

Challenges to Implementing Indigenous Immersion Program in Canada

Sudhashree Girmohanta

Reviewed by Red Bear Robinson, Knowledge Keeper

A high-quality full immersion program where students learn the content subjects in their mother tongue is the most effective way for rapid language revitalization (McIvor & Parker, 2016). While Indigenous language immersion programs worldwide, like Māori and Hawaiian, have proven to be successful in regenerating the respective languages, Canadian Indigenous immersion programs are struggling to survive (Gonzales et al., 2018). Scarcity of federal funding has been identified as the primary factor that keeps Canadian Immersion programs from thriving (Morcom & Roy, 2017). However, as the Canadian government has recently allocated a handsome amount of money for Indigenous language revitalization, it is crucial to understand the other factors that might be impeding the growth of the immersion programs. Finding out the obstacles these immersion programs frequently face will provide future work direction. The purpose of this paper is to identify, from the literature, common challenges that prevent stakeholders to successfully carry out Indigenous immersion programs in Canada. This paper will discuss how the scarcity of fluent speakers, lack of relevant content and teaching strategies, and parental beliefs impede fruitful implementation of Indigenous language immersion programs in Canada.

I do not have Indigenous ancestry. I am an immigrant who migrated from India to Canada for doctoral study. As I am not from an Indigenous community, all my knowledge and understanding about the rich culture and diverse language practices of Indigenous peoples in Canada are acquired from scholarly literature. I

identify myself as a person of color and a minority language speaker.

Lack of Fluent Speakers

As all Indigenous communities in Canada experienced severe language loss, not many people speak the languages today (Blair & Fredeen, 2009). Notably, according to a report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages, more than half of all fluent speakers of First Nations languages are over the age of 65, and only one percent falls under the age of 24 (McIvor & Parker, 2016). So, elderly speakers are the only people who can facilitate learning in a full immersion classroom environment. As a result, many Indigenous immersion programs primarily rely on the elder speakers to come into the schools daily to teach children the target language (Morcom, 2013). Despite their enthusiasm about transmitting the language to the younger generation, due to their advancing age, it may be difficult for Elders to commute daily and teach children in the immersion programs. Moreover, as McIvor and Parker (2016) describe many Elders fluent in their mother tongue have experienced trauma related to their heritage language learning and maintenance. These negative experiences may make it difficult for some Indigenous language speakers to shoulder the responsibilities of a language teacher.

Teachers in Indigenous immersion programs play a crucial role in teaching students the subject matter and the target language (Morcom, 2013). As content and language learning are intertwined in an immersive school environment, fluency in

the target language is essential for all teachers. However, as research conducted by Gonzales and colleagues depicts, not every Indigenous immersion program in Canada has teachers who are fluent in the target language (Gonzales et al., 2018). As such, it is challenging for schools to be English-free (Gonzales et al., 2018). Additionally, while proficiency in the target language is required, a teacher's fluency in that language does not guarantee effective language teaching (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). Morcom (2013) emphasizes the importance of providing teachers in a full immersion program like Mnising Anishinabek Kinoomaage Gaming (MMAK) with essential skills to "expose the children to a wide range of vocabulary and grammar instead of just teaching words and phrases" (p. 4). However, in many Canadian Indigenous immersion programs especially in Quebec (i.e., the Cree, Inuit, Mohawk), teachers are neither proficient language speakers nor adequately trained to foster content learning in the target language (Gonzales et al., 2018).

Immersion programs encourage teachers, staff, parents, and community members to communicate with the children in the target language even if the children respond in another language (Blair & Fredeen, 2009). To support their children's language learning, parents should be able to speak the target language. However, because of structural oppression, many adults did not have an opportunity to learn and maintain their heritage language, meaning that most parents use English for communication (Usborne et al., 2011). As a result, it is difficult for children who come to the immersion programs to practice the target language outside their classrooms.

Teaching Practices and Relevant Content

The two main components of Indigenous immersion schools are incorporating traditional teaching practices and using culturally relevant, land-based curricula. Research conducted in an intensive summer Cree immersion program in Alberta demonstrated the effectiveness of implementing traditional teaching practices through music, drumming, and dancing (Blair & Fredeen, 2009). Although some immersion

programs try to incorporate the traditional teaching style of the community, the incorporation of various cultural components in language teaching practices is still rare (McIvor & Parker, 2016). Furthermore, in many immersion schools, there exists ongoing tensions between the use of traditional and modern pedagogies (Johnston & Johnson, 2002). Similarly, while many First Nations communities across Canada have engaged in developing culturally appropriate pedagogy and learning content for students, the lack of resources and research in this area may prevent other educators from adopting such pedagogy and content in their own programs (McIvor & Anisman, 2018).

Parental Beliefs

Despite the success of many Indigenous language immersion programs worldwide and in Canada, many parents have concerns about the impact of immersion on students' academic success, English language acquisition, and self-esteem (McIvor, 2015). Contrary to research findings indicating a positive relationship between mother tongue education and second language learning, most parents still believe that learning a heritage language hinders students' English language acquisition, which in turn, affects their academic achievement and self-esteem (Usborne et al., 2011). Additionally, a common perception among parents is that children in an Indigenous language immersion program will struggle in their learning as they are not competent in the target language (Morcom, 2013). In contrast, researchers have found that children draw from their first language while learning an additional language (Wright et al., 2000 as cited in Usborne et al., 2011). Morcom and Roy (2017) also found that, although bilingual children's literacy development begins slowly, it is common for them to catch up and surpass their monolingual counterparts by grade three.

Recommendations

It is essential for a successful Indigenous language immersion program to prepare fluent and skilled teachers, incorporate culturally

relevant curriculum and teaching practices, and increase parents' understanding. As McIvor et al. (2018) mention, teacher training programs should include language learning opportunities for future teachers interested in teaching in an Indigenous immersive school environment. More research is needed to find creative ways to incorporate traditional teaching practices in language and content learning (Gonzales et al., 2018). As McIvor and Parker (2016) suggest, there is an urgent need to involve community members in developing culturally relevant and land-based curriculum to support effective learning. Also, it is crucial to inform parents of research findings that demonstrate a positive connection between children learning their heritage language and academic success and self-esteem (Usborne et al., 2011). Importantly, there is a need for patience as young children engage in learning in an Indigenous immersive environment (Morcom & Roy, 2017).

Author Biography

Sudhashree Girmohanta is a doctoral student in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning with a collaborative specialization in Comparative International and Development Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

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