

# Breathing Life into New Speakers: Nsyilxcn and Tlingit Sequenced Curriculum, Direct Acquisition, and Assessments

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**Abstract:** Many Indigenous languages are critically endangered and faced with the urgent need to create parent-aged advanced speakers. This goal requires sequenced curriculum, effective teaching methods, students being supported to spend more than 2,000 hours on task, and regular assessments. In response to this urgent need the author followed a proven direct acquisition method and curricular design developed for Nsyilxcn and Interior Salish languages and wrote two beginner Tlingit textbooks and their accompanying teaching manuals. The author piloted the Tlingit textbooks with a cohort and developed a filmed assessment process. This article shares results of filmed assessments for Nsyilxcn and Tlingit, implemented by beginner and intermediate speakers. Recommendations are made for Indigenous language revitalization, including assessment methods appropriate to critically endangered Indigenous languages and strategies to create advanced speakers.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language acquisition, Indigenous language revitalization, language curriculum, Nsyilxcn, Okanagan, second-language assessment, Tlingit

**Résumé :** De nombreuses langues autochtones sont menacées d'extinction et ont un besoin urgent de former des locuteurs avancés chez les adultes. L'atteinte de cet objectif exige un programme d'apprentissage progressif, des méthodes pédagogiques efficaces, des mesures de soutien aux étudiants pour qu'ils puissent consacrer plus de 2 000 heures à cet apprentissage, et des évaluations suivies. Dans le but de répondre à ces besoins, l'auteure a appliqué une méthode éprouvée d'acquisition directe et un programme conçu pour le nsyilxcn et le salish continental; elle a également rédigé deux manuels de tlingit à l'intention des débutants, ainsi que les manuels de l'enseignant correspondants. L'auteure a expérimenté les manuels de tlingit avec une cohorte et mis au point une procédure d'évaluation filmée. Cet article présente les résultats des évaluations filmées pour le nsyilxcn et le tlingit, réalisées par des locuteurs débutants et intermédiaires. Des recommandations sont proposées en vue de la revitalisation des langues autochtones ; elles comprennent entre autres des méthodes d'évaluation convenant aux langues autochtones très menacées et des stratégies pour la formation de locuteurs avancés.

**Mots clés :** acquisition des langues autochtones, revitalisation des langues autochtones, programme d'apprentissage linguistique, nsyilxcn, Okanagan; évaluation en langue seconde, tlingit

My name is Sʔímlaʔxʷ; I am a language teacher and language activist from the Syilx Nation. I work primarily with my own language, Nsyilxcn (Okanagan, Interior Salish, also known as N'səl'xcin, nqilxʷcn, Salish, Colville-Okanagan, and Sinixt),<sup>1</sup> forming cohorts, training adult learners, and recording Elders (described in Johnson, 2014a; 2014b; 2016b; forthcoming). In the winter of 2013–14 I was asked to teach two Tlingit learners in Whitehorse, Yukon. K'èdukà Jack and George Bahm each expressed the desire and responsibility to learn and teach their language. There are currently no intensive language programs in the Yukon and very few speakers or teachers, so I designed a program based on successful Nsyilxcn curriculum and teaching methods. I employed a teaching strategy and a filmed assessment similar to one I developed for Nsyilxcn (Johnson, 2012a; 2012b; 2014b; 2016b). The Tlingit program filled a critical need for a sequenced immersion curriculum designed to be taught by beginners. I wrote and tested two beginner Tlingit textbooks based on the curricular design used by the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project. K'èdukà, George, and I met six hours a week to pilot the first textbook. I filmed our learning between October 2013 and May 2014. K'èdukà and I later organized a cohort of seven Tlingit learners to learn the first book, and wrote and piloted the second book with K'winikweik Morgane Pennycook (Johnson, Jack, & Pennycook 2015a; 2015b). The application and Q1 filmed assessment of the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project methods, applied to both Nsyilxcn and Tlingit, is the focus of this article. The direct acquisition method and curriculum are discussed separately (Johnson, 2016a), and recent application to an Nsyilxcn cohort in the Syilx Language House in Johnson (2016b; forthcoming).

This article demonstrates the need for a consistent approach to Indigenous language assessments and sequenced curriculum. Very little is published in this field, and I share many observations from my own research. I provide a roadmap to proficiency and describe the waystations of beginner, intermediate, and advanced. I describe the number of hours of study and the assessment techniques appropriate to each level, including filmed evidence of students' progress in Nsyilxcn and Tlingit, from beginner to intermediate. I provide anecdotal reports from advanced Indigenous learners, including Hawaiian, Nsyilxcn, and Tlingit learners in the United States, and recommendations for programs that will create advanced speakers, including the magic of

small cohorts and the urgent necessity for full-time language domains to support learners on their journey to advanced proficiency.

Before we begin, let me define my terms. By *speaker*, I mean at least high-intermediate speaking proficiency; a person who can spend the day storytelling, working, raising children, and living and breathing language in his or her daily life. By *language revitalization*, I refer to activities involved in creating speakers; this includes teaching and creating sequenced curriculum. Revitalization is more suited to action than theory. *Revitalize* in Nsyilxcn is  $\text{əx}^w\text{lal}$ , meaning “bring back to life.” Picture Coyote, of Syilx storytelling fame, sitting up, living, breathing, brought back to life by his brother Fox – fully intact and ready for further adventures.

### Background and motivations of learners

K'èdukà Jack is a Tlingit youth, aged 24, from the Taku River Tlingit community, based in Teslin, with strong motivations to learn her language and teach children in the day-care where she works. In 2015 she became a full-time language activist in order to work with me to complete the first and second Tlingit textbooks of the curriculum and to teach intensive lessons to youth. George Bahm is a Tlingit educator, aged 49, from the Teslin Tlingit community, based in Whitehorse, motivated to learn Tlingit in order to teach the students he encounters in his experiential outdoor education position with the Yukon Department of Education. Our backgrounds are shared fully in Johnson (2016a). My background is shared in Johnson (2014a; 2014b).

K'èdukà, George, and I knew from experience that all too often revitalization efforts focus prematurely on school programs for children (discussed by Fishman, 1993) and lack programs to create adult speakers. Dreams to create fluent adults and children are hindered by too few hours of instruction by teachers who often lack methods and curriculum. It was clear to us that for critically endangered languages such as Tlingit, parent-aged adults are the key generation of language learners (Fishman, 1993; Wilson & Kamanā, 2009), and that sequenced curriculum and proven teaching methods are critically needed (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998).

Our Tlingit cohort was small ( $n = 3$ ), and the pilot project consisted of 40 intensive hours of acquisition, hardly a dent in the more than 1,000 hours required to become intermediate speakers (Jackson and Kaplan, 1999; Johnson, 2014b; Rifkin, 2003). We were undaunted by a lack of resources, a lack of time, no funding, and the advanced age of our fluent speakers. We followed the inspirational advice of Blackfoot

activist Darrell Kipp, to just “get started” and “work with the ones who want it” (Kipp, 2000).

*Tlingit and Nsyilxcn*

Tlingit (Lingít) is critically endangered, as are most North American Indigenous languages. There are fewer than 100 fluent Elder speakers remaining. Tlingit is an isolated branch of the Na-Dené language family, comprising the mutually intelligible Coastal and Inland Tlingit dialects. Inland Tlingit is located in the southern Yukon Territory and the northwestern tip of British Columbia. Coastal Tlingit is located on the southern Alaska Coast. Tlingit culture is rich in family, kinship, clan structure, and famously complex oratory and poetic metaphor (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1987). A more complex language than Tlingit is difficult to find; Tlingit is notable for its highly structured grammar and rich sound system, having a handful of phonemes unheard in any other language. There are numerous initiatives to teach Tlingit in the Yukon, all aimed at schoolchildren, and several beginner texts and resources. Excluding this research, there are currently no intensive adult Tlingit programs and no new speakers on the Canadian side of Tlingit territory. However, there are excellent adult programs in Alaska, and a small handful of new speakers has emerged, supported by language camps, university programs, and corporate and non-profit programs.

Nsyilxcn is spoken on the Interior Plateau, straddling southern British Columbia and northern Washington. In Canada, there are numerous initiatives to teach the language, aimed mainly at schoolchildren. There are a variety of adult beginner programs in communities and colleges, but no advanced speakers have emerged in Canada in 60 years. A handful of advanced second language speakers has emerged in Washington in recent years, due primarily to the efforts of the Salish School of Spokane and the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project. Both Nsyilxcn and Tlingit are cross-border languages. Interestingly, there are tiny handfuls of speakers emerging on the US side of the border in both languages (Johnson, 2016a). In 2015, the Syilx Language House Association was launched to deliver 2,000 hours of programming to 16 Syilx adults on the Canadian side of Syilx territory – Penticton, BC – and is on track to graduate a cohort of high-intermediate speakers by 2019 (2016b; forthcoming).

Nsyilxcn and Tlingit languages have several things in common. Both are critically endangered. Language revitalization is vitally important to each language community, to youth and Elders, and is a key component to decolonizing praxis. However, for both, there is a difficulty in stemming the tide of language erosion due to a lack of

trained teachers, sequenced curriculum, teaching methods, and successful language programs. There is no linguistic similarity between Nsyilxcn and Tlingit other than the fact that each has extremely complex grammatical structures and many difficult sounds not found in English.

### Literature Review

#### *Second language assessment benchmarks*

Language assessment is a well-established field within second language acquisition; however, in application to Indigenous languages it is newly developing. The terms *beginner*, *intermediate*, and *advanced* (and similar terms) are defined and described in detail by the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB, 2006; Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000), the American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, n.d.), and Jack Miller's (2004) Indigenous Language Benchmarks, among others. Each assessment system describes benchmarks for speaking, listening, reading, and writing, though for the assessments detailed in this article I refer only to speaking benchmarks. The CLB descriptions are very thorough and employ real-world, task-based proficiency descriptions that describe what the learner can do, such as "ask about and tell time" and "summarize a lecture" (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000, p. viii). Miller (2004, pp. 163–165) combined CLB and ACTFL scales and adapted them to First Nations contexts to develop a nine-tiered system, First Nations Language Proficiency Benchmarks, specifically for Indigenous and Interior Salish languages.

Because of its task-based descriptions and strength in describing advanced levels, CLB is my favoured assessment for Indigenous languages, in combination with Miller and ACTFL (see examples of their application to Nsyilxcn in Johnson, 2014b; forthcoming). For simplicity's sake, I merge CLB, ACTFL, CEFR, and Miller's classifications into beginner, intermediate, and advanced, divided into low, mid, and high subcategories, rather than their complex numbering and naming systems. It is important to note that the intermediate range of speech and learning is much broader than the beginner range; learning becomes increasingly more difficult and time-consuming as higher levels are reached (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000, p. viii). For example, it may take only 50 hours to progress from low- to mid-beginner, but to progress from low- to mid-intermediate multiplies this number by a factor of 10. To successfully create adult mid-intermediate speakers, at least 1,000 hours of intensive, quality instruction must be provided

with sequenced curriculum (Jackson & Kaplan, 1999; Rifkin, 2003; Johnson, 2014a, 2014b; Ignace, 2015).

Anecdotal reports suggest that many Indigenous language programs are adopting existing benchmarks and some are attempting to improve upon them. Haynes, Stansfield, Gnyra, Schleif, & Anderson (2010) reviewed several Indigenous language programs and their assessment methods. Many of them appeared, in my opinion, overly weighted toward beginner testing, highly generalized, and appearing to conflate intermediate and advanced levels.

Māori language researchers developed the five-step Kaiaka Reo language benchmarks: “1. Very limited proficiency; 2. Limited proficiency; 3. Basic proficiency; 4. Elementary/confident proficiency; 5. Native-like proficiency” (Edmonds, Roberts, Keegan, Houia, & Dale, 2013, pp. 51–52). Levels 1 and 2 appear similar to beginner, level 3 similar to intermediate, and level 4 similar to advanced. The system was developed and tested on 700 school-aged students, though interestingly not their teachers. Māori language students scored between 2 and 3.8, gradually improving over their eight years in school, with their greatest improvement between years 1 and 3, after which the learning curve became less steep (Edmonds et al., 2013). The Kaiaka Reo benchmarks appear to lack descriptive detail, over-represent beginner levels, and under-describe intermediate levels.

Hawaiian researchers developed and trialed a Hawaiian Oral Language Assessment (H-OLA) for Hawaiian immersion schools, with similarities to the Māori Kaiaka Reo assessment system (Edmonds, 2008). Both systems employed a storytelling picture series for assessing oral proficiency and a similar scoring rubric (Housman, Dameg, & Kobashigawa, 2011, p. 19). The H-OLA used only three levels of proficiency: “1. novice, 2. intermediate, and 3. pre-advanced” (Housman et al., 2011, p. 24). Similarly to the Māori assessment, I believe the benchmarks would better serve learners if the intermediate and advanced levels were more developed.

Language acquisition follows a natural progression described as natural learning phases, for both adults and children. The phases are, approximately: the comprehension (or silent) phase, early production phase, speech emergence, and, finally, intermediate and advanced speech (Krashen & Terrell, 1988). The teaching manual for the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project refers to them as Comprehension, Limited Production, and Full Production. I collected several Nsyilxcn terms to describe language acquisition phases, roughly matched with the nine speaking benchmarks, summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Benchmarks, acquisition stages, and hours of study

Benchmarks	Nsyilxcn acquisition stages	Hours of study
Beginner – low	k'lp'x <sup>w</sup> ina?: holes cut in the ears, when a person begins to comprehend language; the first stage of Nsyilxcn acquisition	50
– mid	q <sup>w</sup> lq <sup>w</sup> l <sup>i</sup> ti?st: first speech, when words are formed, similar to a child's speech, short utterances	100
– high		200–400
Intermediate – low	n'əq <sup>w</sup> cin: clear speakers, starting to be heard, become more clear voiced, audible, from tiq <sup>w</sup> , plain to see	400–600
– mid		1,000+
– high		2,000+
Advanced – low	n'tt <sup>i</sup> cin: straightened or true speech, when speech contains few errors, like the Elders	–
– mid		–
– high		–

(reproduced from Johnson, 2014b, p. 130) Note: “Hours of study” refers to hours of intensive study required to achieve proficiency in complex First Nations languages such as Nsyilxcn, any Salish language, or Tlingit.

### *Indigenous second language curricula*

Most Indigenous language programs in British Columbia have numerous lessons, some textbooks, limited audio recordings, but do not have a complete curriculum (FPCC, 2014). A curriculum is described as a “roadmap” of how and what is to be taught, with a full set of materials, explicit methods, and “intended outcomes” (Ignace, 2015, p. 46). In the case of language revitalization, the intended outcome is to bring learners from beginner to advanced speech. An Indigenous language curriculum therefore is a fully sequenced set of textbooks with lessons, teaching materials, teaching manuals, props, goals, objectives, outcomes, and assessments designed to bring the learner from beginner to advanced speech.

A complete Indigenous second language curriculum will provide at least 1,000 hours of sequenced instruction from beginner to advanced. Effective lessons will progress from the comprehension phase, to limited production, to full production; employ games and activities that take into account the phases of learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1988), and appropriately sequenced grammar input within meaningful contexts and exercises (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Ignace, 2015, p. 29).

One or more teaching methods are often associated with each lesson in a curriculum. Indigenous language curricula have been built based on various methods including direct acquisition (Peterson, Wiley, & Parkin, 2016), Total Physical Response (TPR) (Dick-Billy, 2003; Dick-Billy, Michel, Michel, LeBourdais, & Michel, 2004, 2007;

Michel, 2013), Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPR-S) (Cantoni, 1999), the Rassias method, the Greymorning method (Greymorning, 1999; Sarkar & Metallic, 2009; Underwood, 2009) and the Where are Your Keys Method (McCue, 2016). Older methods include the audiolingual and word list methods. In the absence of a fully developed language curriculum, teaching methods such as TPR, the Greymorning method, and Where are Your Keys are highly effective (Arcand, 2011; Gardner, 2012), but they rely on having a highly dynamic teacher. Many individual learners have gone to great lengths as adult learners to achieve a sufficient level of proficiency to switch entirely to speaking their language in the home; their methods are often a highly individualized combination of intensive linguistic study and Master-Apprentice techniques (Hinton 2013). Master-Apprentice methods provide excellent language input to individual learners but do not create curriculum. The Master-Apprentice method was not used in the current research, though I report on it extensively in Johnson (2014b).

A well-designed Indigenous language curriculum will incorporate strategies specific to colonial contexts. Second language acquisition relies on an optimal level of language tension, occurring when the level of input is slightly beyond learners' current level of comprehension (Krashen & Terrell, 1988). With too little or too much tension, the learner cannot learn (Spiellmann & Radnofsky, 2001). Indigenous learners and teachers have additional tensions from colonial contexts and tensions within community. The support of a sequenced curriculum, effective teaching methods, and a safe classroom environment is of paramount importance (Johnson, 2014b and forthcoming). Successful curricula for critically endangered languages must be designed to be taught by beginner speakers and raise them up to advanced through teaching. They must follow well-described methods, be easily replicated by new teachers, be easily trainable, and incorporate maximum levels of classroom safety. Two curricula that meet these criteria have been developed by Interior Salish languages, as discussed below.

The Chief Atahm School is a Secwepemc (Shuswap, Interior Salish) immersion school that has operated successfully for 20 years in Chase, BC. The backbone of the school's program is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, and the school has developed and published a set of two TPR textbooks (Dick-Billy et al., 2004, 2007) designed to be taught by learners. The method requires a trained, creative, and dynamic teacher. A shorter version of the first textbook has been published as a template for use in all BC schools (Michel, 2013). There are, however, no teaching manuals and the actual teaching method is not explicated; to receive training in the TPR method, Chief



Atahm offers annual workshops and conference presentations. Teaching in the TPR method has been effective in raising teachers (learners themselves) and students to at least high-intermediate proficiency, though the high demands of teaching appear to create a plateau in the teachers' learning.

The other successful curriculum is the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project, described in the next section.<sup>2</sup>

### N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project

My language, Nsyilxcn, is incredibly lucky in the sense that we have the well-designed and proven curriculum, the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project (Peterson et al., 2016). The N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project is a series of six textbooks, organized into three levels – beginner, intermediate, and advanced – and representing approximately 1,200 hours, or two years of full-time study. The N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project uses daily vocabulary quizzes, mid-term tests, and oral and written final exams. After studying the curriculum, learners can continue to learn through teaching the same curriculum to adults or children. The N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project was created by Christopher Parkin, LaRae Wiley, and Sarah Peterson, working jointly with the Salish School of Spokane and the Paul Creek Language Association (Peterson et al., 2016). It is known in Canada as the Paul Creek Curriculum. The teaching method is referred to as Direct Acquisition.

The Direct Acquisition method uses techniques designed to be taught by second language learners in full immersion, including games, activities, sentence drills, and dialogues. The first two textbooks are taught at the beginner level. The first book, *N'səl'xcin 1*, consists of 45 beginner lessons, each with 10 vocabulary words and four question-and-answer sentences, and takes 90 hours to teach. The first book provides a 500-word vocabulary to learners and teachers. Each of the six textbooks is accompanied by Elder speakers' audio recordings, written exercises, colour graphics, teaching manuals, and computer teaching games. The second textbook, *Captík<sup>wł</sup> 1*, is based on simplified versions of 16 traditional stories and is designed to bring students to a 1,000-word receptive vocabulary. The vocabulary is taught with identical games and exercises to the first book, and the story sentences are taught with identical games and sequencing. In this way, a comfortable pattern of learning is established for the teachers and the learners.

The third and fourth textbooks are considered intermediate. *N'səl'xcin 2*, similarly to *N'səl'xcin 1*, is presented in 45 lessons, each with vocabulary; however, each lesson has 30 new vocabulary words,

and rather than three simple sentences there are several pages of grammatical drills and partner exercises. The fourth book, *Captik<sup>wł</sup> 2*, similarly to *Captik<sup>wł</sup> 1*, is presented as 15 story-based lessons; however, rather than single sentences, the stories are in full paragraphs, untranslated other than a glossary of up to 30 new vocabulary words per story. Each story-based lesson includes pages of grammatical exercises accompanying the new vocabulary words and sentences. The fifth and sixth textbooks follow the same pattern of increasing complexity. In *N'səl'xcin 3*, complex cultural information is presented in full immersion, with longer recordings. In *Captik<sup>wł</sup> 3*, traditional stories are presented in their full versions, accompanied with grammatical and partner exercises. The seventh and eighth textbooks (Level 4 in the curriculum) are in development.

The curriculum template of the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project is successfully adopted by three Interior Salish languages (Nsyilxcn, Kalispel, and Spokane). There are currently 50 full-time adult language learners, all in the United States, and a handful of new speakers, able to live, work, and raise children in the language (Parkin, personal communication, 2014).

*Beginner assessment: Nsyilxcn*

My initial Nsyilxcn assessment films (Johnson, 2012a, 2012b) followed a simple method that showed definite progress in our speaking ability and demonstrated to Syilx community the effectiveness of the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project and full-immersion intensive study in a cohort. I filmed my Nsyilxcn cohort after we had completed the first two books of the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project (after 200 hours of intensive study), just as we were moving into the Chopaka immersion house to study the third and fourth books. My cohort and I attempted to tell the Goldilocks story. In comparing our speech to international benchmarks, we were approximately mid-beginner speakers. In comparing our progress to an Nsyilxcn scale (Table 1) we were q<sup>w</sup>lq<sup>w</sup>ltiʔst (first speech, similar to a child's). We lived in the immersion house in Chopaka, BC, for six months. I filmed throughout the program and performed an assessment at the beginning and end.

The first film, *Goldilocks I* (Johnson, 2012a), shows the first assessment. We told the same story again six months later, shared in *Goldilocks II* (Johnson, 2012b). In *Goldilocks I* our storytelling and first immersion conversation demonstrated classic mid-beginner speech, with very few details or embellishments, incomplete sentences, pauses, lack of vocabulary, repetition, silence, little or no control of grammar, and lots of gestures. Silence played a role both in our first immersion conversation, when one of us ran to get a CD rather than describe it,

and in our storytelling, when one of us was unable to complete the story while blue jays laughed in the background.

We were able to storytell better than engage in group conversation in *Goldilocks I*, demonstrating limited high-beginner storytelling traits although we were clearly mid-beginner speakers. This showed that conversation is much more difficult than monologue. High-beginner-level speakers can describe things and take part in simple routine conversations (Miller 2004), a task well beyond us in our kitchen-table conversation (Johnson, 2012a; 2014b, p. 130).

*Intermediate assessment: Nsyilxcn*

For intermediate-level assessment examples I turn to the second and third Nsyilxcn assessment films, *Goldilocks II* and *k<sup>w</sup>u n'łəq<sup>w</sup>cin* (*we speak clearly*). In *Goldilocks II* (Johnson, 2012b), after approximately 600 hours of intensive instruction, we were able to narrate the entire Goldilocks story from beginning to end, with few pauses, though we still spoke with many grammatical errors. We were transformed from mid-beginner to low-intermediate speakers (Johnson, 2014a, 2014b). In comparing our progress to a Nsyilxcn scale (Table 1), we were n'łəq<sup>w</sup>cin (clear speakers, meaning we were able to make ourselves understood). We demonstrated some storytelling traits of mid-intermediate speakers, though our actual level was low-intermediate. We had difficulty conversing outside of our interviews and formal lessons, though we had brief flashes of brilliance in classroom lessons, as can be seen in our third film. We were far short of high-intermediate speaking ability; for example, we would have been completely out of our depth participating in a business meeting or debate.

Our third Nsyilxcn film, *k<sup>w</sup>u n'łəq<sup>w</sup>cin* (*we speak clearly*) (Johnson, 2012c), represents an open-ended assessment of our program. My cohort and I described our language progress, in Nsyilxcn. The six-minute documentary was filmed during our last month in the language house, after approximately 600 hours of intensive instruction. We share personal reflections about our transformation. We explain in our own words that our language improved, we discuss our language levels, the efficacy of our curriculum, our experience, and the methods we used. The journey to n'łəq<sup>w</sup>cin (clear speech), described in my dissertation, was transformational:

As a language-level I believe it indicates we moved through the difficult k'lp'x<sup>w</sup>ina? (the silent, or comprehension phase, a shy, inaudible phase) and q<sup>w</sup>lq<sup>w</sup>łti?st (first speech, a phase where we are difficult to understand), into a phase where we have clear (łəq<sup>w</sup>) voices – a profound transformation. This doesn't mean we don't make a *lot* of errors in our

speech – we do – or that our speech is not simple – it is. However, nʔəq<sup>w</sup>cin means that we are clearly audible and are comprehensible to others – an Elder would be able to understand us though perhaps with difficulty. Nʔəq<sup>w</sup>cin means there is still a long way to go, but we have found our voice. This is no small feat for adult Indigenous language learners, considering the generations of language loss and the damage wrought by colonization and residential schools. (Johnson, 2014b, p. 133)

To be clear, my Nsyilxcn cohort and I are far from advanced; however, in our filmed Nsyilxcn interviews we each commented that we now believed advanced proficiency was possible. I estimate that there remain another 1,000 hours of intensive learning for us to achieve high intermediate speech (Johnson, 2014b, p. 128; Johnson, forthcoming). As we approach high-intermediate speech, the assessments will become more grammatically complex. High-intermediate filmed assessments will involve grammar-based question and answers, story-telling, and the ultimate test of proficiency: conversation.

*Advanced assessment: anecdotal reports*

There are no published assessments of advanced Indigenous second language speakers, and few researchers have written about successful contexts for creating advanced adult Indigenous learners. This section provides anecdotal reports and recommendations from speakers I have personally met who have, in my opinion, achieved advanced levels.

I believe that the teachers and graduates of the Hawaiian and Māori language programs are advanced speakers. It is, however, unfair to compare North American with Hawaiian and Māori language programs because of the far greater number of hours to achieve proficiency in North American Indigenous languages. Hawaiian and Māori language publications do not use the term “advanced,” preferring “native-like proficiency” (Māori) and “near-advanced” (Hawaiian) as described above. During the 2014 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium, I witnessed presentations by Hawaiian students and staff at the University of Hilo Hawaiʻi and the immersion language school who appeared to be advanced. Classes are led entirely in Hawaiian by second language speakers in secondary and post-secondary immersion programs. I have met adult advanced Mohawk speakers who learned as adults through a combination of hard work, individualized programs, curriculum, and teaching. I have also met advanced younger speakers of Interior Salish and Tlingit from the United States, as mentioned above.

I met two young women at the Celebrating Salish Conference in Washington in 2012 who are raising their children in Kalispel (Interior

Salish). Both are involved in the full-time Kalispel language training program using the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project. One is Jessie Fountain, the young teacher of the adult program. She has taught all six books (in Kalispel) to three cohorts of adults (twice), and is described as fluent by her fluent Elder. Jessie reports, in an interview, “I dream in the language. I’m raising my son in the language.... I teach it every day. Within 15 months we can bring someone to fluency” (Hval 2013).

A small Nsyilxcn immersion school in Washington has succeeded in creating the first group of high-intermediate to advanced teachers. The Salish School of Spokane follows a charter-school model to provide full-time immersion to 75 children, meaning no English from the moment the teachers enter the school to the time they leave, nine hours later. The school employs twelve full-time teachers and one principal, supported by private fundraising efforts. Teachers teach in pairs and attend two hours of language instruction every afternoon, where they learn and review the intermediate and advanced levels of the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project. Their principal, Chris Parkin (the curriculum developer), his wife and lead teacher LaRae Wiley, and four teachers have achieved at least high-intermediate proficiency; I wouldn't be surprised if some are advanced. The original pilot cohort for the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project included Parkin and Wiley's young adult son, Graham Wiley-Camacho. Their experience shows the value in small groups as well as in sequenced curriculum, in working outside of existing institutional structures, and in starting a full-time school after achieving proficiency, training teachers and writing a full curriculum.

Language nests have proven to be highly successful immersion workspaces, or contexts for language use, often employing proficient speakers. However, a critical point to make is that successful nests employ teachers when they are already proficient; the nests themselves do not create adult speakers but rather employ and train them. Hawaiian language programs employed young adults who were already proficient, and at their inception they worked closely with Māori, Mohawk, and Blackfeet immersion programs, among others (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001), themselves modelled after Canadian French immersion programs (Warner, 1999, p. 75). The Salish School of Spokane provides language training to its teachers before they are employed and ongoing training to create advanced speakers.

There is magic in groups of five or six people learning an Indigenous language together. The US Foreign Service recommends an optimal class size of four to six people for difficult languages (Jackson & Kaplan, 1999). There were five of us in the original Nsyilxcn language house, and we became like family. In Hawai'i the original small cohort

of learners, including Kauanoē Kamanā and Bill Wilson, became catalysts for a language revolution (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, p. 96) that now numbers 500 new speakers and 50 children being raised in the language (Gionson, 2009). The Mohawk language movement “depended heavily” on a small group of highly motivated individuals (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, p. 86). The Chief Atahm immersion school was formed by members of a family of Secwepemc activists (Michel, 2012, p. 145). A fluent Tlingit Elder told me there is no bond like the one formed between learners, referring to the original cohort of five in Juneau, Alaska.

A small handful of high-intermediate to advanced Tlingit speakers has emerged in recent years in Alaska. Excellent Tlingit language materials have been created over the past 30 years by the Sealaska and Goldbelt foundations. Tlingit is remarkable for its numerous recordings and publications. For example, University of Alaska Southeast recently published a groundbreaking series of filmed and transcribed Elders in conversation (University of Alaska Southeast, n.d.). A spokesperson for the Tlingit revolution is X'unei Lance Twitchell. Twitchell is a young professor at the University of Alaska, Southeast, a language activist, language teacher, and new speaker (Twitchell, 2012). He has written and shared numerous beginner and intermediate language resources on the Internet (e.g., Twitchell, 2014).

I met the original cohort of five talented Tlingit learners, including X'unei, at a Tlingit language conference in Juneau, Alaska, in 2013. According to their accounts, they began as a small cohort at a full-immersion language camp organized by Sealaska, where the ratio was five learners to five fluent elders (Chester, Twitchell, & Katzeek, 2013). The cohort benefitted greatly from the original language camp as well as subsequent full-time work with Elder speakers. This experience cemented their bond as learners, and they all went on to become speakers. They are raising their children in the language.

### **Lingít Curriculum: *Lingít 1* and *Lingít Story 1***

There were a handful of excellent beginner Tlingit textbooks with recordings, but none which laddered into a sequenced curriculum, followed a method, or were designed to be taught by learners. I therefore translated available beginner Tlingit lessons into the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project's first textbook format so that it would follow a laddered progression and be teachable and assessable.

*Lingít 1* follows the curricular design and teaching methods of *N'səl'xcin 1*. *Lingít 1* consists of 45 lessons, each with ten words and four sentences, audio recordings, and colour graphics. The lessons

and recordings were gleaned from previously published beginner language texts with CDs, and original recordings with Anáhash Sam Johnston and Keiyishí Bessie Cooley in Teslin, Yukon. I recruited Tlingit learners to pilot the program, trained co-teachers, obtained university accreditation, fundraised to continue into 2015, and lobbied for and received support from students' workplaces (Johnson, 2016a). The lessons, method, and learning process are described further in Johnson (2016a) and demonstrated in a YouTube film: K'eduka Jack successfully taught *Lingít 1* to a cohort of seven young Tlingit adults in Whitehorse, Yukon (Johnson, Jack, & Pennycook, 2016).

The second book, *Lingít Story 1*, is based on traditional stories, following an identical direct acquisition method and curriculum template to the N'sál'xcin Curriculum Project's second textbook, with permissions. When K'èdukà and I recorded the first story with Anáhash Sam Johnston in Teslin, Yukon, our hearts soared (Johnson, 2016a). Subsequently, we received funding, created a larger team, recorded 10 stories with Anáhash Sam Johnston and Keiyishí Bessie Cooley, and edited and piloted the first five stories with a cohort (Johnson et al., 2015a).

#### *Speaking assessments*

Indigenous language assessment is a new and evolving field. A well-designed curriculum incorporates frequent assessments, and in the case of critically endangered Indigenous languages, these must be designed to be carried out by learners, quickly and efficiently, taking as little time away from learning as possible. Different assessments are appropriate to various benchmarks. For example, beginner speakers need assessments that are concrete and familiar, like describing a poster, as it is not yet possible for a low-beginner speaker to storytell.

The following sections provide insight into beginner, intermediate, and advanced assessments. Film is very useful in Indigenous language assessments (Hinton, 2001, pp. 222–223). I created a filmed assessment process for Nsyilxcn and Tlingit and compared our speech to international language benchmarks. The following sections describe the results of filmed Tlingit and Nsyilxcn assessments at beginner and intermediate speech levels. Nsyilxcn examples are from the three films I created while living in the Nsyilxcn immersion house (Johnson, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; described in Johnson, 2014a, 2014b). I provide insights into potential assessments for advanced speech levels.

#### *Beginner assessment: Tlingit*

The Tlingit beginner assessment method was simple and easily employed by beginners. I filmed each learner, including myself, describing

a poster using as many words and phrases as possible. I then did a word count of distinct words used, calculated the length of sentences, and compared the language used to descriptions of language ability in international benchmarks. The poster was a colourful illustration with a variety of scenes, activities, and landscapes from everyday life. In one corner was a lake with canoes and boats, forests, and a sky with fluffy clouds; in another was a street with buildings, pedestrians, groups of people, children, cars, and dogs. In the centre were restaurant scenes, sports scenes, and different landscapes. Describing the poster was an opportunity to speak words learned in our lessons and apply them to a real-world context. K'èdukà, George, and I assessed our speaking ability in March 2014 after 20 hours of study and again in May 2014, after completing the first book, after 40 hours of study. For both assessments I filmed each of us describing the same poster. I collected classroom footage between October 2013 and May 2014 and created a short film, *Tlingit 1: Our First Assessment* (Johnson, 2015). The film shares footage from the initial and first assessments as well as scenes from our lessons, demonstrating some of the direct acquisition methods. We can be seen studying around a table, using fly swatters, and using graphic images to facilitate a beginner partner-exercise conversation as part of one lesson.

If I had filmed us at the outset, the footage would have shown us using approximately zero words to describe the poster. My Tlingit vocabulary was zero, and both K'èdukà and George had Tlingit vocabularies of fewer than 50 words. That placed each of us in the low-beginner category (only because CLB does not have a category for “less than 50 words” or zero, as some rating systems do).

We had been studying for 20 hours before our initial assessment. After 20 hours of instruction, we could employ on average 17 words to describe the poster. These were words for such items as dog, man, flag, lake, and trees. In George's first filmed assessment he began by introducing himself in English, “My name is George Bahm, I've been studying for about one month,” and then proceeded to describe the poster in Tlingit. He used 16 words (all nouns except for one verb), mostly one-word sentences, two two-word, and one three-word sentence. K'èdukà used 15 words, not counting her introduction, mostly one-word sentences. In my first assessment I used 20 words to describe the poster, not counting my introduction. Most utterances were one-word sentences. I used three two-word sentences and no verbs. Most (65%) of our utterances were one-word sentences, with a small handful (35%) of two-word sentences, such as “two boats.” One three-word sentence was used: “many men here.” One-, two- and three-word sentences are typical of low-beginner speakers.



After 40 hours of instruction, in May 2014, we described the same poster. The second assessment showed, without a doubt, that we had learned a great deal of Tlingit in a short time. In her second assessment, K'èdukà introduced herself saying, “yak'ei tsootaat. K'èdukà Jack yoo xat duwasaakw” [Good morning, my name is K'èdukà Jack].” She then described the poster, using 25 words, two of which were verbs. Most were one-word sentences, four were two-word sentences, and there was one three-word sentence. George used 23 words; 20% were one-word sentences, 50% over two-words, and he spoke three four-word sentences. Of George's utterances, 80% were two to four words long. In my second assessment I introduced myself with, “yak'ei tsootaat. Sʔimlaʔx<sup>w</sup> yoo xat duwasaakw. Lingít shtooat iltoo . . . oh . . . Lingít shtooat xaltoo. [Good morning, my name is Sʔimlaʔx<sup>w</sup>, he/she is . . . oh . . . I am learning Tlingit]. This is our second language assessment we have been studying Lingít together now, myself and my very courageous pilot project group for three months. And. . . let's see if I have learned anything.” I then described the poster using 27 words, three of which were verbs. Most were two-word sentences (50%); there was one four-word sentence and one six-word sentence. I used lots of repetition, and a small amount of auto-correction of grammar. Seventy per cent of my utterances were two to six words long.

Each of us had used more words – 25 on average – to describe the same poster. Perhaps more importantly, our sentences had doubled in length and complexity. Most, or 70% of our sentences, were two to six words long, and only 30% were one-word sentences. Five sentences in total were four to six words long. The speech indicated we were well on our way to achieving mid-beginner speaking proficiency.

As a final project, we filmed an entire lesson in Tlingit to demonstrate the direct acquisition teaching method. George taught the lesson, which happened to be a weather lesson, to K'èdukà and me, in full immersion for nearly an hour. It was a positive reflection on the teaching method that he was able to teach as a beginner learner for an hour in full immersion. (This film has not been made public.) The classroom footage from *Lingít 1* shows the success of the direct acquisition method in supporting beginner learners and beginner teachers to maintain full immersion for the duration of the lessons.

### Discussion and conclusions

Many Indigenous languages do not have the advantage of sequenced language curriculum or intensive language programs. Language activists are therefore responsible for multiple roles in the initial stages of

language shift: building curriculum, performing grassroots activism, lobbying our governments, creating pilot projects, finding support, dealing with criticism, and eventually hunkering down with a small cohort and working with the ones who want it. There is much activism to be done, and luckily we have the successful models of Interior Salish, Māori, and Hawaiian to follow. I recommend that pilot programs follow successful models, create sequenced curriculum, and implement regular assessments.

In conclusion, the best way to support Indigenous language learners of critically endangered languages is through 2,000 hours of intensive language classes, taught by second language learners in a cultural context. Sequenced curriculum, effective teaching methods, hours on task, community support, and regular assessments are key to the success of language revitalization. With assessment, it is possible to know if learners are progressing. Without sequenced curriculum and assessments, it is all too common for learners to plateau at beginner (or if they are lucky, intermediate) levels, due to ineffective teaching methods, a lack of sequenced curriculum, or simply too few hours of instruction. Our initial filmed assessments demonstrated the success of our teaching methods – our speaking measurably improved, measured by number of words spoken and sentence length. The assessment films demonstrate the confidence in speaking, even at a beginner level, generated by intensive, supportive, sequenced language programs. The films provide direct proof that the language curriculum is effective, and it is hoped that they will inspire other language activists to adopt similar models.

The final step of language revitalization is to create domains of use, full-time language domains where second language learners are supported to continue learning. These will be work domains, such as the language nests, immersion schools, and university departments in Hawai'i, and the immersion school in Spokane, Washington. In full-time language domains, learners can be supported to complete the journey from intermediate to advanced and build skills and confidence. At this point they can make the personal choice to speak full-time and bring the language home to their children.

There are many accomplishments to look forward to on the road to language proficiency. Beginner speakers will feel a thrill when they string their first one-, two-, and three-word sentences together. There are proud moments, as a teacher, when a learner gains a new level of confidence, ability, or a moment of creativity. There is a thrill when, as a mid-intermediate speaker, an Elder speaker is finally able to understand your speech. Elder speakers are overjoyed to be understood for the first time in years. At the mid-intermediate stage the learner is

finally proficient enough to receive cultural instruction *in the language*. I saw joy in my Syilx Elder's eyes when I was able to understand him, record his stories, and publish his words exactly as spoken for younger generations to read and hear. My main work as a language activist is to create opportunities for learners to experience these moments. I recently launched the Syilx Language House Association, in partnership with Syilx First Nations bands in Canada, a full-time grassroots program to support 16 highly motivated adult learners (Johnson, forthcoming). The plan is to teach the entire N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project two days a week over four years, deliver 2,000 hours, train learners to co-teach, record, and transcribe Elders. Currently in our second year of operation, we are on track to produce a new generation of high-intermediate speakers by 2019 (see Johnson, 2016b).

My hope is that pilot projects such as ours will provide a starting point for language communities to mobilize cohorts of learners with support from their communities and their leadership. My prayer is for our family of learners to grow; for Nsyilxcn, Tlingit, and all Indigenous communities to gather our resources and breathe life into our languages; and to cradle and support second language learners on our journey to proficiency.

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### Acknowledgements

I hold my hands up in the air to Christopher Parkin for freely sharing the N'səl'xcin Curriculum Project teaching methods and curricular design. For the language, *kn kšam mi əlx<sup>w</sup>lal iʔ nq<sup>w</sup>lq<sup>w</sup>iltitət*. High-five to my students, in both Nsyilxcn and Tlingit, for their passion and hard work; *p inx̄mínk*. *Limləmt* to Dr. Marianne Ignace, Simon Fraser University, for my postdoctoral fellowship through the SSHRC Partnership grant, and subsequent funders including Mitacs, First Peoples Culture Council, and the Aboriginal Languages Initiative. *Limləmt* to Penticton Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Westbank First Nation, Okanagan Indian Band, Okanagan Nation Alliance, and their leadership for stepping up in 2015 and supporting the Syilx Language House Association to create new Nsyilxcn speakers. Gratitude to my capsíws sisters from the Chopaka Language House in 2012, fluent Elder Samtíc'ʔ Sarah Peterson, Chris Parkin, LaRae Wiley, and the Salish School of Spokane for trail-blazing leadership and mentorship. Gratitude to the En'owkin Centre and its fluent Elders for my first lessons in Nsyilxcn. Gratitude to all Tlingit learners for

your courage, K'èdukà for your fire, and fluent Tlingit Elders Anafahash Sam Johnston and Keiyishí Bessie Cooley for your dedication.

### Notes

- 1 N'səl'xcin is the preferred spelling in Washington, and Nsyilxcn is the preferred spelling in BC. Also known as N'syilxcn, Nsyilxən, which mean Syilx or Salish language, and nqilx<sup>w</sup>cn, the language spoken by people.
- 2 Other curricula exist but are difficult to find. Sm'algyax (Tsimshian) curriculum is mentioned in FPCC (2014), but with no audio recordings. The proof of a successful curriculum is advanced graduates; the Mohawk program in Kahnawà:ke appears to be creating intermediate to advanced speakers through intensive adult immersion programs and written curriculum (KORLCC 2014a, 2014b).

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128 Sʔímlaʔx<sup>w</sup> Michele

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