indianness” and further evidence that I was not brown or Indian “enough.” Yet, Lightbown and Spada (2006) consider certain kinds of vulnerability *necessary* for language learning. However, the kind of vulnerability they discuss is of allowing oneself to sound “funny” and make mistakes. This kind of vulnerability does not come easily to me in language learning situations, and at times language learning has made me feel “dumb,” “slow,” and “child-like,” which is difficult when you are a highly capable person in many other ways. Yet, I recognize that allowing my child-like side to come out and “play,” being willing to sound “funny” and make mistakes has worked wonders for advancing my attempts to learn *nîhiyawîwin*.

Frustration has probably been the strongest and most debilitating emotion that has affected my language learning. At times, it has caused me to shut down and give up, and it has caused tension for me with my language mentors, which does not contribute positively to my language learning. Learning that frustration is a natural part of

language learning—and learning how to handle it effectively so that it does not inhibit further learning—remains an ongoing challenge for me.

Feelings of self-defeat, hopelessness, and despair, although infrequent, were strong emotions when they came. At times my progress seemed slow, or the learning opportunities irregular and the influence of English so strong that I needed to acknowledge the feelings and work through them in order to carry on with my language learning goals.

All of these emotions affected my language learning abilities in various ways and at different times. They are shared here in the hope that other adult learners may reflect on their own journey and feel validated in the emotions they may feel while taking on the courageous work of learning their language. As conveyed by So (2004), “the successful management of one’s emotions, or affective factors ... can lead to successful learning” (p. 44). Like all adult learners, I have had to learn (and I continue to learn) how to manage the various emotions that arise through the language learning process. At times I am more successful than at others. When I am well-rested, less stressed about other things, and noting progress or more confidence in my learning, I am at my best for language learning. When I am lacking sleep, distracted, or feeling discouraged about my progress, I have a greater tendency to down-spiral into frustration, blame (of self or others), and hopelessness. Thankfully, however, my sustaining motivators have been strong enough that, even when I have not been able to recover in the moment, I have continued to return to the learning when I am able. However, with all of this said, developing “thicker skin” and accepting that my mentor(s) may not always be able to teach in my preferred way of learning continues to be another of my greatest affective challenges. I hope that naming, acknowledging, and normalizing the emotions that

inhibited me will help other language learners to overcome these emotions and further their goal of language learning.

### ***Barriers and challenges***

Lightbown and Spada (2006) inform us that adults can make “considerable and rapid progress towards mastery of a second language” when given the opportunity to use the language in “social, personal, professional, or academic” contexts (p. 73). In relation to this declaration, a primary challenge to my learning has been the dominance of English and the lack of opportunities and domains in which to use *nîhiyawîwin*. In western Canada, where I have lived all my life, English language use is pervasive. It dominates television channels, radio stations, newspapers, printed literature, and road signs, is the language of instruction in most public schools and the language of business and commerce of most western Canadian cities (with exceptions, such as certain areas of Greater Vancouver), and it is rapidly becoming the dominant global language as well (Crystal, 1997, 2000). Therefore, the social and personal domains are the only ones available to adult Indigenous language learners in most of Canada, which greatly diminishes long-term and widespread possibilities for real Indigenous language revitalization across the nation.

Another prominent challenge I have faced is obtaining adequate oral language input. Until the final year of this twelve-year journey, I had heard so very little of our language that it was little wonder I was not yet a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker. The language I had been exposed to was often taught through translation (e.g., *atim* is dog) and dominated by grammatical teaching in English *about* the language. I have felt for years that I have lacked the kind of exposure and repetition I needed to become a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker. In the quest for adequate oral input, one must find either volumes of

recordings or mentor-teachers. Although oral recordings can be a big help, they will never speak back to you or challenge your understanding of a certain word or phrase in a different context. That is, recordings do not provide complex language opportunities or socialization in the language.

Several additional challenges experienced during this language learning journey have been the cultural valuing of silence over speech, and the challenge of learning two dialects simultaneously. In regard to silence over speech, which is an inherent *nîhiyaw* way of being, knowing that language learning requires oral practice brought the unnatural circumstance of pushing my mentors to speak (or speaking myself) during times when there would normally be silence. An example of this was provided in the Journal Entry from June 2011 in chapter four on making stew with my mentor. Related to this challenge, respected knowledge keepers (normally Elders) are traditionally not asked questions directly by younger community members; however, it is known to be important for language learner to be able to ask questions, suggest topics, and produce language interactively, again creating an unnatural and potentially offensive situation while language learning. Learning two dialects simultaneously has been an additional challenge as I am often learning two words for new concepts (e.g., me = *niya* or *nitha*) and also trying to remember to code-switch when speaking to each of my mentors, doing my best to stay in their mother dialect.

While having language mentors in my life has been the single greatest asset in my journey, their ability to assist in my language learning has been limited in several ways. Neither of my mentors has an understanding or appreciation of second-language learning research and the canon of knowledge that exists about what is required of both teacher and student to facilitate a successful second-language learning experience. I would estimate this is more often the case than not for Indigenous mentor-teachers.

Most mentor-teachers in our communities have not learned another language since childhood; in my experience, this greatly hampers their ability to understand the learner's situation. In addition, mentor-teachers are unlikely to actively study how second languages are learned and therefore how to mentor and teach in a way that will create a new language speaker. (In the case of my two mentors, however, it is worth noting that their recent involvement and training in the MAP approach has assisted them to become more reflexive and multidimensional teachers.)

Last, it is not just the learner's time that is a challenge, as explained in the section "Age" above. During my language learning journey, my mentors' time has frequently been a challenge as well. Many of our best language speakers are also fully engaged in other paid work and/or caregiving responsibilities. They are often busy working, studying, or caregiving; therefore, locating a language speaker who is willing to work with you and finding time in their schedule can be a challenge.

Expanding on the issue of time, life circumstances brought some additional challenges for me over the past few years that relate to time but equally to lack of intellectual space and energy for language learning due to my other intellectual school and work demands. For instance, although this is in some ways ironic, undertaking a doctoral-level study of myself learning *nîhiyawîwin* has at times detracted from my progress in the language learning itself. I found I was often saturated with new information, leaving little mental and emotional energy to absorb even *more* new information. My learning has been additionally hampered by the intellectual demands of my high-responsibility academic position for the past three years. These factors underscore the necessity for adequate intellectual "space" for learning a new language.

### ***Urban reality***

This language learning project was rooted in an urban reality, which has been a key feature of my language learning quest. I am a third generation “off-reserve” *nîhiyaw-iskwîw*. My family’s use of our ancestral language ceased in the small northern Ontario town to which my maternal grandparents moved after World War II, and I am working hard to regain it on the rocky shores of southern Vancouver Island. What has further significance about the urban context of my language learning story is that it is part of a greater demographic shift of Indigenous people toward urban areas all across Canada. This trend links my story to the stories of the more than half of all Indigenous people in Canada who are now living off reserve in urban or rural areas of the country (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Whereas life in an urban centre is a reality for me and 54% of “Aboriginal” people in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008), it does present challenges to language learning, of which I will focus on three. The first is the lack of access to speakers of the target Indigenous language when out of territory. (That is not to say that all people who are living off reserve are living out of territory, but it was my experience and assuredly is the experience of countless other adult Indigenous language learners.) The reality is that there are likely to be fewer speakers of the target language away from the home communities, and the farther one is from their home territory, the fewer speakers there will be. Second, living away from one’s home community or communities (in my case they are plural) diminishes the prospects of creating a community of speakers, another useful component of successful and sustainable adult Indigenous language learning. Third, Indigenous languages are tied to the land and territory; therefore, learning out of territory brings additional challenges. For example, the *nîhiyaw tipiskâw-pîsim* (Cree

moon) observed in May is *sâkipakâwipîsim* (leaf-budding moon), when in Victoria the trees normally begin to bud in February.

This tie of language and culture to territory is an important factor in learning language out of place, and at times it led to some confusion for me. To explain, a large part of living culturally is being tied to your environment—that is, to the land and water beneath you—yet my attempts to learn more about my culture often left me feeling disconnected from *this* territory in which I live. For instance, *nîhiyaw* spring and fall seasons translate to break-up (when the ice on lakes and rivers is starting to thaw, crack, and separate) and freeze-up (when the lakes and rivers are freezing over), but these events do not occur in the territory in which I live, leaving me with a feeling of disconnect when learning the name for those “months.” One might wonder if the greater point about Indigenous language survival is whether it should matter which Indigenous language one learns. Would it not make better sense to learn the SENĆOTEN or Lekwungen language while living on Coast and Straits Salish land? For many allies and fellow Indigenous language learners, that would be a valiant and admirable goal. Learning the language of the territory in which you live is one of the highest signs of respect one can offer the original people of the land on which we work, learn, and play. Yet, my desire and pull is to learn *my* language.

Obviously, for me, language learning is strongly tied to ancestral heritage and identity. Mary Young (2003) explains how she felt when she first heard *Anishinaabemowin* spoken by fellow students at residential school. Although she could speak her language and therefore had a different connection to it than I have had to mine, her description of her feelings closely mirrors my experience of hearing *nîhiyawîwin* now: “Hearing them literally stopped me in my track ... something awoke



my spirit, my being and the language I heard sounded reassuring and soothing. My heart was immediately happy” (Young, 2003, p. 2).

Urban life (and other forms of off-reserve life, such as rural) is a reality for more than half of the Indigenous population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008), which is a challenge for Indigenous language learning but should not impede it entirely. However, it will require attention, organization, and complex solutions to ensure that, if the trend of migration away from reserves continues, we do not leave Indigenous language revival, including adult Indigenous language learning, to only those living on reserve (Baloy, 2011; Norris & Jantzen, 2003).

### ***Decolonization***

*When you are an [I]ndigenous person and aware of your political surroundings, you have to engage. It's tiring. It's exhausting, infuriating. That's the dance, man. And you are born into it.* (Mohawk/Tuscarora poet-artist Janet Rogers, interviewed by Reiswig, 2011, p. 32)

This section honours three important parts of my language learning journey, which links Indigenous language learning to the political, and, more specifically, to the Indigenous decolonization movement. The first is my acknowledgement that “being Indian ... is inherently political, and ... to know our colonization is inherently political” (Million, 2011, p. 316). Acknowledging this reality has allowed me to be true to myself, to allow the parts of me that wanted to strengthen my cultural identity to align with the parts of me that seek social justice for my people. Integrating these two parts of myself has allowed me to act with integrity by “walking the walk,” taking up the charge of reviving Indigenous languages in a very personal and direct way.

Second, this research study is linked to decolonization through the opportunity it allowed me to honour my responsibility to make a contribution to the Indigenous self-determination movement. I have heard it said that every time we use our language we engage in a political act. I certainly have come to believe that this is true. The Indigenous languages of the land now known as Canada have been under assault for more than 100 years. This research project actively seeks to create at least one path towards their revival.

Several authors tackle the link between language and power, which is ultimately linked to the experience of colonization. All hold relevance for the reality of Indigenous language revival in Canada. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) explain that “ideologies of language are not about language alone but are always socially situated and tied to questions of identity and power” (p. 11). Kinginger (2004) theorizes that the US has a “widespread and deeply held suspicion toward multilingualism” (p. 221) and that, although Canada is officially a bilingual country, Indigenous languages (and many other languages spoken by Canadians) are largely dismissed and ignored. Kinginger (2004) offers the following possible reason for governments’ disdain for multilingualism: “Speakers of languages other than English must be assimilated, for their competence is dangerous and divisive” (p. 221). Blackledge (2004) explains, from the British context, that “when the dominant majority insists that the ideal model of society or nation is monolingual, we immediately encounter questions about identity and group membership” (p. 68). While the policies and contexts in the US and Britain differ somewhat from those in Canada, the resulting lack of support for and valuation of languages other than English (and French, in the Canadian context) is similar.

Finally, linking this journey to the decolonization movement allows me to contribute to reviving Indigenous languages, apart from my responsibility to the self-

determination movement but rather to the parallel language- and culture-driven movement to revive and maintain Indigenous languages in Canada and the US (and beyond). It is widely believed that Indigenous culture is housed in Indigenous language (Kirkness, 1998), and several authors express concern that so many world voices are being lost (Davis, 2009; Hale, 2001; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). These are the realities that continue to motivate those who are a part of the Indigenous language revival movement around the world. The story of the grievous effect on my family of the century-long assault on Indigenous languages is only one story. My hope is that sharing my story will encourage and empower other adult Indigenous language learners and activists to know they are not alone and that we can be a part of the goal of reviving and maintaining *all* of the Indigenous languages in Canada.

### ***Promising practices***

While there are many different approaches to adult second-language learning, all have their merits and limitations (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In my language learning journey, I have included both formal and informal language learning approaches. The informal approaches included activities such as listening to recordings and studying written *nîhiyaw* resources such as dictionaries and workbooks. Of the formal approaches I have used, I drew most extensively on two and found their most profound contribution to my journey lay in their combined use. The two approaches were the Master-Apprentice Program (MAP) and the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA). While these approaches have not yet been systematically studied, I included them in this study due to their prominence as adult Indigenous language learning approaches in both Canada and the US, with both reporting excellent results (First

Peoples' Heritage, Language, and Culture Council, 2010a, 2010b; Greymorning 2010a, 2010b; Hinton, 2008a; Sarkar & Metallic, 2009).

Although one goal of this dissertation is to further the understanding of the use of these two approaches for adult Indigenous language learning in Canada, their inclusion was intentionally not evaluative in nature; therefore, I did not set out to “test” either approach thoroughly. Rather, I wanted to highlight the approaches because they are so widely used in North America, and to comment on their strengths and challenges based on my own experiences.

Through reviewing my research records, I have summarized the following main advantages and contributions that MAP has made to my language learning journey: identifying and providing everyday sites for language use; presenting more opportunities to hear the language in real-life contexts; offering more opportunities to practice speaking the language in various contexts (public and private); providing opportunities for repetition (both listening and speaking); and creating an instant speaking community, even if it is just two people.

The major advantage I found in using ASLA was its use of systematic building blocks to teach the basic skills of conversation and storytelling. The rapid boost I experienced in my learning (overall levels achieved are detailed below in the Success/Progress section) when I undertook this approach strengthened my motivation to persevere and offered hope that becoming a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker might not be such a remote goal. In addition, this approach denounces literacy-based learning, a principle that resonates with me because literacy-based approaches have not been effective in my own language learning journey. To put it plainly, it seemed that the more I wrote down, the less I learned. (This is due in part to the writing system. While some characters are shared with English, making them familiar, they make different sounds.

It was also due in part to the attention the writing activity diverted away from listening efforts and speaking practice while in the presence of speakers.) Instead of focusing on literacy, ASLA draws on what I believe to be innate tendencies that most of us have to learn through images. It mimics in the most profound way I have seen the experience of learning a first language as a child. All of these qualities are advantages of this approach. Two great disadvantages I found are that it requires constant diligence on the part of both the learner and the teacher, and developing the learning resource materials for this approach is also very time consuming.

While both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, my observation of my language learning process indicates that the best results from these two approaches were achieved through their combined use: I used ASLA as an “activity” within MAP as a way to boost vocabulary and sentence-construction skills. When I used MAP alone, my progress seemed slow, as noted in my language learning journals, and unlike with ASLA, I continued to have a great reliance on writing which did not seem to be of much benefit to my learning.

While this study most specifically focused on the MAP and ASLA approaches, they are just two of many language learning approaches that exist. I have come to understand that no single approach is *the* answer; rather, all approaches are a means to an end. All should be taken in stride and used (in combination with others) to the extent of their potential to further one’s language learning.

## ***Assessment***

Although the goal of this research project was to document an adult language learning journey, increasing my ability to speak and understand *nîhiyawîwin* was also a significant purpose. To track one’s progress in a quest toward second language

acquisition, attention to assessment techniques is necessary. My aim was to apply relevant assessments, thereby exploring the possibility for their use with adult Indigenous language learning. While a plethora of techniques, methods, and theories for assessing second language acquisition exist, the point of this section is to focus on those that are the most relevant and useful to adult Indigenous second language learning. The three assessment tools reviewed for use in this study were chosen due to their widespread use, the first two within Indigenous contexts (i.e., MAP self-assessment tool produced by the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival [2011] and the *Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs*) and the third internationally (i.e., *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* produced by the Council of Europe).

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2011), hereafter CEFR, is the most widely recognized tool across Europe (and increasingly elsewhere) for the acquisition of second or subsequent languages (Council of Europe, 2011). This tool, which is included as Appendix A, is organized along two axes: one is by ascending levels of skill (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) and the other is by learning category: comprehension, speaking, and writing abilities. The CEFR also includes a learning "passport" that has learners document their development and create learning portfolios about things they can do (e.g., audio or video clips of their speaking, written work if relevant, etc.) giving learners more agency, offering an opportunity to develop more of a sense of what they *can do* and not what they *cannot do* in the L2. The purpose of the tool is to be affirming and validating, not punitive.

For application to this project, this tool required adaptation as it is heavily laden with references to language use within public arenas that are mainly unavailable to Indigenous language speakers in Canada (e.g., opening a bank account, listening to

current affairs radio, watching television programs,<sup>35</sup> asking for directions in the city, reading magazines and advertisements, reading restaurant menus, and completing governmental forms). While this assessment tool requires substantive adaptation to be useful in the context of Indigenous second language acquisition, it works well at the early stages (i.e., levels A1, A2) to allow beginning learners to situate themselves in the spectrum of their learning (which I demonstrate in the Success/Progress section below). The tool's merits are its grounding in research and the platform it provides for the development of an Indigenous-focused tool. I believe it could also serve the purpose of educating Indigenous people about commonly accepted standards for language learning in other parts of the world and, although this may seem somewhat discouraging, illustrate how low we are aiming with the majority of approaches used to revive and maintain Indigenous languages in Canada today.

*The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs* (2000; hereafter, Aboriginal Framework) was a significant and impressive development because its creation resulted from extensive consultation and collaboration across the four western provinces and the Yukon and Northwest Territories. This tool is too voluminous to be included as an appendix, therefore it is briefly outlined here.

The Aboriginal Framework provides proficiency-based outcomes at six levels: K–Gr. 1; Gr. 2–3; Gr. 4–6; Gr. 7–8; Gr. 9–10; and Gr. 11–12. The outcomes included at each level are divided into the following four categories: (i) language use contexts; (ii) strategies for language learning; (iii) language quality; and (iv) language functions. (Due to the size of the assessment section of the Aboriginal Framework, totaling 20 pages, it

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<sup>35</sup> A handful of television programs in Indigenous languages exist in Canada and are mainly aired on the Aboriginal People's Television Network; some regions have their own frequency (e.g., Kahnawake, QC), while others, such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, have their own network.

was not practical to include it in its entirety, however, the first four pages are included in Appendix B to provide a sense of the tool.) The goal of the second language program within the Aboriginal Framework (for which this assessment tool was created) is “communicative proficiency” (*Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs*, 2000, p. 89). While not included across all levels, this assessment tool includes literacy goals of second language acquisition at higher levels. While this tool is certainly Indigenous focused and created, and while it holds great promise for adaptation for an adult Indigenous language learning assessment tool, it has two limitations in its current form. One is that it is targeted at a K–12 context within a rigorous school-based second-language program; the other is that it is a tool for teachers to create lesson plans and test children, not for learners or laypeople; it would therefore need to be reduced and simplified for use with individually driven, mentor-assessed language learning programs.

Given that the Master-Apprentice Program was one of the language learning approaches used in this research study, its self-assessment tool warranted consideration, although it is the least substantive of the three assessment tools considered. Its main purpose seems to be to track participant involvement, more from an administrative perspective for purposes of financial compensation for participants. I concluded that the MAP assessment tool was inadequate for use in this study due to its generality and vagueness of self-assessment.

My review of these three assessment models concluded that, while none were adequate in their current form to be highly useful for advancing adult Indigenous language learning. In reviewing of all three models to determine their usefulness in advancing adult Indigenous language learning efforts, I learned the following. The CEFR (2011) taught me that by international second-language learning standards I was



aiming very low in the full spectrum of language learning in my quest. I would extend this realization to most Indigenous language learning programs in Canada, with few exceptions. The MAP assessment tool (Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, 2011) indicated to me that I needed more specific measurements to track my progress, as long-term goal setting and vague self-assessments of my progress did not contribute positively to sustaining my motivation and drive to learn. Lastly, the Aboriginal Framework (2000) highlighted for me the tremendous lack of input and opportunities for use my present language learning plan presented (which is perhaps not surprising given that the target outcomes are based on school based immersion program). The CEFR integrated with a simplified version of the Aboriginal Framework seemed to hold the most promise for creating an effective assessment tool for adult Indigenous language learning. It is therefore recommended that future research should focus on the creation of a new model for assessment of adult Indigenous language learning.

### ***Success/progress***

This section responds to one of the guiding questions posed in the introduction to this dissertation regarding my language learning outcomes at this juncture of my journey. As a point of reference, I begin this section with the fundamental goals of my language learning journey, which, although I have only most recently been able to articulate them in this way, date back to the start of my language learning journey in 1999.

My goals were/are:

- to be able to communicate with our Elders in *nîhiyawîwin*
- to pass the language on to my children

- to complete my sense of identity as a *nîhiyaw-iskwiw*
- to contribute to the decolonization movement through using my language learning to help to restore Indigenous people and our languages to the place of equality and respect that existed not so long ago

Toward these goals, as described in *nitâcimowin* (my story; chapter four), two significant periods in my language learning have boosted my learning toward my goal of becoming a *nîhiyawîwin* speaker. These intensive and most productive years were from 2004 to 2007 and from 2009 to the present. During these two intensive language learning periods, I incorporated all options available to me, including undertaking *nîhiyawîwin* language classes, independent study from print and audio materials, creating language learning materials for use in my home, and, later, incorporating the MAP and ASLA approaches into my learning strategies. Most importantly, however, the past two years have included the greatest amount of auditory input and oral output to date.

To assess my progress, both at the conclusion of this study and along the way, I carefully considered three different models of language learning assessment. However, none of the three seemed entirely right (for different reasons) for assessing my progress, as described in the Assessment section above. With this knowledge, but still needing a tool to track and express my language learning progress, I opted to use the CEFR as the tool that landed in the centre of the spectrum of usefulness. The CEFR provided enough nuance to identify incremental progress (unlike the MAP tool) but was less complicated and specific (K–12 system) than the Aboriginal Framework.

I equate my language learning progress to the experience of watching a slug cross a path, where one needs to look away for a period of time in order to notice progress. I can self-assess with confidence a steady improvement in my comprehension

of instructions, social interactions, and storytelling (of familiar subjects); I notice improvements in my ability to spontaneously create sentences and maintain short, simple dialogue with other speakers on topics such as greeting rituals, leave taking, commenting on the weather, determining the hour of the day and when we will next meet; perhaps the thing I notice most is an improvement in my pronunciation.

Based on the broad and holistic assessment above, I self-assess that I have made progress. To include a more scientific approach, I will also provide the outcome of my journey using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) assessment tool. The starting point for me was as an absolute beginner. While I began my journey with *nîhiyawîwin* in 1999, up to 2004 I still had less than five words/phrases committed to memory in which I was comfortable producing spontaneously on all aspects of language learning (comprehension, speaking, and literacy). Using the CEFR self-assessment grid, the following levels of progress were self-reported to December 2011.

*Starting point (1999):* Could be described as “ground zero”; not yet visible on the first column of the chart labelled “A1”; the first level of language learning achievement.

*“End point” (December 2011):*

		<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>B1</b>	<b>B2</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>C2</b>
understanding	LISTENING	√	½ √				
	READING	√	½ √				
speaking	SPOKEN INTERACTION	√	√				
	SPOKEN PRODUCTION	√	½ √				
writing	WRITING	√	√				

To conclude this section on assessment, I include here my mentors' assessments of my language learning to date. It is important to note that neither of my mentors are trained in second-language learning assessments and were not called upon to provide formal assessments for the purposes of this study. However, I inquired of each of them informally at the end of this study as to their thoughts on my progress to date. My partner and mentor, *âciw*, commented that he believes I have not yet put the best effort I am capable of into language learning due to the challenges that have accompanied me over the last eight years. However, he notices that I understand most of what is said to me, that I can say much more than I used to, and that my pronunciation has noticeably improved. I am encouraged by his faith in me and very much look forward to putting more time and energy into my learning following the completion of my doctoral degree. Jackie is such a loving, kind person who is so happy that someone is taking the interest to learn *nîhiyawîwin* with her that she seems incapable of criticism. However, she too says she is impressed by how much I know, how much I can say, and how motivated I am to learn. In her words, "when I first met you, not one word of Cree, but now, just look at you, all kinds of talking Cree!"

### ***What does it take?***

What does it take to succeed as an urban adult Indigenous second language learner? This section synthesizes what I have learned on this journey about what it takes to initiate and sustain Indigenous language learning, as an adult in an urban setting, over time. This is not to say that I have all the answers, and since I have yet to achieve advanced *nîhiyawîwin* speaking abilities, I may not even qualify as a "success story" (yet). However, through this journey I have been offered many lessons on what it

takes to succeed as an urban adult Indigenous language learner, and I present them here.

First, however, and in keeping with Indigenous research methodologies, I acknowledge that I come to language learning from a relatively privileged location. Although a graduate student, I live an increasingly middle-class life and have had the ability to travel vast distances on multiple occasions to visit my homelands. I have been able to purchase resources for language learning, such as dictionaries, video and audio recording, and workbooks. My language group (*nîhiyawîwin*) is the largest in Canada, and despite its multiple dialects and vast territory, it comes with obvious advantages, such as a greater volume of resource materials than most other Indigenous languages. I have had many opportunities to enhance my learning over the past twelve years. I have attended multiple language learning training sessions, sometimes in other cities, including one in the US. I have attended conferences related to Indigenous language learning and language learning in general. As a graduate student in language and literacy education, I have had access to second language acquisition (SLA) research through my affiliation with a university. My engagement with SLA research broadened my thinking about my own language learning and offered me the opportunity to rethink strategies in real time, leading me to develop and redevelop my approaches as I continued on my journey.

I have expressed my hopes throughout this dissertation that my research will benefit other adult Indigenous language learners through sharing what I have learned; however, it is important to acknowledge that learners are unique and come to their learning with prior life experiences, some which may hinder and others that may enhance their possibilities for learning their language. Urban adult Indigenous language learners are far from a homogenous group. Differences among individuals within this

demographic span gender, socioeconomic level, education level, language group, number of speakers, access to speakers, personal life history, place of birth and childhood (on reserve, off reserve, rural, remote, in or near large urban centres) and adoption to non-Indigenous families, to name but a few. Despite these differences, I continue to hope that the understandings that have emerged from this dissertation will be useful and applicable to many others.

Returning now to the autoethnographic tradition, I offer these understandings through an entry in my language learning journal.

*Journal Entry, nîpin (summer) 2011*

*it is difficult*

*it is isolating*

*it is frustrating*

*it is (at times) seemingly impossible*

*BUT it is possible.*

*It requires:*

*being highly motivated*

*being willing to sacrifice—must make room in your mind, body, spirit—*

*life—for language learning (give up sport, tv, newspapers, recreation, holidays, etc.)*

*taking responsibility—you must accept that no one is going to do it for you,*

*no one is going to lead it or make it happen, you have to be willing each and every day to make it happen*

*accepting you will do the work of two—you may not have a prepared,*

*capable teacher who is fully educated in second-language learning strategies, techniques, and what it takes to create a new fluent*

*speaker—they may have ideas you will have to deconstruct, they may lack patience, they may lack time; it will be your responsibility to create a curriculum, to work with your teacher(s) in culturally appropriate ways to offer what you need to become a speaker*

*having to learn about 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning—you will need to learn strategies and methods to teach yourself via books, videos, recordings, and with your mentor(s)*

*finding mentorship and/or creating a speaking community*

*finding ways to use the language and to bring it into your world, either by teaching your children, getting in touch with relatives who speak your language, incorporating it into your workday, or finding like-minded people who are interested and willing to learn and become your conversation partners*

*building the confidence to speak your language in public and in front of your relatives, neighbours, and coworkers who do not speak your language*

*some outside support such as financial—this may be in the form of time, someone (such as a spouse or parent or employer) supporting you so that you can spend many of your waking hours learning and using the language*

*emotional support—whether this is family or friends, a learning partner, a community of learners, or a professional who is familiar with 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning and is passionate about Indigenous language revitalization to support and encourage you. it is difficult to do this work in isolation and there will be times you will feel completely alone, you will feel that there is no point, that it cannot be done; you have to find or create an encouragement bond or support circle around you to keep going, such as making it a family project or creating a language-speaking community*

*doing everything you can to pair up with someone or optimally create a community of learners (and teachers)—it can be very lonely and isolating and besides, who will you talk to once you learn?*

\* \* \*

*adult Indigenous language learning takes  
commitment, resilience, determination, sacrifice, prioritizing*

### ***Chapter summary***

This chapter has offered a meta-commentary on the autoethnographic account of my language learning journey shared in the preceding chapter. This chapter's purpose was to offer knowledge and hope to other adult Indigenous language learners while engaging with the academic literature, thereby making a scholarly contribution to the study of adult Indigenous language learning. The dissertation's final chapter, which follows, outlines the potential contributions of this research and its implications for the field of second language acquisition, the developing field of Indigenous second language learning, and the decolonization movement. It also makes recommendations for policy, proposes future directions in research, calls for a new field of study, and offers concluding thoughts on hope for the future.



## Chapter 6. *iskwâyâc tihtamowina* (final thoughts)

The primary contribution of this dissertation is to augment the sparse but growing body of research on adult Indigenous language learning by exploring one learner's documented twelve-year language learning journey. It is an autoethnographic study by an urban, out-of-territory *nîhiyaw* woman that analyzes her motivations, reports outcomes, and explores the possibilities of various approaches as they relate to adult Indigenous language learning and cultural identity formation.

*mâcipayiwîn* marked the beginning; it opened the dissertation with an overview and context for *nitâcimôwin* (telling my story). It connected my story to that of my ancestors through the section "*at kohkom's knee*." Also included in this introductory section was the broader context of *nîhiyawîwin* in Canada as well as the study's purpose.

Chapter one, *kayâs* (history and context), explored the history of Indigenous languages in Canada (with some inevitable overlap in the US) to orient the reader for the story yet to unfold. This history included a time of commonplace Indigenous multilingualism, the eventual decline of Indigenous languages, the effects of urbanization and dislocation from territory and community, and the link between Indigenous language and identity. Next, the current condition of Indigenous languages in Canada and the existing global influences were discussed. The Indigenous language revitalization movement and burgeoning field of study, as well as policies and approaches within them, were also examined in this opening chapter.

*masinahikan kiskihtamôna* (knowledge that is written or comes from books), chapter two introduced the theoretical frameworks that guided and influenced the study: Indigenous second language learning, sociocultural language learning theory, and decolonization theory. The literature on various approaches to adult language teaching

and learning was reviewed; conditions needed for success, challenges to successful learning, and gaps in the adult Indigenous language learning literature were also explored. Literature on learner motivation was reviewed and several case studies were included. The chapter also briefly examined ancestral language learning.

The methodological foundations of the dissertation, namely autoethnography and Indigenous research methods, were explored in chapter three, *sihcikiwîna* (the way or method of doing something). The fusion of autoethnographic traditions with Indigenous research methodologies and their application in this study were also explained. The two formal language learning approaches most prominently followed in the language self-study were summarized and their inclusion in the journey explained. The records collected and the manner in which they contributed to the creation of the autoethnographic narrative were also detailed, as was the role of language teacher-mentors. The chapter also explored the issue of generalizability.

The narrative heart of the dissertation, *nitâcimowin* (my story), was presented in chapter four. The story described a family's dislocation from community and disengagement from its ancestral Indigenous language, with a return to the language in a subsequent generation. The story was told chronologically as a memoir, focusing on highlights, low points, and pivotal moments in the journey and coming together toward a holistic sense of the entire journey. The narrative unfolded within a metaphorical framework of the six seasons of the *nîhiyaw* worldview, with each segment of the journey being signified by the attributes of a particular season.

Following the presentation of the autoethnographic story, *kîkwaya kê miskamân* (what I have found), chapter five reengaged with the academic literature to explore what the story had to teach us and to further our understanding of urban adult Indigenous language learners for the benefit of multiple stakeholders. The chapter

served as a meaning-making exercise, providing meta-commentary on the narrative in chapter four in dialogue with the scholarly literature about the research topics, with the goal of creating new knowledge.

This concluding chapter, *iskwâyâc tihtamowina* (final thoughts), outlines the contributions of this research and its implications for the field of second language acquisition, the developing field of Indigenous second language learning, and the decolonization movement. Finally, it makes recommendations for policy, acknowledges limitations, proposes future directions in research, calls for a new field of study, and offers concluding thoughts on hope for the future.

### ***Contributions of the research***

As an autoethnographic study examining the experiences, challenges, and possibilities of one Indigenous adult language learner in Canada, this dissertation contributes to the creation of new knowledge in four distinct ways. Its primary contribution is as an addition to the largely untold story of urban adult Indigenous language learning in Canada. Second, it expands the foci of the Indigenous language revitalization movement to include Indigenous adult learners, viewing them as an untapped resource in a critical and urgent pursuit of language revival. Third, this study contributes to the decolonization movement underway in Canada by aligning Indigenous language revitalization efforts with it. Fourth, it informs second-language researchers and practitioners about adult Indigenous language learning, and thereby contributes to the emergence of Indigenous language learning as an academic field of study.

## ***Limitations***

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on *nîhiyawîwin*, one of the three Indigenous languages in Canada predicted to survive because of the overall number of speakers. Of these three, *nîhiyawîwin* has the largest number (87,285) of language speakers (Statistics Canada, 2008). Owing to this broad language base, more resources (and mentors) are available for learners of *nîhiyawîwin* than for learners in many other Indigenous language groups. Therefore, certain aspects of this journey will differ from the journeys of learners who belong to smaller language groups (e.g., isolates) with very few speakers anywhere and with few or no curriculum resources. However, it is important to consider that despite there being a high number of *nîhiyawîwin* speakers overall in Canada, this language-speaking group ranges from the east coast to northern BC and the Northwest Territories and includes five dialects, the farthest apart of which (geographically) are mutually unintelligible. In addition, the overall trend in Indigenous populations toward urbanization weakens the language centres where many speakers would otherwise live close together; speakers and potential learners are ending up isolated in urban centres, often out of territory (e.g., a *nîhiyawak* may live in Calgary, which is Blackfoot country, or Prince George, which is Carrier-Sekani country).

Second, the urban experience and a multigenerational experience of being separated from one's homelands are also importance specifications of this study. Therefore, the experiences explored in this study may differ somewhat from the experience of an adult striving to learn their language within their own territory or in an on-reserve context where there might be more of a "community of learners," more land-based language learning activities to take part in, and perhaps an organized program of study for adult language learners.

Third, this study takes place in a mainly Canadian context. While programs that have originated in Native America<sup>36</sup> have been included, they were adapted to a Canadian context. While the story within this study and the implications that may be drawn from it may bear similarities to others, the outcomes may be more particular to Indigenous urban adults in Canada. Further, the knowledge base of this researcher and the programs and examples drawn upon are mainly from western Canada and almost exclusively within English-speaking Canada. Although some issues may have similarities to parts of French-speaking Canada as well as eastern or northern Canada, I am cautious about claiming knowledge or expertise in these areas.

Finally, contexts that are particular to this learner include a middle-class socioeconomic position, a high level of postsecondary education, and the potential/perceived advantage of having a language mentor living in the same house. The first two factors create some advantages for language learning, such as greater access to financial resources to attend workshops and to purchase technology and curriculum. It is debatable whether having a postsecondary education in itself is an advantage for a second-language learner, but certain skills acquired through it may have assisted me (e.g., high literacy levels that enabled studying second language learning techniques in the literature, study skills, memorization techniques for storing large amounts of information, and time management skills). However, I have studied, amongst other things, basic linguistics, research methods, and SLA theory, which has enabled me to understand certain aspects of the learning process at a more metalinguistic and metatheoretical level. The presence of a language mentor in my daily life could certainly be seen as an advantage for a number of reasons, the most

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<sup>36</sup> Another colloquial term used to mean the country that is now known as the US through a Native American worldview of unrelinquished territory.

significant of which may be increased language use opportunities. However, my partner has reminded me on more than one occasion that no one likes to be treated like a “walking dictionary” (an especially literal point when the learner is following you around from room to room). It is also important to remember that human relationships are complex, and I have had to negotiate language learning relationships with both of my language mentors. Each relationship contains its own successes and challenges.

## ***Implications***

### **Second language acquisition**

The outcomes of this research hold several implications for the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Although its foundations reach back as far as sixty years, SLA was established as an academic field of study mainly since the late 1970s (Block, 2003; Mitchell & Myles, 2004), and it has focused primarily on learning languages that are spoken in the wider community as a dominant (or official) language. Within the past ten years, the field began to include heritage language learning, defined as learning one’s heritage language in a country where it is not the dominant language (e.g., Canadian-born Chinese heritage language learners), and, even more recently, ancestral language learning (defined as learning one’s ancestral language in one’s homeland, such as Gaelic in Scotland). While Indigenous language learning shares similarities with both heritage language learning and ancestral language learning (mainly, learning a non-dominant language as well as the ancestral connection to the target language), this dissertation provides compelling arguments for the study of Indigenous language learning in Canada as a distinct field. These distinct factors include the influence of a political context of colonization in Canada, the absence of a homeland of speakers which

can be accessed or returned to overseas, the lack of upward mobility<sup>37</sup> awarded to Indigenous second language learners, the vast number and diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada (which result in small language-speaking communities), the vastness of Canada (compared to Scotland, Ireland, Japan, etc.), the lack of immersion possibilities due to extreme erosion of language use in many Indigenous communities across generations, the low number of speakers overall (and therefore low numbers of teachers and opportunities for mentorship), and urban migration away from learners' territories of origin in Canada.

That few Indigenous people in Canada are learning their ancestral language as a first language (with the exception of speakers of one or two of the sixty-plus languages) indicates that a great number of potential second-language learners exist.<sup>38</sup> Thus the connection to the field of SLA is obvious. This dissertation has explored possibilities and challenges of an alliance of the fields of SLA and Indigenous second language learning (ISLL), as well as differences between them. While the field of SLA has recently begun to include and thereby acknowledge ISLL issues in its mainstream publication pool (see Duff & Li, 2009; Hinton, 2008b; Hornberger, 2008; and Pesco & Crago, 2008), their inclusion is far from prolific. This dissertation has also explored possible research alliances between SLA and ISLL through factors such as motivation, identity, age, and affect. One of the main challenges of including ISLL in the field of SLA is that SLA is already well established, with dominant (*lingua franca*) and foreign language learning as its base.

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that there are other heritage and ancestral languages that are unlikely to offer much upward mobility either, such as Ukrainian, as opposed to French, English, or Chinese, which are more global languages with currency.

<sup>38</sup> In 2001, of the 239,620 Indigenous people able to speak an Indigenous language in Canada, 47,155 were second-language speakers, which accounts for nearly 20% of speakers (Norris, 2007).

Although this study explores possible alliances between the two fields, ultimately it recommends the establishment of a distinct field of ISLL study. Yet it seems that SLA could benefit from continued and increased attention to ISLL issues while concurrently offering support and encouragement to the establishment of an ISLL-focused field. One of the benefits to SLA of a continued and increased focus on ISLL would be the launching of SLA into a more postcolonial dimension, expanding rather than confining it to dominant-language, off-shore, and immigrant experiences. At the same time, recognizing that many factors, principles, and processes in language learning are human in nature and therefore transferable and adaptable, one of the many benefits for the emerging ISLL field of building connections to and being informed by SLA research would be not having to reinvent the wheel. ISLL could benefit from reexamining, from an Indigenous point of view, concepts within SLA that inform and adapt to an ISLL context, such as challenges common to all adult learners, exemplary approaches to adult language teaching and learning, and conditions necessary for successful adult language learning.

The ultimate implication for SLA emerging from this study should be the taking up of this study's recommendation to continue to expand the boundaries of SLA through collaborations with ISLL research that could be mutually informing, while recognizing the contextual particularities and therefore the necessity of autonomy for an independent ISLL field of study.

### **Indigenous second language learning**

Adults are increasingly being noted as an underused demographic for Indigenous language revitalization (Gordon, 2009; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Richards & Burnaby, 2008) with the potential to be an important contributing group. It is hoped that this study will raise the profile of adults as an undertargeted learning group and



therefore draw more attention from Indigenous language policy makers and program designers.

Documented efforts in Indigenous language revitalization in Canada and the US over the past several decades have focused mainly on children, both young and school-aged (Hinton & Hale, 2001; Reyhner, Cantoni, St. Claire, & Yazzie, 1999; Reyhner & Lockard, 2009). More recent studies (Garcia, 2009; McCarty & Wyman, 2009; Wilson & Kamana, 2009) suggest that attention to youth Indigenous language learning is increasing. Meanwhile, the focus on adult Indigenous language learning as part of the Indigenous language revitalization movement remains slight. Most mentions of adult Indigenous language learning in the literature are incidental—vague mentions of parents learning because their children are in immersion programming, or staff members learning their language over the lunch hour as part of the tribal mandate to increase language use in band business—without much detail or any significant research done on the approaches used, their efficacy, the outcomes, or individual variations in acquisition.

The research done specifically on adult Indigenous language learners most often focuses on group settings, such as adult immersion programs or immersion language-culture camps, with little attention paid to individual adult Indigenous language learning journeys (Gordon, 2009; Maracle & Richards, 2002; Richards & Burnaby, 2008, Sarkar & Metallic, 2009). Yet, although the research and applied focus on adult learning is limited, *interest* among adult learners appears to be on the rise (Daniels-Fiss, 2008; Gordon, 2009; Pitawanakwat, 2009).

While acknowledging and supporting the focus on children, this dissertation demonstrates a need for more serious attention to adult language learning, a better understanding of what learning approaches will work for adults, and how they will need

to be supported to make a more pronounced contribution to the creation of speaking communities and family-based speaker sites. It argues for the perception of adult learners as the *missing* link in Indigenous language revitalization rather than the *weakest* link.

This study's final implication for ISLL is its recommendation for a new and interdependent field of academic study focused on Indigenous language revitalization. The ISLL field will focus on the specific contexts and challenges of Indigenous language learning, thereby making valuable contributions to the continuation and revival of Indigenous languages across nations. Currently, ISLL draws heavily on other fields of study, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, applied linguistics, and SLA (its closest scholarly relation).

A continued connection with these fields will contribute to the strength and healthy growth of ISLL. It is to be hoped that those in the SLA field will continue to develop their interest in ISLL, allowing for a continued mutual discovery of tensions and overlap, but at the same time awakening possibilities for the creation of new knowledge within and between the two fields of study. Growing this connection will require publications by Indigenous second language specialists and increased studies of the ISLL phenomenon in ways and forms that are accessible to members of the SLA scholarly community, so that mutual learning can occur. In addition, building a bridge between these fields will require adapting and interpreting established SLA insights for the ISLL community.

### **Decolonization movement**

For decades, the decolonization movement has focused on issues of self-determination (such as control over land, governance, health, and education), with relatively minor mention of Indigenous language revitalization as an important part of

this movement (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The first implication for the decolonization movement that emerges from this dissertation brings language to the fore, calling for the more central inclusion of Indigenous language revitalization in the decolonization movement. Second, this dissertation highlights (with the support of multiple authors) the potential strength in links between the decolonization and language revitalization movements and the possibilities for advancing them. A growing body of literature focuses on the promise of increasing the health and strength of Indigenous nations on many fronts, including health, education, and self-governance, through a greater emphasis on Indigenous language revitalization (Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007; McIvor & Napoleon, 2009; Meek, 2010). It is hoped that politicians and academics involved in the decolonization movement will benefit from this dissertation and other, related research that appreciates the mutual benefits to be gained from more closely aligning these two movements.

## ***Policy recommendations***

### **Funding**

It is often thought that the damage to Indigenous languages occurred in the past, but it also a present-day reality. The continued perpetuation of a monolingual (in the majority of the West) or colonial-bilingual Canada accelerates the demise of Indigenous languages. The contemporary reinforcement of monolingualism or colonial-bilingualism serves colonialism by creating a (false) united global front, which is marketed to Canadians as patriotic. Colonial governments fear difference because it threatens national unity and the patriotism that fosters support among Canadians for any current

federal government's agenda and actions (ranging from military spending and cuts, to social programs, to financing visits from the monarchy).

In comparison to the cost of implementing the Indian residential school policy that played a large role in the eradication of Indigenous languages, the amount of federal funding that is currently committed to Indigenous language revitalization is an embarrassment to Canadians. The government of Canada “apologized” for past wrongs, including the damage caused to Indigenous languages and cultures (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008); however, whatever plan there might be to restore Indigenous languages to their precolonial status is obscure, to say the least. Federal funding targeted for Indigenous language revitalization has been so far almost inconsequential.<sup>39</sup> The plan seems to be to do just enough to ensure that the government can report they are doing something rather than nothing. Government undoubtedly recognizes that language is powerful and holds great potential in the revival of powerful Indigenous nations; language revival may be a threat to the colonial government. Funding is needed at a level that would effectively revive Indigenous languages in Canada and that takes into account the potential contribution of the adult population.

### **Multiple official languages**

This dissertation asserts the possibilities for healing and strength building within Indigenous nations while concurrently encouraging the possibilities for creating a “healing Canada” through the adoption and affirmation of Indigenous languages as co-official languages in this country. While federal governments once saw Indigenous

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<sup>39</sup> The federal Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) provides \$5 million dollars a year to be divided equally among provinces and territories (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005). Given the most current census population statistics of 1,172,790 Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2008), the ALI funding equates to about \$4.25 per person per year for Indigenous language revitalization. It is worth notice, however, that some provinces and territories supplement this federal funding, making Indigenous language revitalization more possible.

languages as vessels that perpetuated inferior and counterproductive (to assimilative quests) worldviews, cultures, and spiritual practices (Milloy, 1999), the people of Canada only stand to lose by ignoring or resisting the revival and continuance of Indigenous languages. As Dr. Lorna Williams conveys, “it’s extremely important that the public recognizes all Indigenous languages as their heritage [too]” (Sharpe, 2010, p. 4). In addition to the reinstatement of Indigenous languages as Canada’s heritage languages, there must also be a shift in the overall societal belief in the inevitable demise of Indigenous languages. This prevailing attitude greatly reduces the chance that Indigenous languages will continue. Indigenous languages must be accepted on their own merits rather than viewed as useless artefacts of a people that “once was.”

Many Canadians whose family history is rooted in a non-English-speaking immigrant story lost their language(s) due to very real forces, such as immigration laws and societal pressures to conform to one of Canada’s colonial languages. Many Canadians who were historically stripped of their language (perhaps unknowingly), now carry the patriotic maple leaf torch of one or both colonial official languages with pride. While the perpetuation of the colonial languages may be unintentional for the many Canadians who simply inherited one of the two at birth, being apathetic toward Indigenous language perpetuation may have the same effect today as active erasure had in the past. I have often heard it said that “at least we are better off than the United States ‘melting pot’ theory. We value languages enough to have two official languages.” But how much do we as Canadians actually value languages, and whose languages, and why?

Next, the rationale and recommendation for a new field of study focused on Indigenous language learning is presented.

### **New field of study**

Given that few Indigenous people in Canada are learning their ancestral language as a first language, most Indigenous language learners in Canada are second-language learners (Norris, 2007). The study of Indigenous language revitalization and Indigenous second language learning have been developing across many disciplinary fields, including anthropology, linguistics, sociology, education, and political science. Meanwhile, the field of second language acquisition has also been developing over many decades, and great strides have been made in furthering the understanding of the phenomenon and the various approaches employed for enhancing second-language learning. Yet, the SLA field has developed largely without input from Indigenous scholars or community members or attention to Indigenous second language learning, even though Indigenous communities have been working on reviving their languages since the 1970s (Bauman, 1980; Jamieson, 1988a, 1998b; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). The sociocultural sector of the SLA field indirectly addresses many of the particularities of Indigenous second language learning by way of the inclusion of identity issues, for example (Block, 2003; Norton, 2000), yet the field's main focus remains on dominant, foreign, and immigrant language learners, and many of the differences between these contexts and that of Indigenous second language learners remain unstudied. Further, although many fields have been involved in Indigenous language revitalization, Basham and Fathman (2008) point out that "any one discipline on its own does not provide an adequate picture of [I]ndigenous efforts to revitalize local languages" (p. 578).

Although the research within SLA largely focuses on other populations and therefore would require adaptation for use in Indigenous contexts, undoubtedly there are theories and best practices that could make valuable contributions to adult

Indigenous second language learning. All possible options for the urgently needed advancement of Indigenous language revival must be explored. However, an overlap and alliance with SLA would not occur without opposition. Some Indigenous language revitalization scholars call for a divorce from the SLA paradigm; Dr. Frederick White (2006), for example, argues that a separation is needed to “advance research with results applicable to all Native American peoples seeking to renew the use of their ancestral language” (p. 106). White emphasizes that Native American peoples are “neither immigrants nor foreigners” (p. 95) and cites differences such as learning dominant languages of wider communication as “characteristics that do not apply to Native American language acquisition/learning circumstances” (p. 91). His argument casts doubt on the importance and wisdom of aligning Indigenous second language learning with the SLA field. While there is overlap with and much we can continue to learn from the SLA field, I agree with Dr. White that, although many Indigenous language issues are distinct, we are likely to continue to be an aside, swallowed by the issues that are of greater interest to larger groups (such as foreign language learners in general, new non-English-speaking immigrants to Canada, etc.). It makes good sense that ISLL remain connected to SLA while we develop our own distinct field of study, which would mean that we would drive the agenda and the SLA field could also benefit from the research we produce, research that is focused on our communities within our historically, culturally, and geographically specific language learning contexts.

An important side benefit of developing this new field of study would be the potential of creating a field composed mainly of Indigenous scholars. It is worth noting that almost all of the recent literature on Indigenous second language learning has been published by non-Indigenous scholars. This fact highlights the related aim of self-determination through training our people to be researchers and scholars in a field they

feel personally connected to and knowledgeable about. Exemplars of the growing body of literature includes research by Basham and Fathman (2008), who focus on latent speakers regaining their Indigenous language as adults; Daniels-Fiss (2008), who details her experience of learning her language as an adult; Hinton (2008a, 2008b, 2011), a widely published emeritus professor who writes about Indigenous language revitalization in general; McCarty (2008), who explores Indigenous languages as heritage languages; Pesco and Crago (2008), who examine language socialization in Indigenous communities; and Sarkar and Metallic (2009), who detail the language learning efforts of Mi'gmaq adults in eastern Canada. Note that all of these scholars, with the exception of Daniels-Fiss and Metallic, are non-Indigenous.

In conclusion, due to the dire condition of Indigenous languages in Canada, a new academic field of study specifically targeted toward and primarily driven by Indigenous scholars is urgently needed.

Next, we turn to potential future directions in research related to this dissertation.

### ***Future directions***

While this dissertation aims to raise the profile of adult Indigenous language learners in Canada, much more needs to be done to support this underexamined and underrealized demographic of learners. In addition, several other research directions have the potential to contribute to the continuation and revival of Indigenous languages in Canada.

First, this research could be expanded to include the stories of other adult Indigenous language learners in Canada. The telling of additional stories, successes, and challenges, and how the latter were overcome, would broaden the understanding of adult Indigenous language learning in Canada today.



The second area of research that could advance this study's goals is a consideration of the family (parents, children, and other generations when available) as the primary learning site for language revitalization. Certainly many postcontact immigrants to Canada whose first language is not English provide a strong example of maintaining their home language and raising bi- or multilingual children, a model that could inspire Indigenous families. In Indigenous communities, family-based revitalization projects would most often involve parents learning alongside their children. Studies from outside Canada and the US call for further investigation into this area (Kopeliovich, 2010; Pauwels, 2005).

Third, the efficacies of the adult language learning approaches that are being promoted require serious examination. For example, for adult learners in urban settings, most learning opportunities are through print materials or, for those fortunate enough to have language speakers in their area, through weekly language classes (Baloy, 2011). Yet, the efficacy of weekly language classes is commonly questioned (Hinton, 2001a). Further, learners with the most favourable option of working with language mentors may find that "master" speakers are not well equipped to provide them with the kind of language input they need to become a speaker. Much more research, theory building, and consideration of the implications for practice in learning and teaching methods within Indigenous communities, both urban and on reserve, are needed to revive and maintain Indigenous languages.

This dissertation reveals the increasing need for Indigenous language revitalization efforts to not only include but increasingly focus on urban language learning populations. It is widely understood that the geographically intact communities of specific language-speaking groups have shouldered the majority of the weight of language revival activities (Baloy, 2011; Waziyatawin, 2008) while,

concurrently, ever-increasing numbers of Indigenous people are moving to cities (Statistics Canada, 2008). This urban shift has enormous implications for the possibilities of reviving Indigenous languages. Therefore, further research into the impact on language learning of the expanding urban reality of Indigenous people in Canada will be increasingly necessary.

### ***ikosi (that is all)***

I care deeply that my stories have the potential to impact and improve social conditions. I make the case that this can happen through examining lives one at a time. (Ellis, 2009, p. 15)

This dissertation set out with adult Indigenous language learning at the centre. It focused on the experience of one urban adult *nîhiyawîwin* language learner in Canada in hopes of contributing to the growing understanding of the phenomenon of personal Indigenous language reclamation here. The routes for examination were a blend of autoethnography and Indigenous research methodologies. While the road to language learning is lifelong, this dissertation focused on a journey of just over a decade. The language learning itself was most prominently realized in the last two years of the journey, using two Indigenous language learning approaches, ASLA and MAP. The outcome of this research is a contribution to the expansion of the SLA field and the emergence of the ISLL field.

This study exhibited one example of individual language learning for the benefit of members of the generation who did not receive the language as children or youth. The study shone a light on adult learners' untapped potential to contribute to the revival of Indigenous languages in Canada. Individuals like me exist all over the continent, and while mine is but one story, one language, and one context, the story

belongs to all of us, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. We share a heritage of colonizer-meets-colonized on sacred land, and five hundred years later, we are witnessing the continuing unfolding of that encounter.

Just like the cycles of the seasons and the patterns in *atahakohp* (star blanket), my journey continues. Although this dissertation project will end, my language learning journey will carry on. I have come to understand that learning a language, although largely a cognitive act, also has an effect on your spirit and your heart. My heart has healed greatly from the historic wounds of loss and shame that exist in my family. I continue to see how my language learning not only affects what I can say and understand in *nîhiyawîwin* but influences the way I see the world. I am learning more than a language: I am learning a worldview—one that feels like it was always inside me, though I did not know its name, or where it came from, or why it was there. My identity as a *nîhiyaw-iskwiw* has been forever strengthened, and I know I will continue to gain strength, confidence, and self-assurance—but most of all peace and humility—through language learning as my journey continues.

This work may never feel complete. It has become my life. It has become my profession. It is for my children and grandchildren ... and also for my ancestors. It began long before me and will continue until my end.

Poet/scholar Carl Leggo (2005) says this:

We need to tell our stories more. And we need to tell more stories. In the end, the stories we write and tell about our living experiences will teach us how to live with more creativity, confidence, flexibility, coherence, imagination and truthfulness. (p. 132)

I am optimistic about the possibilities for the future, when Indigenous people, and therefore our languages and cultures, will regain the valued and dignified place in

society that we once held. This is not to say that we can move backward, but by looking back, we will see more clearly a path to the future, a future in which we can all speak the languages of our hearts.

Through my quest to learn our language, I believe I am creating my own (virtual) *atahakohp* by weaving *nîhiyawîwin* into my (and therefore my family's) everyday life. In doing so, I hope to bring honour and respect to my ancestors, myself, and my children. I hope one day to be able to give my children and my hoped-for grandchildren *atahakohp*, both real and metaphorical, through the gift of returning the language to its rightful place in our family. I conclude this phase of my journey with the four-sentence prayer taught to me by Jackie. I pray to the grandmothers and grandfathers, giving humble thanks for this day, and end by acknowledging all of my relations (the four-legged, the winged, those who swim and human alike).

*nohkomak, nimosômak*

*kinânâskomitinâwâw anoch ôma kê kîsikâk*

*kahkiyaw niwahkômâkanak*

*ikosi, hay hay*

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*

The table below shows skills in understanding, speaking, and writing across ascending levels of skill (A1, A2, etc.).

		<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>B1</b>	<b>B2</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>C2</b>
<b>U N D E R S T A N D I N G</b>	<b>Listening</b>	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided. I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
	<b>Reading</b>	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.

		<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>B1</b>	<b>B2</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>C2</b>
<b>S P E A K I N G</b>	<b>Spoken Interaction</b>	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
	<b>Spoken Production</b>	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
<b>W R I T I N G</b>	<b>Writing</b>	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate needs. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

## ***Appendix B: Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs (excerpt)***

### **AREAS OF LANGUAGE OUTCOMES**

#### **Language Use Contexts**

At each level, three kinds of language use contexts in which students are expected to perform are identified:

- Interaction: involves face-to-face communication and the socio-cultural rules for such interaction.
- Interpretation: requires students to understand and interpret discourse, or a connected set of sentences or ideas.
- Production: requires students to produce discourse that is understandable to others.

#### **Strategies for Language Learning**

Skills that pertain to becoming more effective as language learners are identified.

#### **Language Quality**

Language quality as a measure of communicative proficiency is not synonymous with meaningful communication. It is possible to communicate meaning with relative degrees of quality. Quality is defined using three criteria:

- Accuracy: primarily involves the grammatical system of a language.
- Fluency: involves the ease with which communication is expressed or received.
- Coherency: relates to the connectness of information, thoughts and ideas within discourse.

While the communicative approach to teaching second languages emphasizes the primacy of function over form, the qualitative features of language use must not be dismissed nor delayed during instruction. Ignoring skills in these areas tends to lead to a fossilization of language development regardless of continued instruction or language use. Individuals are able to function relatively well in the second language, understanding and being understood, but are viewed by the language community as having a “broken” language or “pidgin” language.

#### **Language Functions**

Language functions are those which students are expected to be able to perform in the language use contexts. They include:

- Giving and Getting Information
- Socializing and Celebrating
- Interpreting Discourse
- Researching
- Producing Discourse.



## **INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS**

### **Level 1 (K–Gr. 1)**

In the first level of second language development, students learn that the Aboriginal language is for using. The teacher uses pre-talk, concrete and visual aids, gestures and actions to help students understand what is being said. Students find language learning much easier when the activities are action oriented, predictable, repetitious, or familiar and relevant to their interests.

### **Level 2 (Gr. 2–3)**

Students at this level are tied to familiar and basic situations in terms of language use, and they continue to interact with phrases and memorized expressions. The teacher continues to teach the cultural understandings and skills with active and concrete learning activities. Students continue to learn the language they need to operate in this context. They learn to respond to many more complex commands and concepts, but their spoken language lags behind as they lay the foundations for understanding. They hone their listening skills.

### **Level 3 (Gr. 4–6)**

At this level, the students begin to rely less on memorized expressions and one word answers. They begin to produce sentences appropriate to particular situations. They move into learning more directly from the oral tradition.

### **Level 4 (Gr. 7–8)**

At this level, the focus is on using the Aboriginal language as the medium of instruction in learning cultural skills from members of the community. The students make many errors as they push themselves to create more complex sentences. It is important in terms of their confidence that the contact they have with the community at this time is supportive and encouraging. The teacher uses language to provide constructive feedback and error correction to ensure that the students continue to develop accuracy.

### **Level 5 (Gr. 9–10)**

At this stage, the students are introduced to learning directly from the oral tradition and the Elders of the community, in a less sheltered way. Language skills focus on strategies for accessing and interpreting the oral tradition.

### **Level 6 (Gr. 11–12)**

In this final stage of learning before leaving school, students are given opportunities to explore language and culture as career choices. They continue in their study of cultural content but integrate it into projects that they can undertake in cooperation with individuals, businesses and institutions involved in the communication, research and translation of language and culture.

## 1. Language Use Contexts

### 1.1 Interaction

#### Level 1 (K–Gr. 1)

#### Level 2 (Gr. 2–3)

#### Level 3 (Gr. 4–6)

*Students will use the Aboriginal language in the following contexts:*

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• routines – interacting with the teacher, classmates and family members during daily or frequent routines at home and at school, such as playtime, preparing to learn, cleaning up</li> <li>• learning activities – interacting with classmates, teacher, family members and familiar Elders/language resource people during learning activities high in contextual information</li> <li>• cultural demonstrations – interacting with Elders/language resource people while observing cultural demonstrations, such as dancing or watching a fire being started, which are high in contextual information</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• school-based cultural learning activities – interacting with the teacher, cultural resource people and classmates during active cultural learning activities in class and outdoors, such as making simple crafts or foods, making a thematic mural, having a picnic</li> <li>• family-based cultural learning activities – learning cultural knowledge or skills from a family member, if a family member who speaks the language is available</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning activities – interacting with classmates, teacher and parent volunteers during active learning activities (of cultural understandings) in the classroom</li> <li>• group work – interacting with classmates in pairs or small groups to work on class projects</li> <li>• seeking information from Elders and familiar members of the cultural community</li> <li>• learning cultural skills – interacting with cultural resource people, teacher or Elders while learning specific cultural skills</li> <li>• nature camps – interacting with teachers, cultural resource people, parents, Elders and other students while at nature camps</li> <li>• community service – interacting with members of the community while engaged in acts of service to the community, such as distributing food to Elders at Christmas, setting up or cleaning up after a community event</li> </ul> |
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#### Note to Developer

Certain outcomes have been bolded to identify them as discretionary because of possible sensitivity. This is not intended to preempt the discretion of Elders in determining what is appropriate for inclusion in a curriculum.

## 1. Language Use Contexts (continued)

### 1.1 Interaction

#### Level 4 (Gr. 7–8)

#### Level 5 (Gr. 9–10)

#### Level 6 (Gr. 11–12)

*Students will use the Aboriginal language in the following contexts:*

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning activities – interacting with classmates and teacher during learning activities</li> <li>• group work – interacting with classmates in pairs or small groups to work on class projects</li> <li>• seeking information – seeking information from Elders and familiar members of the cultural community</li> <li>• learning cultural skills – actively learning cultural skills during community events and while at nature camps</li> <li>• community service – interacting with members of the community while engaged in acts of service to the community, such as helping with preparation for a cultural event, working with day-care children</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seeking consensus – interacting with classmates in a decision-making process, such as a group project, class meetings</li> <li>• learning cultural skills – interacting with Elders or cultural resource people to learn cultural skills</li> <li>• nature camps – interacting with members of the community and Elders while participating in nature camps</li> <li>• community events – interacting with members of the community while participating in community events, such as commemoration, language festival, square dances</li> <li>• community service – interacting with members of the community in acts of service to the community, such as helping with the preparation of programming for community radio, television or print media</li> <li>• researching – interacting with Elders or cultural resource people while researching cultural information</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seeking consensus – interacting with classmates or school personnel in decision-making meetings, such as student council, class meeting, group project</li> <li>• researching – interacting with Elders or cultural resource people while researching cultural information</li> <li>• receiving guidance – interacting with Elders or other adult members of the community to receive guidance or advice on specific matters, such as how best to be of service to the community, how to access Elders in the community, planning a spring camp</li> <li>• nature camps – interacting with members of the community and Elders while participating in nature camps</li> <li>• community events – interacting with members of the community while participating in community events, such as wakes, Elders' gatherings, meetings, language festivals</li> <li>• community service – interacting with members of the community in acts of service to the community, such as volunteering at an Elder's lodge, explaining a display of community historical information</li> <li>• mentorship or career and personal planning courses – interacting with a mentor on a project relating to the language and/or culture, such as preparing a community showing of a cultural dance troupe, working with a translating service at a community health office, working as a translator/aid with a physician visiting Elders</li> </ul> |
|---|---|--|