

Language Planning: Planning a Future for Your Language

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The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) is a First Nations-led and directed provincial crown agency with the mandate to support the revitalization of First Nations languages, arts and cultures in British Columbia (B.C.).¹ Since 1990, FPCC has been supporting community-based language revitalization projects through grant funding, training, research and resource development. FPCC monitors the status of First Nations languages, develops policy recommendations for First Nations leadership and government and collaborates with organizations on numerous special projects that raise the profile of arts, languages, cultures and heritage in B.C., Canada and internationally.

One of FPCC's key language programs is the Language Revitalization Planning Program.² The program enables communities sharing a language to come together to collaborate in spite of dialect, political and community differences as well as geographical challenges. Communities work as a team to share resources, knowledge, funding, resource people, infrastructure and expertise to develop a language plan. A "language plan" is a framework that outlines the full scope of revitalization activities needed in a community and provides a roadmap of targeted steps that can be evaluated and revised throughout the ongoing process of revitalization and maintenance. A language plan can help a community ensure that efforts are effective. However, planning is not always easy! Since its inception in 2008, the program has had varying degrees of success. Currently we are undertaking a full review of our language planning programming with the aim to better support Indigenous planning models and processes. In partnership with First Nations revitalization experts and regional planning experts, we are exploring the different ways planning takes place at a community and nation/tribal level, and how these processes support ongoing language revitalization efforts.

In this paper we share our learning on the role of language planning in building successful language initiatives and highlight effective practices in language planning that have been implemented in B.C. communities. We hope this information will be useful to community members interested in developing their own language plan.

Current Context of Language Revitalization in British Columbia

The current context of languages in the province poses both challenges and opportunities for language revitalization. British Columbia is rich in linguistic diversity. With 34 First Nations languages indigenous to the region, B.C. has more than 50% of the languages in Canada. However, each of these languages is challenged by having relatively low numbers of fluent speakers. According to the most recent *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages* (Dunlop et al. 2018, 5) there are 4,132 fluent speakers of First Nations languages in B.C., or 3.0% of the total population that reported. Just over half of fluent speakers (51.9%) are aged 65 and over. While the number of fluent speakers overall has decreased since the previous report in 2014, the number of younger fluent speakers reported has increased. In addition, the number of language learners is increasing. These are very promising trends.

In addition, there are multiple external factors that pose challenges to communities. Government funding policies tend to be proposal-based and short term which means long term planning for revitalization is not possible. While education policies have shifted away from the deliberate assimilation of Indigenous people

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and the destruction of their languages through the Indian Residential School system, current policies and practices in education tend not to lead to the development of fluent speakers. There are also more subtle factors that continue to hinder language revitalization such as the way Indigenous languages are represented in the public eye. With a view to sensationalism, media continues to look for “last speaker” stories that promote the marginalization of these languages.

At the community level in B.C., First Nations leadership faces competing priorities. Turnover in leadership and staff, lack of trained staff and funding instability lead to program instability. Most First Nations communities in B.C. are geographically remote from major urban areas, so there are very few local opportunities for training and capacity development. Learners must leave their communities and often travel great distances for their education. There has long been a focus on literacy-based strategies that don’t create fluent speakers. In general, the language infrastructure in communities (everything from facilities to human resources to language curriculum) needs to be built.

In spite of these many challenges, there is also reason for optimism. The increasing number of young fluent speakers and those engaged in language learning (mentioned above) demonstrate a strong desire to reclaim languages. In 2018, the Province of British Columbia announced \$50 million in new funding for language revitalization over three years (Wilson 2018). Moreover, in June 2019, the federal government passed *An Act respecting Indigenous languages* (Bill C-91), which was co-developed by the Department of Canadian Heritage and representatives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. This is the first time that Indigenous people have had the chance to shape federal policy for their languages. Both of these measures hold much promise for work in this area.

Language Planning

What Is Language Planning?

Language planning means that a community decides what they want for the future for their language and maps out how to achieve that future picture. It is not just about teaching or standardization—it lays the groundwork for language in ALL areas of life. Language planning takes a whole-community approach that goes beyond a single domain (such as education) to identify strategies and desired outcomes for all demographics, from infants to Elders. A plan may include community mobilization, fundraising, project planning, staffing, professional development, succession planning, and much more. Figure 1 illustrates some of the broad domains and specific projects that could be considered in a good language plan.

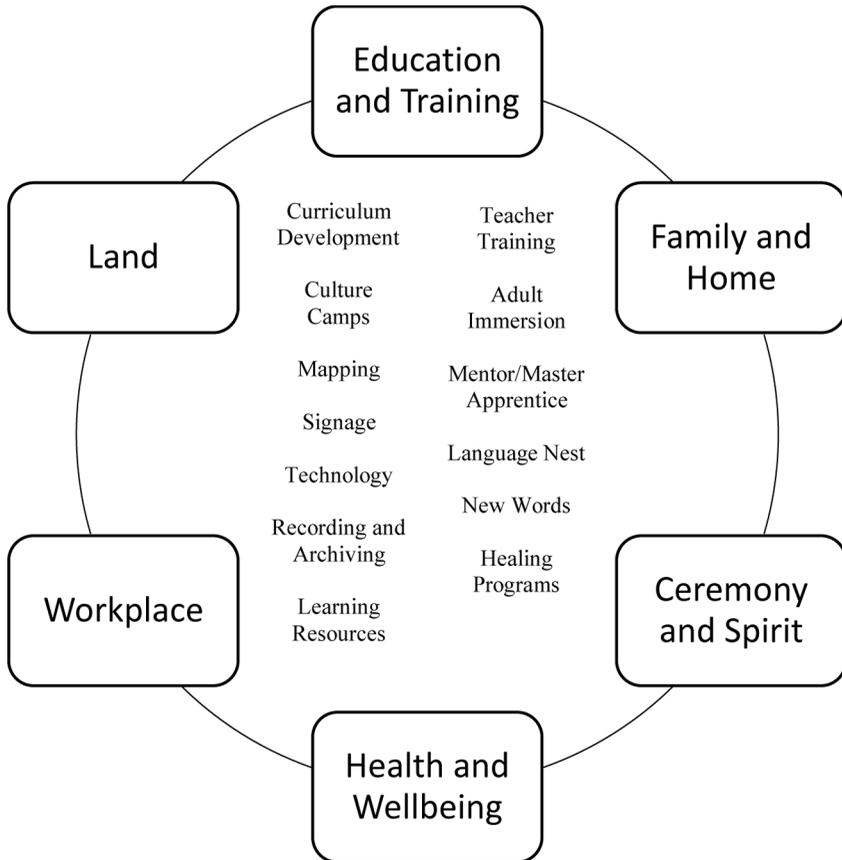
Figure 1 highlights several domains of life, but these are not independent; they are interconnected and depend on each other. For example, in the domain of education, the work of curriculum development comes to mind. Indigenous-centred curriculum development will connect language to activities on the land which in turn links to extracurricular endeavours such as culture camps. Teacher training is a necessity in the domain of education and will require adult immersion in order to develop fluency through task-based language learning such as the Mentor/Master Apprentice method. Task-based activities will tie adult learning to the home and family. Children in the education system are also connected to their homes and families and links can be made between a school and home by providing for learning opportunities for parents and also for preschoolers, such as through a language nest program. Connections within all areas of the figure can be made in similar fashion. Language planning then, should take this concept of interconnectedness into account.

But why do language planning? We often hear community members say: “We don’t have time to plan! We just have to get to the project!” While there are good

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reasons to “jump to it” and act quickly for language revitalization, there are also significant reasons why it is worth including planning in revitalization work.

Figure 1. Domains that may be included in a language plan.



First, the development of a language plan can help estimate the actual cost of language revitalization; this in turn can aid the community in acquiring funding as it tells government and funders that communities know exactly what they need. Second, having a good plan can address common challenges such as program stability, turnover, training, and so on. Because a plan maps out the scope of language activities and identifies gaps, these sorts of challenges can be addressed before they become problems. For example, a plan will identify the current and future need for language teachers. If there are teachers approaching retirement, a plan would anticipate these retirements and enable language planners to recruit young people into a teacher training program well in advance. But most importantly, a plan can help ensure that funding achieves desired outcomes. Goals are clearly outlined, strategies are chosen to address each goal, and results can be measured against the original goals; plans can then be revised as necessary to make certain that the efforts are heading in the right direction.

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How Do You Do Language Planning?

While language revitalization planning is still relatively new for most Indigenous communities in Canada, some shared experiences have shown how NOT to do language planning! It is not ideal to hire people from outside the community to research and write a plan. While it may benefit some communities to have an external expert offer advice on the planning process, it is best to have the planning led by community members themselves; the whole community needs to be involved in the development and execution of a plan. This is because it is the best way to get buy-in from everyone and to begin recruiting people to get involved in the activities outlined by the plan. Although having community-wide involvement is worthwhile, it's not enough just to hold one community meeting to brainstorm a wish-list of programs, projects and initiatives. This is a good starting point in the language planning process, but it's only a first step. It's also helpful to keep in mind that a plan doesn't need to be lengthy and complex to be effective. The main ingredient of a good plan is a clear timeline outlining activities which match achievable goals.

So how is language planning done? Very simply, a community needs to identify:

- Where they are now (current status)
- Where they want to go (vision and goals)
- How they'll get there (action plan)
- Whether they did get there (assessment and evaluation)

Good language planning is about collectively deciding what community members want and being realistic about how these goals will be achieved. A language plan:

- Unites the community around a shared goal; generates buy-in and leadership support
- Demonstrates capacity to funders and to the government (ideally, funding should be for plans instead of projects!)
- Enables efficient use of funds as they come available
- Ensures that projects are sequenced (build on each other)
- Focuses on strategies that have the desired outcomes (knowing vs. putting into action)

What does it mean to be realistic about goals? The answer to that question will vary according to the language status of the community. First Nations communities in British Columbia are at very different stages in terms of number of fluent speakers and ongoing language initiatives. For example, if a community has no fluent speakers with teaching certification, opening an immersion school immediately is not a realistic goal. However, layered short-term goals can lead to the longer-term goal of an immersion school. This could begin by identifying a cohort of young people who are interested in becoming teachers. These young people could be supported to develop their fluency through adult immersion methodologies while simultaneously working towards teaching certification. While this is happening, a language nest could be established to create an immersion language environment for preschoolers. An immersion school could be built on this base when fluent, trained teachers are available. Realistic goals will reflect and build on the current capacity of a community.

It is also important to be realistic about what can be accomplished in a given time, especially when it often takes a considerable amount of time trying to get the funds to build and sustain a language program.

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Ideally, the language plan will lead to the development of language competency instead of just language awareness. It moves people away from just knowing about language to actually being able to use language. In other words, the plan results in speakers. That's language revitalization in a nutshell.

What's the Difference between a Project Plan and a Language Plan?

Because of the nature of funding and resources, most community members are used to thinking in terms of projects rather than plans. What is the difference? Let's take a language nest as an example. A language nest is an immersion program for young children from birth to 5 years. Planning for a language nest project means thinking about everything that is needed for that project, from the facility to the materials such as toys to the fluent speakers and staff that will be needed.

A project plan outlines what will be needed to run a language nest. However, as the language nest project develops, it may be discovered that more programs and supports are needed in the community to help achieve the designated goals. For example:

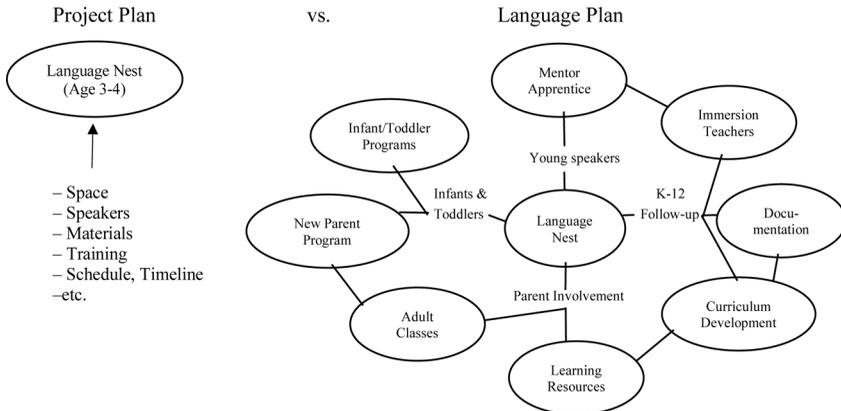
1. You know that you cannot rely entirely on Elders to be the sole providers of language in the nest as they have many demands on their time and may not want to work full time. Do you have enough younger fluent speakers to work in the nest? If not, you will need to consider creating fluent adult speakers in your community who can work in the nest once they become more fluent. A Mentor/Master Apprentice program will be good for this. So you will need to include that in your plan.
2. Starting language immersion for children aged 3-4 years can be challenging if they have had no prior language exposure. In order to achieve the most success in your nest, you may want to provide language exposure opportunities for infants and toddlers. This could include an early childhood program that will expose infants to the language and will teach parents or caregivers language to use with them. This could be a part of your plan.
3. Once you have the nest in operation, what will happen to the children who start Kindergarten? Will their language learning stop there? If your goal is for the children to be fluent speakers, then only an hour a day of language class will not be sufficient. So your community may want to work toward an immersion school. Some of the young people trained through the Mentor/Master Apprentice program may be interested in becoming teachers, so teacher training can be built into your plan.
4. As you begin to launch immersion programming in your schools, you will need immersion curriculum! In order to create good curriculum, you will need to draw from a large bank of language data. That will require documenting the fluent speakers in your community, so plan for a documentation project.
5. When you have a lot of documented information, you can develop a team to create curriculum for the school. Plan for that!
6. In order to support both the children in the nest, and the children in the immersion school, parents will need to learn how to speak the language as well. The curriculum you are developing for the school can also be put to use in adult language classes that will support parents and adults in the community. Plan for that!

Can you see where this is going? A language nest is a single project and one can think of it in that way. However, a language nest can connect and intersect with many other domains and age groups in a community. With good coordination, all of the pieces can fit together and benefit each other. That's exactly what a

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language plan is. A language planner considers the language wellbeing of all community members and decides on the strategies that will best achieve that. Having a plan and carrying it out will achieve so much more than any one project can. The difference between a project plan and a language plan is illustrated in Figure 2.

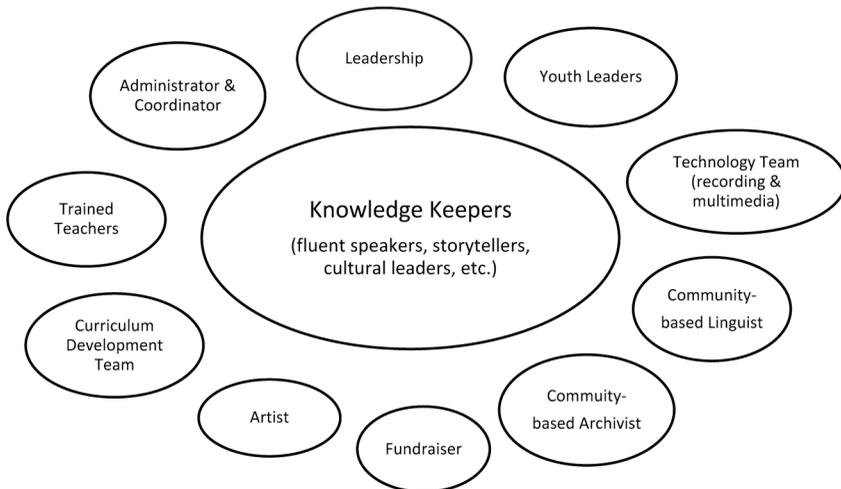
Figure 2. A project plan for a language nest versus a holistic language plan.



Community Language Infrastructure

In order to be successful, a language plan will require a whole language team to carry out the tasks. For too long, in too many communities, the responsibility of language revitalization has fallen to only a few people. Involving a team can help put a language plan into effect. Team members can support each other in the work and provide inspiration to the entire community to move a plan forward. Figure 3 illustrates one possible example of a language team.

Figure 3. Community language infrastructure: A language team.



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In this possible example of a language team, the circles represent different roles or skill sets that contribute to the work. In the work of language revitalization, those who have language and cultural knowledge are respected as having the most important role of passing on that knowledge to others. Other circles represent skills other than language knowledge that are nevertheless important for the work of revitalization. For example, artistic talent can support the creation of learning resources. Technological skills are practical for documentation including the recording and archiving of language multimedia. Training in linguistics (such as a certificate or a Bachelor's degree) is useful for the creation of dictionaries and learning resources. It may be that each of the skill sets is held by a different person, or it may be that some people on the team fulfill several different roles.

This diagram is not intended to suggest that each of these roles are obligatory for a language team, only that there is a wide variety of opportunities for people to bring their unique skills and knowledge to bear on the work of language revitalization. In our experience with language planning in B.C., communities are most successful when they involve a broad range of community members. Providing youth with opportunities to be directly involved in leading revitalization is particularly important.

A language team is just one part of the language infrastructure in a plan. Other considerations include: suitable facilities for language programs, teaching materials for all ages and levels, a resource library and language archive, media and technology (e.g. audio recordings, videos, apps, radio) and more.

Evaluating a Language Plan

Assessment and Evaluation

Evaluation refers to the process of assessment. A language team must be willing to assess the community's language plan and make changes if outcomes are not matching the expected goals. Evaluation should be built into a language plan. The first step to planning an assessment is to have a clear goal: decide what success looks like. How will community members know when their plan is successful? This will provide the guide against which progress can be tracked.

Once a language plan is in place and activities are being carried out, it will soon be time to assess whether the activities are actually meeting goals. This requires a check-in with the current situation. If language programming is not meeting expectations, why not? Perhaps some resistance was encountered, either from within or outside of the community. In order to accurately assess progress, an understanding of the origin of that resistance is necessary. An honest assessment of the situation is the first step in problem-solving to address that resistance. Of course, there are many other reasons that can prevent goals from being met. Were insufficient human or monetary resources allocated to an activity? Was it difficult to maintain an immersion environment due to a high ratio of participants to speakers? Were parents unable to attend a program due to lack of childcare? Was the timing a problem—did seasonal events like flooding impede travel? There are many possible obstacles, but these can be overcome if they are identified and amended through an evaluation process. Without an evaluation, mistakes may be repeated over again.

It is essential in assessment that progress is measured against stated goals and that community members are honest about the outcomes that have been achieved. Effective assessment relies on having measurable outcomes. Ensure there are concrete ways to track progress and results. For example, in a language nest, educators can use index cards to note vocabulary development of young children and periodic comprehension tests can be used. For older children and

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adults, pre- and post- fluency assessments, self-assessments and journaling can be useful measures of progress. Even tracking attendance and numbers of participants over time can help identify the value and reach of a program. Presenting program participants with opportunities to provide feedback is also vital.

Evaluation can seem daunting but it is necessary. At First Peoples' Cultural Council we continually evaluate our own programs. In 2006, FPCC determined that funded programs were creating language awareness but not language fluency. Therefore, the agency shifted its programming focus to immersion-based programs. In addition, each program funding stream has an evaluation component. For example, in the Mentor/Master Apprentice program, apprentices complete pre- and post- self-assessments of fluency, submit regular reports of activities and progress, and undergo a series of oral evaluations in their communities before a panel of fluent speakers. With this combination of measurable outcomes in place, we can assess whether apprentices are increasing their proficiency through the program. We recently undertook an evaluation of our Language Revitalization and Planning Program with external planning expertise in order to improve how we assist communities with the process of language planning.

Strategies That Work

As part of an evaluation process, it's worth considering whether the chosen initiatives are right for the needs of a community. What kinds of strategies have had great outcomes for language revitalization? It's tempting to focus on projects that are easy or popular but this doesn't always get results. Researching the best strategies to meet language goals will be part of the language planning process, but here is a short summary of some ideas to get started.

Programs using language immersion strategies are an excellent choice if a community's goal is to increase the number of speakers. Immersion refers to language learning where no English is used and learners have the opportunity to be surrounded in the target language for a concentrated period of time. Immersion strategies are recommended because learners can increase their proficiency in speaking and understanding a language, rather than only developing some literacy skills or basic vocabulary. Programs that use immersion include:

- Language nests for preschool children
- Language-medium education for Kindergarten to Grade 12 (e.g. Chief Atahm School in Adams Lake, B.C., WSÁNEĆ School Board in Brentwood Bay, B.C. and the Xetólacw Community School in Mount Currie, B.C.)
- Adult immersion programs such as Mentor/Master Apprentice, Where Are Your Keys or Accelerated Second Language Acquisition
- Adult intensive immersion programs (e.g. full-day immersion classes or language houses)

In addition, there are strategies that support and complement immersion programs including the creation of language teams, training of youth language leaders and language documentation of fluent speakers to create learning resources and curriculum. Supporting silent speakers to begin speaking can also boost the number of speakers who are available to support immersion programs. Silent speakers (also known as receptive bilinguals, latent speakers or understanders) are people who understand their language but don't speak it. FPCC has developed a course that assists silent speakers to reclaim their language. For silent speakers, beginning to speak again is a part of reclaiming their identity, healing from past residential school trauma, and taking the first steps toward becoming active participants in language programs in their community.³

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As we demonstrated in Figure 2, these programs will have limited outcomes when they are run as stand-alone projects. A single strategy will not be sufficient to revitalize a language. The greatest outcomes will come from implementing a variety of strategies that support language learning and use in multiple domains in the community, and from connecting those programs in a supportive network. For example, participants from a Mentor/Master Apprentice cohort or an adult intensive immersion program will gain the language proficiency needed to work in a language nest or a language-medium classroom. Children who have participated in a language nest may experience greater success when they move on to a language-medium classroom. Creating language-medium curriculum may require extensive language documentation work to gather the content needed for the curriculum.

More information and resources for the above programs can be found on our website (First Peoples' Cultural Council 2020). For language planning, there is a guide to language planning and policy development which is relevant to interested community members, language planning teams, educators, First Nations leadership, and policy makers (Franks and Gessner 2013). The guide lays the foundation for community-based language revitalization efforts, from surveying speakers to developing a community language plan and implementing language policies and programs. It includes practical information, resource lists and templates for community use.

Conclusion

Reclaiming, revitalizing or maintaining a language is a complex but achievable task. In order to be successful, language planning must be included as a very essential piece of this task. Language planners must identify the current status of the language in the community, the community's desired goals for the language and an action plan that will enable goals to be achieved.

A good language plan will involve all domains of life in a community. It is more than just planning for a single revitalization project. It incorporates all age groups and several different strategies that mutually benefit each other. What's more, developing a language plan is not a one-time job. Regular assessment and evaluation must be carried out to ensure that the plan is working. Then the plan can be modified in order to improve outcomes where projects did not meet goals or add new programs to build on successes.

Based on FPCC's experience in supporting communities with this work, we share a few final thoughts about language planning. We have learned that language planning is about more than the language plan; the process itself is beneficial. It brings people together to talk about language and gives rise to collaboration, particularly because it gives community members a voice. It creates awareness and generates interest. The work of planning will create skill development opportunities for the language team. Most importantly, existing language programming in the community will be strengthened and a community will be on the way to creating an environment where language is actively spoken in all domains!

Notes

¹ We thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

² The Language Revitalization Planning Program is supported by the Province of British Columbia Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

³ For more information on receptive bilinguals, see Romaine (1989) on bilingualism in general and Sherkina-Lieber (2011) and Sherkina-Lieber & Helms-Park

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(2015) on receptive bilinguals in Labrador Inuttitut, especially with regard to testing the comprehension and production abilities of receptive bilinguals.

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