

# Indigenous Language Revitalization and Preservation in Canada: Strategies and Innovations

Wei Jia

Faculty of Education, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Email: jwei323@uwo.ca

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**Abstract**—Indigenous languages are significant fundamentals in Canadian culture and society that carry Indigenous peoples' stories, experiences, spirits, and traditions that represent Indigenous peoples' cultural identities. However, most of the Indigenous languages are endangered and threatened, the historical factors that have contributed to the endangerment of Indigenous languages, especially the residential school system and language assimilation policies in Canada. This paper aims to explore strategies and innovations for Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) and preservation in the Canadian context. In this paper, I begin to investigate the status of Indigenous languages in the past and then discuss the current implications and ILR initiatives, including government legislation and programs in Canada. Through reviewing the strategies for ILR that are implemented around the world, I emphasize the need for new approaches and strategies for further ILR and preservation, such as the use of digital technologies and internet platforms, to make resources more accessible for language revitalization and tools for language revitalization in Canada.

**Keywords**—indigenous language, indigenous languages revitalization, indigenous education, language policy

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Our languages are central to our ceremonies, our relationships to our lands, the animals, to each other, our understandings, of our worlds, including the natural world, our stories, and our laws”—National Chief Perry Bellegarde [1].

Language is one of the core components of Indigenous identity. Indigenous languages hold significance not alone due to their representation of the unique cultural and national identity of Indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge, legacy, and awareness may be effectively represented through their language. More than 70 Indigenous languages are currently spoken by First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit in Canada [2]. Due to colonialism and historical factors, Indigenous communities and Indigenous people face a critical loss of languages, culture, and knowledge. From the perspective of the minority speech community, the language's disappearance is unintentional and usually viewed as undesirable, especially by older generations who have had little or no exposure to the dominant language [3]. Understanding the significance of Indigenous languages in Canada and advocating revitalization and preservation are crucial for Indigenous communities and Indigenous people.

The United Nations has been advocating for Indigenous rights, which include language and education. The United

Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Article 13.1 [4], states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons”. Article 14.1 [4] states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” and Article 14.3 [4] states shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language”. Other countries also encountered the same situation, such as Australia, Mexico, New Zealand, and Norway. In this paper, I will review Indigenous language status in the past and then the current implications and challenges of Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) and preservation in Canada. Moreover, I will examine Australia, Mexico, New Zealand, and Norway's strategies and policies in relation to revitalization and preservation. Through the analysis, explore strategies and innovations from other countries that can be used in the Canadian context.

David *et al.* [5] suggested the Culturally-Relevant visual mapping (Fig. 1) based on the scales of space and time (Fig. 2), analyzing the interrelations between these notions across different geographical and temporal dimensions, including both past and future. Based on the spatial and temporal scale integration in the visual map, to review from the past to the present, and from Canadian society to the global context.

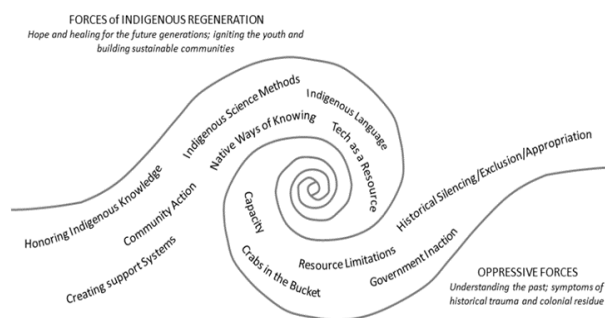


Fig. 1. Culturally-relevant visual map.

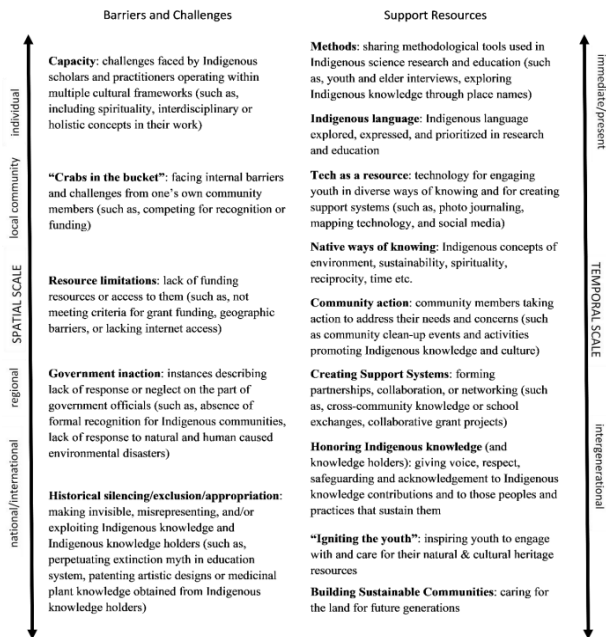


Fig. 2. Spatial and temporal scale.

## II. FACTORS IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE LOSS

In 2021, Statistics reported a total of 237,420 Indigenous people of descent in Canada have the ability to engage in conversational dialogue in Indigenous languages, reflecting a decrease of 10,750 individuals or 4.3% compared to 2016 [2]. There has been a decline in the proportion of Indigenous people who can speak their native tongue.

The residential school system in Canada aimed to educate and transform the Indigenous young generation and assimilate them into Canadian society. The students experienced social isolation and their cultural heritage was treated with disapproval or criticism. They have been separated from their residences and parents, and experienced a separation from select siblings, as educational institutions were organized on the basis of gender segregation. The children were prohibited from utilizing their native language, including in written correspondence addressed to their parents. The process of assimilating children started right away upon their enrollment in the schools, involving the cutting of their hair including boys, and the removal of their traditional attire, replacing it with new uniforms. In several instances, individuals were also given new names instead of using their own names [6].

Khawaja [7] mentioned the unearthing of the remains of 215 children at the location of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia in 2021. Ahead of this time, the causes of death of these children were unknown; they were interred in an unmarked collective grave. Fig. 3 shows the main events in Canadian history and the most recent residential school closed in 1996. According to Miller [6], the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation held a ceremony in which the names of 2800 children who died in residential schools in Canada were revealed. Over 1600 children who die in residential schools remain unidentified. These painful tragedies have generated more motivation for the movements aimed at revitalizing Indigenous culture and language. This is of vital significance as it contributes to the process of restitution for contemporary Indigenous communities who are still suffering the

consequences of Canada's history of genocide.

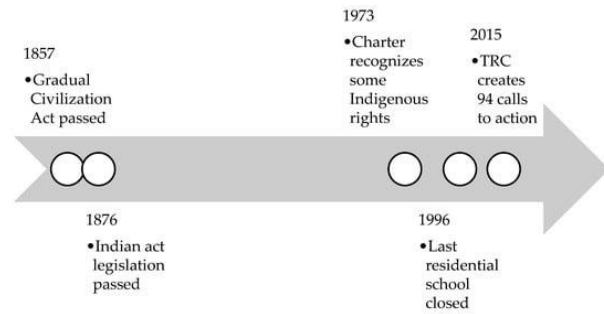


Fig. 3. Important actions of Indigenous language in Canadian history.

Beck and Lam [3] indicated that the term “language loss” occurred in the Canadian context in relation to the discussion of Indigenous languages. It was interrupted by the government intentionally that the Indigenous language cannot be transmitted through generations. The minority languages such as French or the languages spoken by immigrant groups were interrupted due to the voluntary adoption of the majority language by children, which is different from Indigenous languages. They also mentioned that the interrupted transmission leads to a lack of proficiency on the part of the younger generation. Consequently, they tend to embrace the dominant language as their primary language for both personal use and raising their children. This ultimately leads to the extinction of the minority language, as well as the loss of identity, societal disintegration, cultural discontinuity across generations, and the erosion of traditional knowledge.

## III. IMPLEMENTATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN CANADA

The number of Indigenous people who speak their mother tongue is declining, which is the main cause of the drop in the number of speakers of Indigenous languages [2]. It is crucial to preserve and maintain Indigenous languages in use and aims to keep the languages alive. This section will explore current implementations of legal rights, programs, and projects in diverse formats in Canada.

### A. Rights and Policies

The Indigenous Language Act (ILA) [8] is a Canadian law that aims to develop ILR, it states that “Whereas the status of Indigenous languages varies from one language to another, including with respect to the vitality of those languages, and there is an urgent need to support the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen them”. The Act was created in association with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Métis Nation and Department of Canadian Heritage. Moreover, the Government of Nova Scotia introduced the Mi'kmaq Language Act. This legislation preserves the Mi'kmaq language as the province's first language [9].

In addition, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC): Calls to Action [10] showed the demand for Indigenous language preservation in the following points:

1. We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.
2. We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following

principles:

- i. Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.
- ii. Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties.
- iii. The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.
- iv. The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.
- v. Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.

3. We call upon the federal government to appoint, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner. The commissioner should help promote Aboriginal languages and report on the adequacy of federal funding of Aboriginal-languages initiatives.

4. We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.

Through the ILA, the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (OCIL) was created. Point 1, 2, and 3 of the TRC are related to The ILA about Indigenous languages. These legislations aim to protect, reclaim, recognize, and revitalize the Indigenous languages and acknowledge the legal status of Indigenous languages in Canadian society.

#### *B. Kanien'keha / Mohawk Language Program*

Mohawk language is one of the six Iroquoian language family. Mohawk remains the only Iroquoian language spoken in Canada in significant numbers, with approximately 1200 speakers. Critical extinction risk still exists for the remaining languages [11].

One of the ILR programs is Kanien'keha / Mohawk Language Program. Community-based Kanien'keha immersion program in Kahnawà:ke community. Younger generations, who have covered from kindergarten to Grade 4, receive their entire education in Kanien'keha. 60% of the instruction at the elementary level (grades 4 to 6) is conducted in Mohawk, while the remaining 40% is conducted in English. In opposition, some parents prefer that their children attend Kuteri School, a community-based English-language elementary school. Since 2004, the Kanien'keha Ratiwennahn:rats adult immersion program has been in operation. Adult Immersion Program has more than 50 alumni and utilizes Kanien'keha in the majority of domains. Additionally, language software was developed in order to create instructional software for Kanien'keha. Further logistical concerns were made known, including funding, lodging, curriculum development, instructional strategies, and language policy. The participation of Elders, and a supportive environment are crucial for improving the situation of endangered languages [12]. The revitalization of Kanien'keha / Mohawk language also was enhanced by a Native teacher preparation program at the University of Québec [13].

#### *C. Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Sníchim Revitalization*

Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Sníchim also known as Squamish belongs to the Salishan family and in the Pacific Northwest language area [11]. Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Sníchim is spoken by the people who live in the former inhabitants of a territory situated along the western coast of present-day Canada, including Burrard Inlet, False Creek, English Bay, and Howe Sound. With the support of Simon Fraser University, the community organization Kwi Awt Stelmexw established a full-time adult immersion program for the language in 2016. The Certificate in Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Language Proficiency (CSLP) and the Diploma in Language Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Proficiency (DSLPL) were both implemented. Benson and Khelsilem [14] created the Glossary of Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh, which is the first iteration of the Glossary of Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Language Revitalization. The glossary included words that related to the history of language devitalization and other words about the CSLP, its creation, contributors, and teaching methods. Enhanced by the contributions and collaborative efforts of additional Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh language community members, the glossary would be improved.

#### *D. Challenges in Canada*

Insufficient financial resources, lack of commitment, and inadequate long-term planning, and implementation may impede grassroots and community initiatives [12]. The primary obstacle is shifting the linguistic ideologies of both non-native speakers and speakers of the language, who have neglected the transmission and preservation of their own language. The progressive decline in intergenerational transmission and subsequent extinction of these languages serves as further evidence of the success of the prevailing ideology that promotes domain languages like English as the language of prestige, education, and social advancement. This ideology is not solely supported by government policies, but also by Indigenous educators and parents themselves [15]. Gomashie [12] suggested that the important focus of language revitalization initiatives is intergenerational transmission, which occurs when children learn a language from their parents, relatives, or other caretakers within the household. The daily use of their ancestral language by adults is beneficial to the language's vitality.

de León [15] mentioned that the absence of interest at the federal and provincial levels regarding the implementation of language policies. Initiatives from the government must also be pursued in order to revitalize languages. Nevertheless, provincial and federal administrations in Canada continue to approach Indigenous issues with some degree of contention, which significantly impedes the development and implementation of policies [7]. Even so, the most challenging barrier arises from the systemic circumstances that continuously empower Indigenous populations to endure inequity and prejudice [15].

### **IV. STRATEGIES OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN GLOBAL**

#### *A. Australia*

O'Brien and Bobongie-Harris [16] state that the historical and current issue of Australian governments and institutions demonstrating their authority to marginalize language,

culture, and other knowledge systems has been a significant challenge for First Nations peoples. The Christian missionaries responsible for supervising missions and reservations held the belief that their efforts were aimed at saving souls and the education of First Nations children, with the ultimate goal of facilitating their assimilation into the dominant societal norms. Those missions served as tools of the colonial administration, with the explicit purpose of eliminating the individuals' sense of identity and severing their ties to culture, language, and family, in order to transform them into submissive laborers for wealthy people.

One aspect of the colonization process is the imposition of English language instruction and the compulsion for children to exclusively communicate in English, therefore supplanting their native languages. The First Nations population was in decline as a "dying race [16]. They mentioned that the Australian government has implemented a bilingual revitalization initiative as part of the curriculum in schools. The inclusion of community engagement and co-design processes including First Nations language speakers is of most importance when implementing First Nations language programs inside educational institutions.

The involvement and engagement of traditional owners and elders in the decision-making process is of utmost importance. It is essential to intentionally prioritize the inclusion of First Nations people's perspectives in the development and implementation of any First Nations language initiative. The enhancement of educators' cultural competency in order to effectively implement First Nations language programs for a wide range of learners is of vital importance [16]. They also stated that First Languages Australia (FLA) is a prominent national organization dedicated to advocating for the recognition and integration of First Nations languages into the Australian curriculum. In 2016, the FLA facilitated a workshop that convened educators from various regions of Australia with the aim of engaging them in the formulation of a comprehensive national plan.

Smith, Giacom, and McLean [17] show that the online tool for the Gamilaraay Language program was implemented program in collaboration with First Nations reference groups. O'Brien and Bobongie-Harris [16] introduced that in the state of Queensland, there have been effective initiatives aimed at revitalizing First Nations languages, which have been executed via collaborative efforts and collaborations with local First Nations people. The Yumba (Everyone) Languages Program is now being implemented at Eidsvold State School, which is a rural educational institution located in the state of Queensland. Mossman State School, located in North Queensland, has incorporated the instruction of Kuku Yalanji, a language indigenous to the First Nations, into its curriculum. They focused on the utilization of co-design, genuine delivery, and cultural inclusion as pedagogical approaches to teach First Nations languages to students.

### *B. Mexico*

Mexico has various different Indigenous languages and the integrationist policies from the past focused on imposing Spanish as the dominant language. The policies such as the Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indios (LGDLPI, General Act on the Linguistic Rights of

Indigenous Peoples) and the program of Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (CGEIB, General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education) has significant impact to ILR in Mexico. The education program of CGEIB aims to encompass all levels of formal education, ranging from elementary to higher education. The establishment of intercultural institutions, such as the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (URACCAN), represents a significant development in higher education within the context of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast [15].

León [15] also mentioned that the government experienced a shift in its language and education policy, adopting a new framework that prioritized Indigenous bilingual education since the early 1960s. The Ministry of Public Education formally incorporated the concept of "bilingual education" into its official agenda in 1963. The General Law of Indigenous Education (Ley General de Educación Indígena) authorized in 1993 requires the promotion of education in Indigenous languages, with the provision that the instruction of Spanish shouldn't hinder the preservation of linguistic and cultural identities among Indigenous students. A total of 40 introduction books were released in the 40 most widely spoken Indigenous languages inside the country. This instructional technique advocated for the utilization of the first language (L1) as the medium of instruction, while also including the teaching of Spanish as a second language (L2), which is considered as an innovative approach.

### *C. New Zealand*

Albury [18] introduced the survival of Indigenous languages was seriously threatened by European colonial settlers in New Zealand. New Zealand has an Indigenous language of Māori and was colonized by British colonization. The Māori language was systematically eliminated due to the policies, and it was agreed by the governments that the Indigenous people would assimilate and give up their own languages. He indicated that the government of New Zealand adopted a biculturalist approach at the beginning of its program to revitalize Māori as a language by advocating that the language be used as an indexical of New Zealand's identity. The first strategy is the Māori Language Strategy (MLS), which enhances the lexicon development and bilingualism and biliteracy approaches. New Zealand also experimented with soft neotraditionalist approaches, which promote the use of the Māori language in communities, such as language programs for whānau and iwi (Māori tribes).

## V. STRATEGIES AND INNOVATION IN THE FUTURE

The techniques of negotiating, mediating, communicating, and cooperating are crucial tools for actively participating and engaging in ILR initiatives. Impressive achievements and innovative approaches have been accomplished via the execution of independent and autonomous projects that involve participants from Indigenous communities, academics, and local and international nonprofit organizations. By encouraging intercultural exchange, diverse actors participate in state-independent projects, autonomous educational initiatives, research, and advocacy [15].

Developing and promoting various initiatives, including language and cultural camps for young people, language programs for after-school activities, language classes for adults, immersive programs and camps for adults, language learning through mentor-apprentice relationships, language-focused residential communities, courses designed for silent speakers, and specifically designed for elderly language learners [12]. Other programs and projects focused on the most popular language revitalization programs and strategies, such as language nests, immersion schooling, enhanced learning methods, and the Mentor-Mentee language learning program [19].

Teachers and educators' training is important. There is a demand for proficient educators who have fluency and comprehension of the language, as well as for instructional resources of exceptional quality. An approach that has emerged is the establishment of Indigenous language teacher training programs, which focus on supporting those who are learning the language as a second language. These programs also provide them with the necessary skills to design educational plans and teach in immersive environments. In order for language revitalization efforts to be successful, it is imperative that parents demonstrate their commitment by enrolling their children in immersion programs and actively supporting language learning at home [13].

Documentation is another strategy for future research. The documentation practices are the immediate community-based materials production. Instead of attempting to replicate culture, we were engaging in spontaneous creation, allowing for the inclusion of story proposals, and relying on natural interactions. By reaffirming the significance of the on a daily, we aimed to create something that would maintain its adaptable characteristics within the educational environment [20].

The use of technology is also significant. Wemigwans [21] mentioned that the Internet contributes to broader cultural movements such as Indigenous resurgence by serving as a tool that would help disseminate important ideas to act on and connect the minds of many more people than was previously possible. The online project FourDirectionsTeachings.com was conceived to give expression to Indigenous worldviews through the teachings of Elders and Traditional Teachers from five distinct Indigenous Nations. In honor of the timelessness of Indigenous Oral Traditions, audio narration is provided throughout the site, complemented by beautifully animated visuals. In addition, the site provides free curriculum packages for Grades 1 to 12 to further explore the vast richness of knowledge and cultural philosophy introduced in each teaching. The curriculum is provided in downloadable PDF and can be read online through the Teacher's Resources link.

The new bundle is a new signifier and it is a new offering online that distinguishes itself from new media art digital storytelling information, and the digital bundle is a new social movement online as it challenges existing dominant social configurations of power by contributing to the social and political transformation of "white stream society" [21]. She encouraged the development of technological and online tools for Indigenous communities since the internet serves as the primary means of communication for numerous Indigenous groups throughout North and South America. It

has emerged as the principal instrument for the widespread distribution of information and knowledge, and ongoing initiatives have been undertaken to connect Indigenous communities with e-health, education, and diverse online government services.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Indigenous languages and Indigenous people have been through restrictive language policies and systematic residential schools. The residential school system and language regulations implemented had negative effects on Indigenous culture and communities, resulting in significant suffering. The protection of Indigenous languages, encompassing the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous language and culture, is of crucial importance. The current implantations in Canada. The legislation and policies provide support for the revival of Indigenous languages and advocate for more opportunities to facilitate the development of additional initiatives aimed at promoting access to Indigenous languages and cultures. The act of revitalizing Indigenous languages and perceiving them as dynamic entities has the potential to foster innovative opportunities among communities, rather than only engendering preservation efforts [20]. Other countries' strategies provide insights for future innovations in ILR from different perspectives. Recognizing and acknowledging Indigenous communities, it is imperative to thoroughly examine and establish comprehensive Indigenous programs and educational initiatives. These efforts are crucial for the effectiveness of ILR and preservation.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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