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Is early immersion effective for Aboriginal language acquisition? A case study from an Anishinaabemowin kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous people in North America and around the world are in dire circumstances with respect to language maintenance and cultural continuation. However, Indigenous communities are also taking back increasing control of the education of their children. In so doing, they are frequently exploring culture-based education and language immersion models as a means of perpetuating language by passing it on to the youngest generation. This is the goal of the Mnidoo Mnising Anishinabek Kinooomaage Gaming (MMAK) Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) immersion school on Manitoulin Island. In this paper, we describe the linguistic results of early years education at the MMAK. We begin with a description of the development of the MMAK and share its successes and challenges in the framework of larger policy developments in the region. We then discuss the linguistic outcomes thus far for students in the MMAK; having collected data with Junior and Senior Kindergarten students over the past two years using multiple assessment methods, we have been able to establish clear patterns with respect to the impact of Anishinaabemowin language immersion on the language development of these students. Finally, we explore how Aboriginal language immersion may be a tool for language revitalization for this and other communities.

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Introduction

As in all countries with colonial histories, Canada's First Peoples are engaged in a battle to maintain our languages and cultures for generations yet to come. The education system has in the past been a tool for the destruction of Aboriginal languages and cultures. Today, however, as First Peoples take greater control of their educational systems, the belief is growing amongst academics and community members that education can be a tool for cultural and language revitalization.

Certainly, now is the time for Canada's First Peoples to engage in language revitalization efforts. Canada contains approximately 50–80 spoken Aboriginal languages belonging to 11 language families, with 3 language isolates (Campbell 1997; UNESCO 2014). The variability in the exact number of languages is the result of dialect differences between communities; as is the case for many languages around the world, it can be difficult to clearly differentiate between dialects, or mutually intelligible variations of a single language, and separate but related languages. Given our vast landscape, this is particularly the case for languages with *dialect continuums*, or chains of dialects

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such that adjacent speaker communities can understand one another, but the speakers from communities spaced further from one another can only understand one another with difficulty, if at all. This is the case for Anishinaabemowin, an Algonquian language known variably as *Saulteaux*, *Ojibwe/Ojibway/Ojibwa*, *Chippewa*, *Odawa*, *Pottawatomi*, *Mississauga*, and *Algonquin*. Our oral and written scholarship tells of why these various speaker communities separated from one another (Benton-Benai 2010), but that all have retained Anishinaabe identities and dialects of the Anishinaabemowin language to this day.

Anishinaabemowin, along with Cree, Inuktitut, Mi'kmaq, and Dene, is one of the handful of Canadian Aboriginal languages that are not currently considered endangered, but rather that are listed as vulnerable according to UNESCO's language assessment criteria (2014). This allows the good fortune of a greater number of speakers to teach the language and in some cases more learning resources. However, given that the language is not spoken or spoken widely in all communities that have it as a heritage language (Pitawanakwat 2013), its status as non-endangered cannot be misconstrued as an excuse to become complacent; rather, now is the time to make use of the tools at hand and increase efforts to ensure the vitality of Anishinaabemowin.

Language immersion and language revitalization

Aboriginal language immersion is a topic of discussion in both educational and political spheres in Canada today. The Canadian education system, particularly the residential school system, was for years used as a tool for exterminating Aboriginal languages as part of a wider agenda aimed at causing 'Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide"' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015 1). While Canada's last residential school closed in 1996, government policy has been slow to enact measures to maintain and support Canada's Aboriginal languages. At the time of this writing, immersion is not funded by the Federal Government's existing First Nations school funding model. Recent attempts by previous governments at developing policy to address the country's failure at appropriate education for First Nations children also notably omitted funding for or even mention of immersion education (Morcom 2014). With the completion of the TRC and the release of substantial documentation of Canada's use of education as a tool for genocide, Aboriginal education and cultural revitalization are currently at the forefront for both the current government and Canadian society as a whole.

From a First Nations perspective, immersion education has been and remains a key component of educational and linguistic policy. The Assembly of First Nations [AFN] which represents First Nations across Canada on a federal level has aimed for the development of immersion education opportunities since its formation (AFN 2010; Morcom 2014). Most notably, immersion is one of the underpinnings of the seminal document *First Nations Control of First Nations Education*, first released as *Indian Control of Indian Education* in 1972, and updated continuously since, with the latest iteration released in 2010 (AFN 2010). This policy is supported by much research in the Canadian context. In spite of a lack of funding, where language immersion has been implemented in a Canadian context, it shows great promise for halting or reversing language loss. For example, since the introduction of widespread immersion and culture-based education under the Mi'kmaq Kinamatnewey Self-Government Agreement (SGA) in Maritime Canada, the Mi'kmaq language, which was once endangered, has moved to vulnerable status according to UNESCO's evaluation criteria (Usborne et al. 2011; Atleo 2013; Battiste 2013; Morcom 2013, 2014; UNESCO 2014).

Elsewhere, in the mainland United States and Canada, immersion programs for languages such as Navajo, Hualapai, Keres Pueblo, Arapaho, Mohawk, Cayuga, Inuktitut, and others have generally demonstrated positive outcomes for Aboriginal language acquisition and transmission (Watahomigie and McCarty 1994; Wright and Taylor 1995; Greymorning 1995; DeJong 1998; Agbo 2001; Demmert 2001; Louis and Taylor 2001; Bougie, Wright, and Taylor 2003; McCarty 2003; Grenoble and Whaley

2006; Ball 2007; Lockard and de Groat 2010; Osborne et al. 2011; Battiste 2013; Morcom 2013; Singh and Reyhner 2013; Morcom 2014). Still others have struggled due to a lack of funding or teacher training (Guèvremont and Kohen 2012). Looking abroad to the results of some of the first Indigenous language programs, which were developed in New Zealand and Hawaii, students are now able to complete not only elementary but also secondary and tertiary studies in their heritage language (Greymorning 1995; DeJong 1998; McCarty 2003; Harrison and Papa 2005; McIvor 2005; Ball 2007; Guèvremont and Kohen 2012; Singh and Reyhner 2013). Because of that, in spite of the challenges, First Nations in Canada are increasingly exploring immersion educational options to ensure the survival of their languages and take control of their education systems. Mnídoo Mnising Anishinabek Kinooomaage Gaming (MMAK) is one such program.

An overview of bilingual education in an Aboriginal context

Within the scope of bilingual education, there are various models that have been employed in Aboriginal communities, as well as around the world. These range on a spectrum based on heritage language inclusion and acquisition goals. As Osborne et al. (2009) write,

on one end of the spectrum, transitional bilingual programs, also known as 'weak' forms of bilingual education, have potential assimilationist overtones, aiming to shift the child from the heritage minority language to the dominant, majority language as quickly as possible. On the other hand, two-way, or 'strong' bilingual programs aim to extend the use of the heritage language leading to cultural and linguistic diversity. (3)

The MMAK program, as discussed here, is an example of strong bilingual education in the form of enrichment immersion. Enrichment immersion education, like the MMAK, sees students arriving at school often with limited knowledge of the target Aboriginal language. The target language is then used as the primary language of instruction, and students learn the language much as they did their first language, reliant on their innate linguistic capacity. The goal is additive bilingualism, or proficiency in both the heritage and dominant languages, as well as overall language maintenance and enrichment (Hornberger 1991). Also within the realm of strong bilingual education, maintenance immersion seeks to strengthen the heritage language use and knowledge of students who arrive already speaking the Aboriginal language (Hornberger 1991). Weak or transitional bilingual education offers a contrast to this, both in terms of the language with which students commence their education and the intended linguistic outcomes. Unlike in enrichment immersion, but similar to maintenance immersion, students in weak bilingual education arrive at school speaking primarily the Aboriginal language. However, unlike immersion, they receive support in school with the goal of transitioning to the mainstream language. The aim is generally subtractive bilingualism, or the replacement of the Aboriginal language with the mainstream language in the school setting (Osborne et al. 2009). It is also important to mention in this discussion language teaching as a subject, in which students overtly study the structure, function, and vocabulary of a language (Morcom 2014). A more in-depth discussion of these approaches is not within the scope of this paper; however, it is vital to note that they fall within a continuum, and there are few programs that fit the prototype of a specific approach. Certainly, there is variation across programs and pedagogies within each approach, and these have impacts for educational and linguistic outcomes (Hornberger 1991).

The development of the MMAK

Manitoulin Island and the North Shore of Lake Huron are at the heart of the traditional territory of the Anishinaabek, and home to numerous First Nations. Six of these, Aundek Omni Kaning, Sheguiandah, M'Chigeeng, Sheshegwaning, Whitefish River, and Zhiibaahaasing, have joined together to form the United Chiefs and Council of Mnídoo Mnising (UCCMM). Within all of the UCCMM's member Nations, Anishinaabemowin is the heritage language, but the language has seen decreased use in recent years; currently, only 8% of residents of UCCMM member nations speak it in the home, even

though 95% believe it is important to learn (Pitawanakwat 2013). As part of a move to increase language vitality in their communities, the United Chiefs and Council of Mnidoo Mnising developed the UCCMM Anishinaabek Language Declaration in the fall of 2011. This declaration is as follows:

The UCCMM assert the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons. The UCCMM will take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected, and will ensure that individuals employed in the UCCMM FN territory will perform and provide all work and service functions in their ancestral language by the Year 2030. The Anishinaabek of the UCCMM territory will assert 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. In the UCCMM territory access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language [*sic*]. All individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education without discrimination. (2013)

The development of the MMAK as an immersion school is central to this declaration for three reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, it enables the participating children to be educated in their heritage language in a school that focuses on culturally appropriate teaching and learning. Second, as previously discussed, immersion is the most expeditious and effective way to produce language speakers who are able to develop and transmit the intellectual and historical heritage of the Anishinaabek as outlined above. Finally, the development of this school is a clear assertion of the sovereign right of the UCCMM's member Nations to 'assert the right to establish and control their education systems' (UCCMM 2013), as is in keeping with the sovereign rights of First Nations across the country and as is central to the educational policy of the AFN and the United Nations (UN) (UN 2008; AFN 2010; Morcom 2014). The MMAK is an immersion Anishinaabemowin school, which means that the children learn entirely in Anishinaabemowin for the first three years of school. Since financial constraints mean that the children will have to move to English language school at Grade 4, starting in Grade 2, when the children are aged between 6 and 7 years, English will be slowly introduced to help ensure a successful transition. Grade 2 will be taught 80% in Anishinaabemowin, and Grade 3 will be taught bilingually. As this is a program under development, Grades 2 and 3 have not yet been offered as of this writing.

The MMAK has two full-time teachers, one of whom is a first-language Anishinaabemowin speaker and the other of whom is a very fluent second-language speaker. As in Bishop, Berryman, and Ricardson (2002), high teacher efficacy further supports the attainment of the program's successful linguistic fluency goals. Similarly, this is clearly a factor in the MMAK immersion program. One can see that the MMAK teachers take great care and much pride in creating a culturally rich learning environment. Their vast Anishinaabe knowledge teaches the students not only Anishinaabe content but also Anishinaabe ways of knowing and understanding. In addition, when fluent elders visit the classroom, the children, as well as visiting non-fluent parents and guests, are able to experience fluent speech in conversation, which will enable them to spread their use of Anishinaabemowin beyond the classroom walls and into other domains of language use. The MMAK is one of the programs offered by Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute (KTEI) which is an affiliate of the UCCMM.

The pedagogy of the MMAK focuses on Anishinaabe traditional ways of teaching and learning, and is also informed by the Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi 1998). This means that rather than preparing lessons, the teachers act as guides for learning by creating opportunities for exploration in line with the children's interests, as well as the curriculum. There is an emphasis on graphic arts, traditional Indigenous arts and activities, and cognitive, social, and language development. The children play an active role in learning, and are encouraged to ask questions and make discoveries. The goal is to create strong learners who approach knowledge with a sense of curiosity, connection, and wonder.

Research with the MMAK

To support the development of the MMAK and to give insight into the development of Aboriginal language immersion programs for the benefit of other communities who are exploring this option,

the families, teachers and administrators of the MMAK have opted to have us engage in research on the program and its impacts. This research will continue at least until the current cohort of students reaches Grade 3, after which point they will transition to English-medium school.

The research is a result of a long-standing relationship between KTEI and Queen's University. KTEI provides space and support for the Manitoulin-North Shore community-based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP), offered by Queen's University. In addition to co-authoring this paper, as coordinator of ATEP and executive director of KTEI, we work closely together on the management of ATEP. Furthermore, as researchers and professors of Anishinaabe Métis and Anishinaabe heritage, we have the honor of engaging in research and teaching that contributes to the revitalization and celebration of our heritage language. This research is part of a longitudinal study funded by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It has been approved by the Queen's University Graduate Research Ethics Board.

Participant pool

The participant pool for the study commenced with the 12 initial JK students. All students were of Anishinaabe heritage and started with similar beginner-level proficiency in the language. In the 2014–2015 academic year, 2 of the original 12 left the school and 8 students joined the MMAK, mostly at the JK level. Some of these students joined later in the year than others. Two of these students are non-Aboriginal.

Research goals

This research has three goals: First, we aim to evaluate the children's linguistic development to gauge their fluency in the Anishinaabemowin language, since language acquisition is the primary goal of this program. Secondly, it is our goal to evaluate the children's academic development to ensure their learning needs are met. Thirdly, we aim to evaluate the children's self-esteem and pride in speaking their language. Due to the scope of this paper, we will focus on the children's linguistic development here. Namely, we aim to answer the following question: to what extent is immersion in Anishinaabemowin an effective way to develop linguistic fluency in kindergartners? For the purposes of this study, 'fluency' is defined in terms of both expressive and receptive speech, and refers to the ability to express oneself easily and accurately in a variety of evaluative (test-based) and social/interactive speech domains, as well as the ability to understand spoken language. As most participants are pre-literate, we focus on oral/aural language except in the case of reading written numbers.

Methodology

Language acquisition was evaluated using two separate metrics. The first metric took the form of a test specifically designed to evaluate students' language proficiency, and focused on evaluative language skill. Here, 'evaluative' refers to language as demonstrated in a contrived testing situation, rather than language as used in natural conversation. It was administered in the spring of each academic year by an educator whose first language is Anishinaabemowin and a research assistant. These metrics, adapted from those employed by Osborne et al. (2009), were meant to assess the students' age-appropriate reading of numbers, as well as listening and speaking abilities:

- (a) Identify colors
- (b) Identify written numbers
- (c) Label basic body parts
- (d) Describe pictures in complete sentences
- (e) Identify objects

In the first test, the participants were asked to identify the colors of circles, using either the animate or inanimate form of the verb. Note that in Anishinaabemowin, words that are adjectives in English are either affixes, or, more commonly, inanimate verbs, so the translation of 'white' is more literally 'it is white'. Anishinaabemowin has animate/inanimate gender distinction, and intransitive verbs often vary depending on whether the subject is animate or inanimate. For example, compare *miskozi* 'it (animate) is red' with *miskwaa* 'it (inanimate) is red'. Circles are grammatically inanimate, so the inanimate form of the verb is technically more accurate. However, both the animate and inanimate forms were accepted as correct for the purposes of this study, since the focus of the question was on the color, not on the shape. Because of this, the gender of their responses was not recorded, but rather the focus was on the correctness of the semantics of their answer. In the second test, students were asked to identify numbers between 1 and 20; they were permitted to get to the number by counting to it on their fingers. In the third test, they were asked to point at their own body parts after hearing the words in Anishinaabemowin. In the fourth test, they were asked to describe pictures using complete sentences, with prompts as to the subjects. In this test, unlike the color test, attention was paid to correct verb forms and morphology. For the fifth test, they were shown pictures of objects and asked to name them. There were six questions in each test. The same test was given to all students in both years.

Further language assessment took place informally within the classroom. Although less quantifiable, this is vital because naturalistic observation is the best way to assess social and interactive linguistic ability. For this reason, at the end of each year, the teachers were asked to evaluate students' linguistic abilities. These evaluations were done according to a version of the Common European Framework that was adapted specifically for the evaluation of Anishinaabemowin, and that is in use for various programs at KTEI as part of the larger *Anishinaabe Odziwin* cultural standards program (KTEI 2015), which encourages students and staff to engage in cultural activities and language learning as part of their learning journey or professional development (KTEI 2015). Students are assessed according to fluency, accuracy, willingness to speak, and pride in speaking Anishinaabemowin and being Anishinaabe. For fluency and accuracy, students are ranked at level 1, 2, or 3 within the larger categories of A (beginner), B (intermediate), and C (fluent). For willingness and pride, students are assessed on a Likert scale from 1 to 6, where 6 is the most willing/proud to speak the language and be Anishinaabe. Those students who are not of Anishinaabe heritage were not assessed as to their pride in being Anishinaabe or speaking the language, but rather on their willingness to speak the language and engage respectfully with Anishinaabe culture.

Results

In the first year of testing (2013–2014), all 12 participants were in JK. In that year, the students got an average of 47% overall on the language test. In the 2014–2015 academic year, students in their first year achieved an average of 28%; it must be noted here that several of these students joined the MMAK in February, rather than September, which is likely the reason for the lower scores among this cohort. By contrast, in the 2014–2015 academic year, those students in their second years of immersion achieved an average of 77% on this evaluation (Table 1).

There was a marked difference between the results of students in their first year and the results of students in their second year of immersion (Table 2).

Table 1. Anishinaabemowin Assessment Results by year.

	Identifying Colors	Identifying numbers	Labeling body parts	Completing sentences	Naming objects	Overall score
2013–2014 starters	58%	67%	31%	51%	63%	54%
2014–2015 starters	21%	42%	23%	19%	33%	28%
First year average	45%	58%	29%	39%	52%	37%

Table 2. Anishinaabemowin formal assessment results by year.

	Identifying colours	Identifying numbers	Labeling body parts	Completing sentences	Naming objects	Overall score
First year average	45%	58%	29%	39%	52%	37%
Second year average	87%	78%	67%	78%	78%	77%

Table 3. Anishinaabemowin teacher-led assessment by cohort.

	Function	Accuracy	Willingness	Pride
2013–2014 starters	2.5	2.4	5.5	6
2014–2015 starters	1.0	1.3	3.6	4.5
First year average	1.8	1.9	4.6	5.7

Table 4. Anishinaabemowin teacher-led assessment by year.

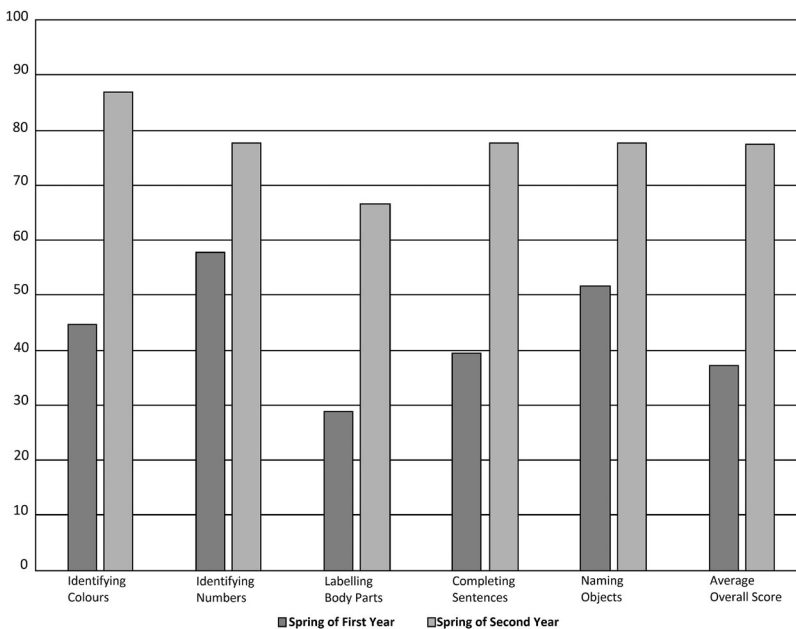
	Function	Accuracy	Willingness	Pride
First year average	1.8	1.9	4.6	5.7
Second year average	3.0	3.0	5.5	6.0

The teacher-led assessment indicated similar results. All students scored at the beginner level for function and accuracy, between 1 (most basic beginner) and 3 (more advanced beginner). [Table 3](#) summarizes the average scores for each cohort in their first year.

Students in their second year on average showed results significantly higher than those in their first year ([Table 4](#)).

Discussion

These results give a great deal of insight into the linguistic and academic development of the children in the MMAK. First, the increased achievement on the language tests administered to the children demonstrates that they are developing increased fluency in Anishinaabemowin ([Figure 1](#)).

**Figure 1.** Language proficiency test results.

On this test, students showed significantly increased linguistic fluency in all areas. The most significant increase was in the area of completing sentences, which is of importance because it demonstrates both semantic and morphological/syntactic linguistic growth, including knowledge of grammatical gender and verb agreement. At the end of their first year in immersion, students scored on average 39% in this area, but by the end of their second year, that score had doubled to 78%, indicating that the students were beginning to understand Anishinaabemowin verb structures. This is important because Anishinaabemowin is a polysynthetic, verb-based language, which means that sentences with several words in English are in fact single words in Anishinaabemowin, taking the form of inflected verbs. For example,

- (1) Ni-nanaapaad-akizin-e
 1SG.VAI-opposite-shoe-INCORP
 'I put my shoes on the wrong feet.' (Ojibwe People's Dictionary)

While we are not aware of any studies that investigate patterns first or second language acquisition patterns in Anishinaabemowin with a focus on grammar or grammatical gender, given the complexity of animacy agreement and verbal morphology in the language, this is likely one of the most difficult aspects of the language to acquire. Improvement in this area is therefore indicative of significant growth in language acquisition.

Similarly, with respect to naming objects, students' scores rose from 48% in first year to 78% in second year. The only area where students on average scored less than 75% was in labeling body parts, likely because in the context of the school these words seldom come up; in particular, students were unlikely to be able to label less commonly discussed body parts, such as the tongue. By contrast, students in second year were most proficient in naming colors, with an average of 87% accuracy, and in the first year they were most proficient at labeling numbers, with a 58% accuracy rate. These are both common topics in a kindergarten classroom. That shows the impact of the immersion environment on student language development. Given the significant improvement in student outcomes on this assessment, it is clear that this immersion program is successful in helping the students acquire their heritage language.

The teacher-led evaluations support this conclusion. Again, there is a significant increase in language proficiency on average between the end of the first year and the end of the second year in immersion (Figure 2).

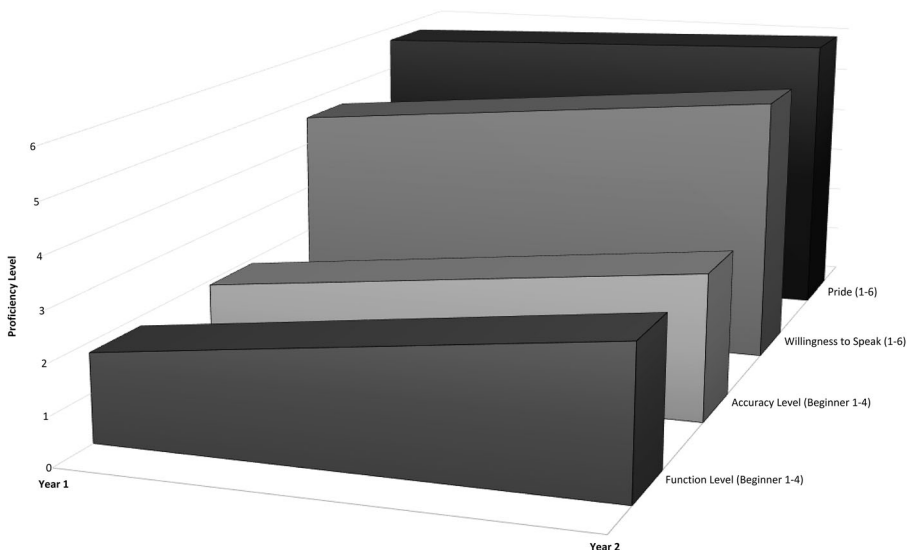


Figure 2. Teacher-assessed linguistic proficiency.

As this indicates, by the end of the first year, students demonstrated both improved proficiency and accuracy. This increase continued in second year, to the point that on average student had achieved a level 3 ranking. This means that while still beginners and not yet fluent (i.e. able to communicate solely in the language in most or all spheres of school and community life), they are progressing such that they are able to produce reasonably accurate, spontaneous speech (i.e. they can formulate their own reasonably accurate basic speech, rather than just parroting phrases they have heard from others). Exposure to a cultural and linguistic immersion experience also shows significant impacts for students' cultural awareness, confidence, and pride in being Anishinaabek. While many students are shy to speak the language at the beginning of school, with an average score on willingness of 4.6/6, by the end of second year, on average they achieved a ranking of 5.5/6 on willingness to use the language. Additionally, they increased from an average of 5.7/6 to an average of 6/6 in terms of cultural pride.

While some may question the value of cultural pride as a metric for determining overall school success, it is in fact key to the linguistic and academic achievement of Aboriginal children. The impact of cultural pride as an important element of overall self-esteem has been the focus of a great deal of research in the area of Aboriginal education. In a Canadian context, the negative impact of aggressive assimilation within the school system on Aboriginal children has been noted since at least the 1960s, including the 1967 Hawthorn Report, which is a government report that weighs the outcomes of day and residential schools for Aboriginal children (Hawthorn 1967). Research has shown consistently that in cases where a child's heritage language or culture are absent or represented poorly within the school, students become insecure and disengaged, with decreased pride in their personal and cultural identity (Wright and Taylor 1995; Cummins 2000; Kanu 2006, 2007, 2011; Armand, Dagenais, and Nicollin 2008; Battiste 2013). They may also struggle to navigate classroom expectations and make connections between content and experiences in and out of school because of cultural differences between the home and school environment (Agbo 2001; Huffman 2001; Fernández 2006; Wright and Bougie 2007; O'Connor, Hill, and Robinson 2009; De Korne 2010; Kanu 2011; Ball 2012; Singh and Reyhner, 2013; Battiste 2013; Morcom 2014). Students in cultural-based education and immersion, on the other hand, are more likely to demonstrate healthier personal self-esteem and cultural pride (Demmert 2001; McIvor 2005; Preston, Cottrell, and Pelletier 2012; Wyman 2012; Battiste 2013). As Bougie, Wright, and Taylor (2003) write,

Heritage-language instruction spares the minority-language children the vision that their heritage culture is associated with lower status, and that the majority group is inherently superior to their own group ... The use of the heritage language as the medium of instruction ... is a clear affirmation of the value and status of the heritage language and of those who speak it. (353)

That esteem for the culture and language, coupled with increased fluency, make it more likely that the children in the MMAK and other immersion programs will go on to transmit their language to future generations (Bougie, Wright, and Taylor 2003).

Limitations

The current study is subject to some limitations. First, the sample size for both the JK and SK cohorts is small, due to space and financial constraints on the program, and it is therefore not possible to extrapolate the results widely across other immersion programs. As discussed previously, there are a number of immersion education programs in Aboriginal communities across Canada, and this number is growing (Guèvremont and Kohen 2012). However, immersion education for Aboriginal students in Canada is still far from the norm. That, along with the limited speaker populations of most Canadian Aboriginal languages and the lack of funding for immersion in First Nations schools, means that small sample sizes are the reality for studies such as this. If we are to learn about the relative benefits and challenges of immersion in a Canadian aboriginal context, this is a limitation we must accept. To build upon what we have learned thus far, these results will continue to be re-evaluated as part of a longitudinal study with the MMAK. This will indicate whether the results observed over

the first two years will continue as the program develops. A further limitation is the result of the diversity of language immersion programs in general. The MMAK is a unique program in that it engages traditional Anishinaabe teachings and pedagogies and a Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi 1998), and is led by particularly gifted teachers. No two classrooms will ever be the same, however, and this limitation applies to all studies such as this. Although the results cannot be specifically extrapolated to reflect expectations for all other Indigenous language immersion programs, they are still very informative for the development of this and other similar schools. This is particularly vital given the understudied status of Indigenous language immersion in Canada (Chambers 2014).

Conclusion

Research in a global Indigenous context indicates that language immersion is one of the most promising approaches Indigenous communities can undertake to maintain and promote Indigenous language use. The introduction of language and culture teaching into First Nations schools in Canada certainly represents an improvement over the previous approach of aggressive assimilation. However, immersion holds even greater promise for First Nations children. Data from research in many Indigenous communities, as well as data from the children in the MMAK, clearly indicate this. First, immersion shows promise in helping Indigenous youth to become increasingly fluent in their heritage language. Furthermore, it builds pride in their personal and cultural identity. That in turn serves generations yet to come, since these students will be more likely to have the skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to pass on their language and ensure its survival. Finally, the development of immersion programs is an outstanding way for Indigenous peoples to take control of their own education systems and deliver culturally appropriate education to their children in their own languages, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2008).

It is true that Indigenous language immersion is not without its challenges. It involves additional costs, as resources must often be developed from the ground up and additional fluent teachers are needed to ensure students have access to educational supports and demonstrations of natural language use between fluent adults. Those are particularly significant concerns given the current situation of educational underfunding for First Nations in Canada (Morcom 2014). Care must also be taken to ensure appropriate transition to mainstream medium school, if immersion cannot be continued throughout a child's education, since an abrupt transition from education in one language to the other can have detrimental impacts on students (Bougie, Wright, and Taylor 2003). However, there are no second chances for Indigenous languages. Once our languages disappear, they will be gone forever. Our languages are the best media to carry forward the thousands of years of intellectual, cultural, and spiritual tradition that our ancestors have built on our territories. They connect us to each other and to our land. They are worth fighting for, and immersion is a key tool in that fight. It is a battle worth attempting, for today's children and for children yet to come.

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