

NEȚOLNEW Research Clusters' Report

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Introduction

The NEȚOLNEW Research Cluster concept was established at the October 2021 All Partners' Gathering. Partners helped form cluster topics based on themes that had arisen in the partners' research projects to date.

The purpose of the research clusters was to provide space for partners to come together to discuss language revitalization research topics of common interest. We shared ideas, questions, challenges, and successes. The hope was to bring together partner and collaborators' collective knowledge, share with one another, as well as to others beyond the partnership.

We began with two clusters:

- 1) Advancing Proficiency, and;
- 2) Assessment (in Indigenous language learning)

We held eight meetings between October 2021 and February 2023. The first six meetings alternated between the Advancing Proficiency cluster and the Assessment cluster, while the last two combined both clusters.

Advancing Proficiency Cluster

The Advancing Proficiency (AP) cluster meetings were facilitated by Nicki Benson.

The following partner representatives attended one or more AP meetings:

- Alwyn Jeddore (Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey)
- Beverly Roy (Kenjgewin Teg)
- Callie Hill (Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na)
- Kahteron:ni Iris Stacey (Kahnawà:ke Education Center)
- Kathryn Michel (Chief Atahm School)
- Marilyn Shirt (University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'i nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills)
- PENÁĆ David Underwood (WSÁNEĆ School Board)
- Rhonda Hopkins (Kenjgewin Teg)
- Suzanne Gessner (First Peoples' Cultural Council)
- Tahohtharátye Joe Brant (Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na)
- Tye Swallow (WSÁNEĆ School Board)

The following members of the NE7OLNEW team also attended one or more meetings:

- Onowa McIvor (Project Director)
- Alexandria Carter (Project Manager)
- Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins (Co-Investigator)
- Belinda Daniels (Collaborator)
- Kari Chew (Collaborator)
- Adam Stone (Research Associate)
- Kanen'tó:kon Hemlock (Research Coordinator)
- Robyn Giffen (Research Coordinator)

Emerging Themes from the Advancing Proficiency Cluster

The first few meetings of the Advancing Proficiency cluster involved open discussions to explore partners' experiences, challenges, questions, and interests in relation to advancing Indigenous language proficiency. Participants shared common experiences such as: actively working on their own proficiency development while also teaching others; difficulty pushing beyond a certain plateau in language proficiency; and a lack of support for advanced Indigenous language learning. They also shared innovative ideas and strategies for addressing some of these challenges.

Some topics of mutual interest were established, and subsequent meetings were held with a focus on these topics as they related to advancing proficiency. The topics were: curriculum and program design; use of technology; and use of assessment. Each of these topics is described briefly below, along with three other emerging thematic areas from our discussions. That is, teaching through worldview; supportive partnerships; and strategies for advanced Indigenous language learning.

Curriculum and Program Design

Many of our partners are working on supporting adult Indigenous language learners through all stages of proficiency. As learners advance, there are fewer resources to support them, and partners have had to create or adapt approaches to meet their needs. While these needs and potential solutions are unique to each language and community, partners enjoyed learning about approaches that were working for others and noted some common principles of curriculum and program design. Some of these topics were:

- Importance of community control of course design and development
- Importance of having clear goals and benchmarks (yet had challenges establishing benchmarks for advanced levels)
- Ideas for sequencing and aligning content across courses
- Importance of teaching through worldview, and the need to find balance of cultural teaching, speaking practice, and explicit grammar teaching
- Some partners expressed concerns about grammar teaching as a colonial construct, while others found that some explicit grammar teaching accelerated adult language learning
- Recognition that adult second language learning contexts are different than natural first language acquisition contexts

- “Accelerated methods” used in adult LL contexts are or can be different to excel the language recovery process
- Pedagogical approaches can be adapted to Indigenous language contexts
- Teaching through stories and cultural texts
- Specific approaches to curriculum building and teaching at advanced levels such as: Understanding by Design; TPRS; WAYK; Oral Literacy Approach
- Focussing on domains of use and pragmatic language use
- Importance of flexibility, space to practice, mutual support
- Advancing proficiency requires safety in the learning environment where people feel comfortable and are protected from lateral violence and harsh corrections

Use of Technology

At our advancing proficiency meeting focused on the use of technology for learning, we were joined by Dr. Kari Chew, a NE7OLNEW collaborator whose research focuses on the role of technology in Indigenous language education. Our conversation included examples of technologies used by partners for advancing proficiency, and issues relating to technology for communities to consider. Some ideas discussed at this meeting included:

- Increased interest in technology for language learning since the COVID-19 pandemic, including online courses and social media platforms
- Online courses help move learners more quickly to intermediate stages, but not commonly used for advanced level
- Advanced learners more likely to rely on audio resources such as radio, music, and recordings
- Regardless of technology, importance of language use offline in order to advance
- Issues of accessibility, data sovereignty, storage capacities, obsolete technology – need for informed recommendations on these and related issues

Use of Assessment

The topic of assessment arose during many of the conversations in the Advancing Proficiency cluster. Partners talked about how and when to assess learners, using assessment to guide curriculum development, and how to utilize assessment to support advanced level learners. We held a combined cluster meeting on the “use of assessment for advanced proficiency”.

Topics discussed at this meeting included:

- The use of existing assessment tools such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)’s Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) – partners have mixed experiences with using OPIs and other tools created for non-Indigenous languages
- Practices for creating culturally-relevant assessment that are appropriate, meaningful, effective
- The importance of safety in language assessment; emotional factors in language testing and strategies to mitigate these
- Using assessment to identify learner gaps and needs – including “next steps” for learners
- Difficulty establishing benchmarks at advanced levels
- Self-assessment practices

Teaching through Worldview

The importance of teaching through Indigenous worldviews, in ways that are appropriate and relevant to Indigenous language learners, arose at the Advancing Proficiency cluster meetings. Indigenous language learners and communities are facing historical trauma and cultural teachings are important for healing and language recovery. This was often accompanied by discussion and suggestions for land-based and hands-on approaches to learning. Some partners noted that such experiences are enhanced when learners already have a solid foundation in the language. It was also noted that at the more advanced level, there is often a move away from classroom learning to community-based and home-based learning. The following ideas were also discussed:

- Teaching worldview and culture are often treated as separate from teaching grammar – how can both be incorporated at every stage of learning?
- Land-based learning increases learner motivation, deeper understanding of the language
- The learning environment impacts language learning
- Land-based isn't only being *on* the land, also about understanding how land shapes language
- Importance of increasing pragmatic language use at home and in community
- Importance of increasing domains of language use at home and in community
- Whenever possible language teaching should be done by members of the community with deep understanding of culture
 - Some partners and collaborators representing other regions have expressed concern about cultural appropriation by non-Indigenous teachers teaching the language

Partnerships to Support Advancing Proficiency

Various kinds of partnerships to support advancing proficiency were discussed. These include working with support people and some institutions, such as universities. Partners shared concerns about, and productive ways forward, in these kinds of partnerships. They noted the need to build bridges across divides in our field including institutional vs. community approaches, and grammatical vs. communicative approaches to language learning and teaching. Topics discussed included:

- Importance of community control in partnerships with institutions
- In university partnerships, importance of relationship-building and developing programs that align with Indigenous worldviews and approaches to learning
- Need for greater engagement with other fields such as Additional Language Learning; Foreign Language Learning; Adult Education
- Oral tradition vs. literacy approaches: despite increased written resources available, number of highly proficient speakers remains low
- We need everything and everybody!

Learning and Teaching Strategies to Support Advanced Proficiency Development

Partners emphasized that there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to language learning, and it is good to try all different kinds of strategies and approaches. Here is a selection of some of the kinds of strategies that participants have used to advance language proficiency:

- Language camps/being out on the land

- Learning how to read and understand linguistic documentation
- Cross referencing recordings with dictionaries and grammar books
- Support and training for language elicitation
- Promotion, and support for, self-directed learning
- Including leadership training alongside language training
- Mentor-Apprentice Program opportunities for advanced learners
- Elder-supported learning
- Peer-supported learning

Assessment Cluster

The Assessment cluster meetings were hosted by Robyn Giffen.

The following partner representatives attended a minimum of one of the Assessment cluster meetings, including the “assessment for advanced proficiency” (combined cluster) meeting:

- Beverley Roy (Kenjgewin Teg)
- Callie Hill (Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na)
- Kahtehrón:ni Iris Stacey (Kahnawà:ke Education Center)
- Kathryn Michel (Cheif Atahm School)
- Marilyn Shirt (University nuhelot’ine thaiyots’i nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills)
- Melpatkwa Matthew (Chief Atahm School)
- Rhonda Hopkins (Kenjgewin Teg)

The following members of the NEȪOLŅEW team also attended at different times:

- Onowa Mclvor (Project Director)
- Alexandria Carter (Project Manager)
- Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins (Co-Investigator)
- Belinda Daniels (Collaborator)
- Adam Stone (Research Associate)
- Kanen’tó:kon Hemlock (Research Coordinator)
- Nicki Benson (Research Coordinator)
- Jacob Manatowa-Bailey (Research Assistant)

Emerging Themes from the Assessment Cluster

As with the Advancing Proficiency cluster, the first Assessment cluster meetings included open discussions exploring partners’ experiences, ideas, and challenges regarding assessment practices in Indigenous language learning.

Topics explored at these meetings included: the purpose of assessment; experiences of using existing assessment tools; what is unique about Indigenous language assessment; and example assessment strategies that partners’ have used successfully.

Partners identified some topics to explore in greater depth. A subsequent meeting was dedicated to the topic of motivational and emotional factors in assessment, and partners also participated in a combined cluster meeting on “the use of assessment for advanced proficiency”.

The following themes emerged from the Assessment cluster: relevance of existing assessment tools; motivational and emotional factors in assessment; goals and needs with assessment; and assessment strategies used by our partners.

Relevance of Existing Assessment Tools

Partners have tried a variety of existing assessment tools in their programs. The majority of these have not been developed by or for Indigenous language learners. Partners expressed mixed experiences with them.

The proficiency guidelines and Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) developed by ACTFL were discussed at each of the Assessment cluster meetings. For some, the ACTFL guidelines have been helpful in providing a common way of understanding language proficiency across programs and communities. For others, they have found ACTFL, and guidelines developed by other international organizations, to be inadequate and inappropriate for their languages. Partners also discussed challenges with how to score OPIs, track student progress, and use such tools at advanced levels. The following ideas were also raised:

- Need culturally-relevant assessment and evaluation tools that align with Indigenous perspectives and worldviews
- NETOLNEW tool is useful for self-assessment in MAP and similar programs, but would need to be adapted for use in other contexts
- Importance of assessing not only language achievement, but language programs, experience for learners, environment, etc.
- Importance of recognizing there is no “one size fits all” assessment
- Existing assessment tools often need to be adapted in some way to suit Indigenous languages or Indigenous language learning contexts
- Challenge of making time for assessment work

Motivational and Emotional Factors in Assessment

At each of the Assessment cluster meetings, partners discussed the importance of recognizing the impacts that motivation and emotion have and the need to attend to these in approaches to assessment for Indigenous language learners. Partners agreed that assessment processes should be productive, and not punitive. They discussed the following ideas for ensuring culturally-safe assessment experiences:

- Environment
 - Comfortable and familiar
 - Ideally outdoors
 - Environment should also be evaluated to assess learner experience
- Communication
 - Assessment should match learning objectives
 - Open explanations about the purpose of assessment, what to expect during assessment, types of questions, etc.
 - Reassurance that it’s ok to make mistakes

- Relationships
 - Collaborative, including when assessment is scheduled
 - Love, gentleness, kindness
 - Opening with casual conversation/warming up, or other relationship-building activities like sharing meals
 - Research shows that good relationships are a strong predictor of physical health
- Holistic
 - Programs and teachers should be evaluated, perhaps by Elders
 - Looking at all aspects of learning
 - Discussion of skits as a fun way to demonstrate what you know
 - Including healing practices in programs, e.g., with silent speakers

Goals and Needs with Assessment

At several meetings the purpose of assessment arose. Partners noted different uses for assessment including: measuring student learning; evaluating teaching strategies; and informing curriculum design. While assessments need to be culturally-relevant and appropriate for context, they also need to provide the right information to suit the purpose. Selecting, or developing, the right assessment depends on knowing what the assessment will be used for. Some topics discussed with this in mind included:

- One purpose of assessment is to understand which teaching strategies are working
- Another is checking if people are learning what we think is important
- Need for safety and support in assessment practices
- Need different forms of assessment in terms of context, function, and purpose – e.g., language proficiency, program evaluation, community engagement

Assessment Strategies Used by Project Partners

There will never be one perfect assessment for Indigenous languages, as each language and context are different. Partners have tried, and had success with, the following assessment strategies:

- Informal assessment
- Self-assessment
- NETOLNEW tool
- “Show me what you know” - what can you mimic, say, understand, etc.
- “Can-do” statements
- Skits – can be less intimidating, show what you know, can be memorized or written
- Adapted OPI (there has been particular interest in hearing from one another about how OPIs have been adapted to language, context, and needs)

Recommendations, Promising Practices, Caveats

- It is important to remember that Indigenous language recovery efforts are in response to violent attempts to eradicate Indigenous peoples and languages
- Indigenous communities must have control over all aspects of Indigenous language teaching and learning including programs, methods, and assessments

- Indigenous languages need to be taught through Indigenous worldview, which means finding an appropriate balance of cultural teaching and explicit grammar teaching
- Safe learning and assessment environments are essential for effective Indigenous language learning

Looking Ahead

NETOLNEW partners are on the cutting edge in regards to promising practices and research in Indigenous language revitalization. There is expressed interest from many others to learn from our partnership. We know that the discussions held at each of our research cluster meetings have been a source of inspiration and mutual support to partners. We are pleased to share these ideas and resources with one another, as well as others who hope to learn from our work.

HÍSWŪKE SIÁM, Wela'lioq, Nyá:wen, Miigwech, kinanâskomitinawaw, masi chogh, máhsi, kukwstsésemc, Gilakas'la (thank you) to all project members who participated in the research clusters.