"Don't Just Collect Words": Strategies for Advanced Indigenous Language Learning

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Abstract

Advanced adult Indigenous language speakers are essential in Indigenous language revitalization (ILR). As first language speakers age and pass away, communities increasingly depend on adults with high proficiency to carry the language forward (Fishman, 1991; Hinton, 2011; W.H. Wilson, 2018). Yet, few studies in ILR focus on adult learners, and fewer still on adults working on advanced proficiency. Similarly, in the field of applied linguistics (AL), minimal attention has been given to strategies for advanced language learning, and less still to Indigenous language learning (Daniels & Sterzuk, 2022; McIvor, 2020). This paper presents the results of a study aimed at understanding how adult Indigenous language learners have achieved advanced proficiency, including cases where there are few or no first language speakers to rely on for mentorship. It presents specific strategies and techniques that participants implemented to successfully progress to advanced proficiency. Insights from this context are shared to further understandings of, and possibilities for, greater connections between AL and ILR.

Résumé

Les locuteurs d'une langue autochtone de niveau avancé sont indispensables dans le domaine de revitalisation des langues autochtones (RLA). Les personnes dont la langue maternelle est une langue autochtone sont en train de vieillir et mourrir; forçant une dépendance aux adultes de compétence profonde à faire avancer leur langue (Fishman, 1991; Hinton, 2011; W.H. Wilson, 2018). Peu d'études dans le domaine de RLA toutefois se concentrent sur les apprenants adultes et encore moins d'études se concentrent sur les adultes qui travaillent sur une compétence profonde. De même, dans le domaine de la linguistique appliquée (LA), une attention minime est accordée aux stratégies ciblés à l'apprentissage avancé du langage et encore moins d'attention sur l'apprentissage des langues autochtones (Daniels & Sterzuk, 2022; McIvor, 2020). Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude ciblée à la comprehension de la façon dont les apprenants adultes des langues autochtones ont acquis une competence profonde, incluant des cas où les apprenants manquaient presque toute guidance parce qu'il y en a peu, voire aucun locuteur de langue maternelle autochtone sur lesquelles ils pouvaient compter. Cet article présente les stratégies et techniques menées par les participants pour réussir à atteindre une compétence profonde. On partage les aperçus de ce context afin d'explorer davantage la compréhension et les possibilités d'un lien plus profond entre LA et RLA.

"Don't Just Collect Words": Strategies for Advanced Indigenous Language Learning

Introduction

As Indigenous communities work tirelessly to ensure their languages reach or maintain a place of strength, there is great need to support adult learners to achieve advanced levels of language proficiency. As first language speakers age and pass away, communities increasingly depend on highly proficient adults to carry the language forward to future generations (Fishman, 1991; Hinton, 2011; W. H. Wilson, 2018). Yet, very few studies explore strategies for advanced Indigenous language learning in either the field of Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) or applied linguistics (AL). While there has been increasing attention to advanced learners in AL (see Malovrh & Benati, 2018), the focus has been on explaining what learners can do at the advanced level rather than on strategies or supports to help learners achieve these levels. In addition, studies in AL generally focus on languages with many speakers, and the insights from these studies are not always applicable to Indigenous language learning.

This paper presents the results of a study with learners of Indigenous languages who had either achieved or were working towards advanced oral language proficiency. The study defined advanced proficiency according to the guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) which are commonly referenced in ILR. According to ACTFL, learners at the advanced level can speak in multiple tenses, produce speech at the paragraph level, discuss a wide variety of topics, manage unexpected communication situations, and be understood by first language speakers (ACTFL, 2012). The study included eight additional language speakers[1] of various Indigenous languages across Canada who had already reached advanced oral proficiency, and a group of 12 Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim (Squamish language) learners working collaboratively to reach advanced levels.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the literature and study methods, before turning to focus on strategies for advanced adult Indigenous language learning. By "strategies," I refer to the specific language learning activities that participants engaged in to advance their proficiency. The strategies are clustered into six broad categories: classes and other group activities; individual study; collaboration with other learners and speakers; learning through assessment; work in the language; and language at home. Each of these are described along with example activities for each.

This study reveals innovative approaches Indigenous people are taking to learn their languages, often in contexts with limited resources or supports. In most cases, participants had no formal training in language education and their knowledge came through experience, trial and error, self-directed education, or peer support.[2] ILR practitioners could benefit from greater access to existing knowledge in AL to help guide decision-making in their efforts, as well as new research on ILR methods to maximize their effectiveness and efficiency (Hinton, 2011; McIvor, 2020). At the same time, the field of AL could benefit from incorporating input from ILR contexts which may reinforce or refute what is currently understood in the field (McIvor, 2020). ILR scholars have called for closer collaboration between the two fields and explored potential areas of mutual interest (Benson, in press; Daniels & Sterzuk, 2022; McIvor, 2020). This study provides empirical evidence to further advance this conversation.

The Unique Context of Indigenous Language Learning

Indigenous language learning is different from learning major world languages. Most Indigenous languages are endangered due to violent colonial policies and practices that sought to eradicate Indigenous peoples and cultures (Pine & Turin, 2017). ILR is often part of a wider cultural reclamation effort, and the motivations of Indigenous language learners are often deeply connected to identity, culture, and sovereign rights (Hermes et al., 2012; McCarty, 2012). Some unique challenges in ILR include "few fluent speakers available to teach the languages, the passing of elder speakers who hold specialized cultural and grammatical knowledge, limited availability of language resources, and social-emotional barriers resulting from colonization and assimilation policies and practice" (Rosborough & Rorick, 2017, p. 12). McIvor (2020) adds that many Indigenous language teachers are language learners themselves. Yet, there is a lack of resources to support them, including teaching materials, curricula, media resources, academic research, or mentors. Without these resources, communities turn to what Hinton (2011) calls "bootstrap" strategies, adapting or creating new methods to support their efforts.

Approaches to Advanced Adult Indigenous Language Education

Despite the challenges, Indigenous communities have worked diligently to support ILR. Recognizing the need for highly proficient adult speakers who can carry the language forward (Fishman, 1991; Jenni et al., 2017), communities have developed programs to support adult learners. Options for adult Indigenous language learners include language classes (e.g., Gordon, 2009; W. H. Wilson, 2018), language camps (e.g., Alexie et al., 2009; B. Daniels et al., 2022), part-time or full-time immersion programs (e.g., Green & Maracle, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Olthuis et al., 2013), and Mentor-Apprentice Programs[3] in which a first language speaker is paired with one or more learners to engage in regular immersion sessions (Hinton et al., 2018). Many adult Indigenous language learners have also turned to self-directed education to improve their proficiency (e.g., Foxcroft, 2016; Johnson, 2012; Underwood, 2017).

Even with this range of options, few of these efforts focus on advanced proficiency. Furthermore, the available literature on advanced Indigenous language learning rarely describes specific strategies used by language learners at these levels. One exception is the work of Tehotakerá:tonh Jeremy Green whose guide to teaching Haudenosaunee languages includes specific activities based on his research on advancing through all stages of language proficiency (Green, 2017, 2018). Another exception is the work of Matiu Tai Rātima whose research documents strategies used by advanced learners of te reo Māori (Rātima, 2013; Rātima & Papesch, 2014). The present study aims to expand awareness and discussion on effective strategies for advanced Indigenous language learning.

Methods

This study was developed in collaboration with members of the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Sníchim Stewardship (hereafter Stewardship). Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim (the Squamish language) is a Coast Salish language that originates in a territory that now includes Vancouver, BC where I grew up.[4] I have been working alongside this language community since 2015. At that time, there were only seven remaining first language speakers of

Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim, and the last of those speakers passed away in 2020. Most of the Stewardship members had completed full-time adult immersion programs for their language and had been working as Sḵwx̱wú7mesh language teachers. All were deeply committed to creating a thriving community of Sḵwx̱wú7mesh language speakers. In 2021, they paused their teaching to focus on their own language proficiency development, endeavouring to reach advanced levels. Following a community-based approach to research (Bischoff & Jany, 2019; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009), I worked closely with the Stewardship group to co-design a study to support their efforts.

Theoretical Framing

My research is framed within an Indigenist research paradigm (S. Wilson, 2007). It is based on the premise that although I am not Indigenous, I can utilize my skills in meaningful ways to benefit Indigenous peoples. To do this well, the work must be grounded in relationship and responsive to the needs and goals of the communities I work with (Bischoff & Jany, 2019; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Riddell et al., 2017; S. Wilson, 2008). This study was developed collaboratively with members of the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh language community and guided by them throughout. I did not impose or test theories with participants, but rather came to interactions with curiosity and the belief that participants are the experts of their own experiences and contexts.

My own view of learning is holistic, recognizing language learning as a complex, dynamic process, influenced by a wide range of internal and external factors (Ellis, 2008; Hornberger, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). The Douglas Fir Group (2016) proposes an ecological model for understanding language learning that views individuals, communities, institutions, and ideologies as interacting continuously and inseparable from one another. This model is consistent with many Indigenous worldviews that are holistic and relational, emphasizing the impossibility of separating the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and environmental (Absolon, 2011; Meyer, 2014; S. Wilson, 2008). Throughout my research, I turned to the ecological model as a reminder of the complexity of language learning and sought to attend to this complexity in my analysis.

Research Questions

The primary goal of this study was to explore how Indigenous language learners can successfully progress their proficiency from intermediate to advanced levels, including in cases where there are few or no first language speakers. The research was guided by three questions:

1. Which strategies from the literature on additional language learning could be applied in the case of Indigenous language learning in contexts with few or no first language speakers?
2. Which strategies have been used by advanced additional language speakers of Indigenous languages across Canada to reach their current proficiency levels?
3. Which language learning strategies work well for a grassroots group of advanced language learners in a context with no first language speakers?

Procedures

The project involved three main components. The first was a literature review on strategies for advanced language learning. The second involved semi-structured interviews with eight advanced additional language speakers of Indigenous languages across Canada. The purpose of the literature review and interviews with advanced additional language speakers was to understand approaches to advanced language learning broadly while drawing out ideas for strategies that could work for the Stewardship participants. The advanced additional language speakers were recruited through a relational process, based on existing relationships and through recommendations from other trusted members of the ILR community. I aimed for diversity in terms of gender, age, language family, and experiences, but sought to interview those who had learned in contexts with at least some similarities to the context of the Stewardship. For example, while the Kanien'kéha speakers come from a context with many more speakers than Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim, one of them had participated in a full-time adult immersion program and the other had been working as a language teacher and curriculum developer. I contacted the participants via email, and interviews were conducted virtually using videoconference software. These interviews ranged from 45-80 minutes each.

The third component of the research involved observation and collaborative activities with the Stewardship. Between December 2021 and May 2022, I conducted several weeks of virtual observations. During this time, I hosted three meetings in which I brought ideas from the literature and advanced additional language speaker interviews to the group, and we discussed which strategies were working well. I also conducted interviews with 12 of the 15 participants at the beginning of our time together, and ten of the participants at the end.[5] The interviews were semi-structured and varied significantly in length due to participant's responses. The first interviews ranged from 25-75 minutes each, and the second interviews were between 15-45 minutes each.

Participants

None of the advanced additional language speakers nor the Stewardship participants had been raised in the language. Four of the Stewardship participants were not Indigenous. Three of the advanced additional language speakers had parents who were first language speakers, and for all other Indigenous participants the last generation of speakers in their families were their grandparents or great-grandparents. Some participants had attended language exposure classes in school, but none began to learn in earnest until young adulthood.

Advanced Additional Language Speakers

The following advanced additional language speakers participated in the study. They are listed alphabetically by first name with their languages in parentheses:[6]

- Aaron Fay (nēhiyawēwin/ Plains Cree)
- Cameron Adams (ininīmowin/ Swampy Cree)
- Jasḵwaan Amanda Bedard (X̱aad Kil/ Haida)

- Kahrhó:wane Cory McComber (Kanien'kéha /Onkwehonwehnéha/ Mohawk)
- Karonhiióstha Shea Sky (Kanien'kéha /Onkwehonwehnéha/ Mohawk)
- Kathryn Michel (Secwepemctsín)
- PENÁĆ David Underwood (SENĆOŦEN/ Saanich)
- Vanessa Campbell (Iyál) (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim/ Squamish)

Most of these speakers had participated in formal language programs such as classes, immersion programs, or Mentor-Apprentice Programs. Kahrhó:wane and Vanessa Campbell (Iyál) had not learned through formal programs but had opportunities to learn through work as teaching assistants with first language speakers. All of these participants had engaged in years of self-study and five had worked or were working as language teachers. I asked the advanced additional language speakers to self-assess their proficiency levels according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines[7] (ACTFL, 2012) and all but one agreed.[8] Their self-assessments ranged from Intermediate-High to Superior.

Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Sníchim Stewardship

In 2016, the Sníchim Foundation (then called Kwi Awt Stelmexw) created the first full-time adult immersion program for the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh language in partnership with Simon Fraser University. Most of the Stewardship participants were graduates of this Certificate program, as well as a second-year, part-time Diploma program. Most also went on to work as teachers or teaching assistants in these initiatives which welcomed new cohorts of students each year. The programs were supported financially by the Sníchim Foundation, the Squamish Nation, and the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. The Where Are Your Keys (WAYK) learning organization had also been closely involved in these initiatives. Their staff provided ongoing pedagogical training and logistical support while also participating in language learning.[9] Each summer WAYK would facilitate a "Summer Language Intensive" in which the teachers and interested graduates would continue working on proficiency development while preparing curricula for the next program cohort. In 2021, the group decided not to run a new cohort and to instead spend 10 months working on pushing their proficiency up to advanced levels. They were supported to do so by their employers, either the Sníchim Foundation, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, or WAYK. They called themselves the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Sníchim Stewardship and they met from July 2021 to May 2022, primarily virtually using videoconference software. The following list of members' names appear as each requested:

- Breeann Baker
- Brent Nahanee (Kwetsimet)
- Charlene George (S7atsáliya)
- Cheṅáx̱wtn (Swú7wu Billy)
- Evan Gardner
- Gordon George
- Jade George (Smnalh-tnaat)
- Jenna N. Hassan
- Myia Antone (Welwál̓tenaat)

- Nicholas George
- Reighen Grineage
- Sarah Jeffrey
- Susanna Ciotti
- Victoria Swahámiya Gabriel[10]
- Xats'alanexw (Victor Harry)

Teachers in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh programs, with support from WAYK, had created and continuously refined a modified ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview to assess learners' proficiency levels. Most Stewardship participants began their time together with proficiency ratings ranging from Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-High, while two who have not been assessed were likely Advanced already.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed using Zoom videoconferencing software. The automatic transcriptions were then checked and corrected by either me or a hired research assistant. When participants spoke in their Indigenous languages, this was noted but not translated except in the case of words that I recognized or was able to find easily online. Each participant received a copy of their transcript to review, add clarification, or request omissions. Only a few requested minor changes. I kept digital field notes (Microsoft Word) throughout my time with the Stewardship. Transcriptions and field notes were uploaded to the data analysis software NVivo which I used to complete thematic content analysis of the information collected (Creswell, 2014). This analysis was conducted in stages, using a constant comparison approach (Charmaz, 2006). As the interviews and notes were coded, these codes were then compared to earlier codes to allow themes to be analyzed inductively (Tie et al., 2019). Participant quotes selected to exemplify themes in this paper were edited to remove repeated words and filler words. They were then shared with participants who in some cases requested additional minor changes for flow or to clarify meaning.

Findings: Strategies for Advanced Indigenous Language Learning

With this study, I set out to identify language learning strategies that helped Indigenous language learners reach advanced proficiency levels. Participants also spoke of non-pedagogical support factors that they relied on throughout their learning journeys, such as motivation, peer support, safe learning spaces, funding, and time for language learning. They also shared attitudes towards language learning that helped them maintain their efforts towards advanced proficiency, such as "go all in," "create routine," "keep it relevant," and "it's ok to make mistakes." Hardan (2013) describes terms used for these kinds of attitudes including "metacognitive strategies" or "affective strategies." I have come to understand them as the participants' guiding principles. The support factors and guiding principles are important to acknowledge because without these, learners may not be successful regardless of their strategies (Wong & Nunan, 2011). By "strategies" here and throughout, I mean specific activities for language learning. Discussion of the support factors and guiding principles is woven throughout the remainder of this paper which focusses on strategies.

The study included a review of the literature on advanced language learning with the goal to identify strategies that could work for the Stewardship participants. As previously noted, much of the literature on advanced language learning focuses on what learners can do at advanced proficiency levels rather than on the strategies they have used to reach these levels. Where strategies are described in the AL literature, many would not actually be possible in Indigenous contexts. For example, immersion or exchange experiences in places where the target language is the dominant language (e.g., Hyltenstam et al., 2018). The ILR literature also points to immersion with fluent first language speakers as one of the best strategies for advanced language learning (Green, 2017; Rātima & Papesch, 2014), but there are no remaining first language speakers of Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim. Activities that rely on accessing media in the target language, such as books or films, would also be impossible as such media do not exist. Other types of text-based activities, such as the cloze activities or sentence completion tasks suggested by Richards (2008), would be possible but would first need to be created by the language learners themselves. Some of the strategies that I suggested from the literature that could work for the Stewardship included pre-listening activities when working with audio resources; interactive tasks to focus on specific grammar forms such as find the difference activities and circle drills; vocabulary tracking; and story recording. Throughout this paper, I link to the relevant literature when discussing these and other strategies described by the participants.

The remainder of this section presents strategies used by either the advanced additional language speakers, the Stewardship participants, or both, offering a variety of ideas of what has worked for Indigenous language learners in different contexts. Through my analysis, I was able to group the strategies into the following six categories: classes and other organized group activities; individual study; collaboration with other learners and speakers; learning through assessment; work in the language; and language at home.

Classes and Other Organized Group Activities

In some cases, participants had opportunities to attend language classes or other organized group activities for advanced Indigenous language learning. Karonhiióstha had completed a two-year, full-time immersion program for Kanien’kéha, graduating with advanced proficiency. Kahrhó:wane and Aaron Fay had opportunities to participate in advanced language classes. Cameron Adams and PENÁĆ were able to participate in advanced Mentor-Apprentice Programs. In cases where there were no formal programs for advanced learning, participants created opportunities for themselves. The Stewardship was an example of this. Karonhiióstha also co-founded Ionkwahronkha'onhátie', a non-profit organization that ran programs to support advanced learners of Kanien’kéha.

Participants noted ways in which language teaching needed to be different for advanced learners. Notably, while most felt that immersion and other input-based approaches were ideal at earlier levels, they found that incorporating some explicit grammar teaching was useful at the advanced level, including times when these aspects of the language were taught using English. Kathy Michel explained:

> I think it’s important to have some explicit teaching now… when it was done to begin with, it was unfolded to us like a big grammar book and that was too much. But now… a smattering of somebody showing you how it works as you need it really helps.

Similarly, several of the Stewardship participants spoke about the usefulness of what they called Sḵwx̱wú7mesh "Ted Talks," brief lectures in English about specific grammar topics. The effectiveness of including some explicit grammar teaching for adult learners has been discussed in both AL and ILR (e.g., Cook, 2016; DeKeyser, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Rātima, 2013), and this is explored further in the discussion section.

Individual Study

Whether or not they had opportunities to participate in organized group activities, all participants undertook individual study. They emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for their learning, creating study routines, and the power of repetition. Most used notetaking to keep track of what they were learning, or wanted to learn, and reviewed these notes frequently. Here, I will elaborate further on three techniques that emerged for individual study: reading and listening; transcription and translation; and self-talk. I also describe a self-directed story-recording activity.

Reading and Listening

Without access to a community of speakers, many Indigenous language learners must rely on audio and text sources for language input. These kinds of resources can be particularly valuable to advanced learners who do not have access to classes or proficient conversation partners. Participants spoke about finding ways to surround themselves with language however they could, often relying on recordings. Many communities have recordings of Elders telling stories and legends or describing life and customs. Some have access to other audio resources such as radio shows or podcasts. Whatever the source, Aaron Fay reminds us that "at any level, daily listening is really important."

Some participants shared that hearing first language speakers and trying to imitate them was helpful. PENÁĆ explained that recordings of first language speakers provide "a model for us to go forward with language, a standard." Gordon George reflected on how listening to recorded stories and legends made learning easier for him since he had grown up hearing his father and others teaching through stories. He also spoke about the importance of hearing the same recordings many times, "really listening to what's going on with the language and the speech and the sentence structure."

While there are mixed opinions about the role of written resources in revitalizing Indigenous languages that were primarily oral languages before colonization (Comeau, 2018), participants spoke of written resources as important sources of language input. They read stories and legends, linguistic documentation, dictionaries, and grammar books. Some noted how the latter were particularly useful at the advanced level. While reading about grammar rules may have felt overwhelming or confusing earlier, at the advanced level they helped learners to clarify questions, identify patterns, and note exceptions.

Whether working with text or audio, learners reported the importance of using these materials in an active way to extend their learning. As Karonhiióstha put it, "don't just collect words, actually use them." She spoke about writing out word definitions in the language, testing herself with different tenses and pronouns, or trying words out with speakers. The Stewardship developed group learning activities to accompany reading and listening materials. For example, they worked together to divide written texts into phrases, identify phrases that they did not know, and exchange knowledge on those language pieces.

Transcription and Translation

Two activities that involve actively engaging with language materials are transcription and translation. Aaron Fay noticed that "the learners who are more advanced, the ones who are advancing quickly… they use transcription as a part of their regular learning process." He and others enjoyed listening to recordings of first language speakers to learn from their cultural teachings while also focusing on language learning. Potential benefits of doing transcription include improving listening skills, writing skills, pronunciation, and prosody (Brant, 2024). It provides opportunities for learners to analyze how language is used by first language speakers, hear new words, and identify areas to work on. It can also help create resources for future learners.[11]

Similarly, translation work can be useful in expanding one's thinking about and *in* the language. Breeann Baker was translating children's books. She would attempt her own translations and then work with more advanced speakers to review and adjust them. She discussed how this exercise helped her to learn new language, and to recognize important differences between English and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim:

> It's been pushing my fluency into a different area. I'm realizing with translation how saying a word or sentence in one language can have a different meaning in another language… and how even though it can be descriptive in one, it could be shortened in another. It doesn't necessarily mean it's any less language because the length has changed, it's just become more specific to the way of the language itself.

Self-Talk

The most cited practice for individual study amongst participants was thinking and talking to themselves in the language. While it may be common for learners to think about language, participants reported thinking and talking to themselves *in* the language as a deliberate practice. With limited opportunities to engage with other advanced speakers, self-talk became an important option for participants: "if you're not using your language every day, at least try to talk to yourself… the more you talk, the more you get better" (Xats'alanexw [Victor Harry]).

Some participants would narrate in their minds what they were doing or what was going on around them. Others would practice specific language forms. PENÁĆ was a big advocate for self-talk practices (see Underwood, 2017), and he described how his self-talk progressed as his language became more advanced:

> In more recent times, it's turned into "well now that I've said it in the first person, how would I say that in the third person?" So, thinking grammatically about it, alternating those modes of conversation, playing with those different voices.

Cheṅáx̱wtn (Swu7wu Billy) described thinking about more advanced language when preparing to speak in ceremony. He noticed that this practice helped not only with language structures, but also shifted his thinking to a Sḵwx̱wú7mesh perspective: "That's really where we're at… when we're talking as fluently as we can, it's not so much 'is this correct?', it's more 'is this Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, the way we're speaking?'"

Some participants were working on deliberately changing their internal dialogue to the language. Gordon George found himself wondering if what he was saying sounded Sḵwx̱wú7mesh and determined that he had to make the change to his internal thoughts to adequately answer that question:

> I found myself saying that more and thought "well, how does it sound Sḵwx̱wú7mesh? What do you have to do to yourself, in your mind, to make it sound Sḵwx̱wú7mesh?" And my first thought was, "well, you have to think in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh." So that's why I wanted to make that change to that internal thought or voice, because that's the only way it can sound Sḵwx̱wú7mesh in my opinion… it's thinking in your language that you're learning rather than thinking in English.

Kahrhó:wane had also consciously made the choice to switch his internal dialogue to Kanien'kéha and explained: "it takes a little work, but it's like anything: once it becomes routine, then you don't have to think about doing it anymore."

Story Recording

Here, I want to highlight a specific study activity that worked well for participants. Aaron Fay found a story recording activity online (see Madison, 2021) and described it to me. I brought the idea to the Stewardship who found it useful and enjoyable. The first step in this activity is the learner records themselves telling a story for five minutes. Ideally, it is a true story about their life. Any words or phrases that they do not know, they say in their first language. They then listen to the recording and identify the words and phrases they had trouble with. They write these down, find the translations, and study them. They then record the same story again and repeat the cycle of recording, identifying trouble words, and studying those words, until they can recite the story with ease.

Stories play an important role in Indigenous education (Archibald, 2008), and other Indigenous language learners have written about incorporating storytelling to enhance their learning (e.g., Claxton, 2020; Daniels, 2016). This story-recording activity provides individual learners an option to practice speaking, or output, which is an essential ingredient for successful language learning (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Green, 2017; Wong & Nunan, 2011). It provides opportunities for noticing what one needs to work on, self-correcting, and building up language relevant to one's life:

> I've been practicing doing a storytelling activity on how to process crab and prawn. I started going off seeing all the gaps and holes and then I was actually able to hunt[12] it all from Swú7wu and Vic a couple weeks ago and now I can tell the whole story in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh or explain it all. So, I really like that activity. I think storytelling where I'm at in my language journey is the most important thing to be practicing - connecting those longer sentences and connecting thoughts. (Myia Antone [Welwáltenaat])

Myia sought input from others to build on her story. This activity could also be used as a group activity by sharing recordings and collaborating with others to identify and work on corrections.

Collaboration with Other Learners and Speakers

All participants relied on others to support their learning. Some were able to visit with first language speakers, but most depended on support from other advanced additional language speakers. Whether they received regular mentorship from more advanced speakers, collaborated informally with friends, or were able to organize groups like the Stewardship, they spoke to the power of peer-supported learning:

> What's helped me the most is the collaborative efforts that are happening… Being able to hunt language from one another, I have found a lot of holes in my own proficiency and have found things that I hadn't considered or thought about that people are digging into individually and have a lot of knowledge on. So, being able to spread that knowledge out evenly amongst each other without having to put too much pressure on one individual has been so beneficial. (Reighen Grineage)

Evan Gardner, the creator of WAYK, was adamant that "adult language learners need a community" and he shared how many WAYK techniques were just as much about community building as they were about language learning. Formal or informal, big or small, having a support network can bolster language learning, as peers can learn from one another and help keep each other accountable. Working together consistently, learners can also build trust and feelings of safety which can lead to risk-taking that can accelerate language learning (Foxcroft, 2016; Gardner & Ciotti, 2018; Johnson, 2017).

Study Together

Participants discussed study activities that they would do together with others, including collaborating on verb conjugation databases; testing each other's vocabulary; trying out new phrases; or transcribing audio and working through new language ideas. Karonhiióstha spoke to several of these activities, as well as ideas for more communicative activities: "me and my friends would create a pile of topics depending on what we were learning at the time, and then we would pull one and try to talk about it for five minutes." Others played language games described further in the section on hands-on learning.

One innovative practice for collaborative study that I witnessed was a WAYK technique used by the Stewardship called "prove it." Each day after lunch, the group would gather for "list time" when they would share words they were working on. These were sometimes vocabulary words, but often more complex grammatical pieces such as tense examples or suffixes. After presenting their list, the participant would create a "set up" by providing contextual information to clarify how they were trying to use the language pieces. Finally, they would "prove it," giving sentence examples using the words. Their peers would then provide corrections and feedback and would often take turns "proving" the same words in different contexts. The entire discussion would happen in S̲kwx̲wú7mesh sníchim. Jenna Hassan spoke to how the activity had been beneficial:

> There's been a shift from having to create a physical tangible scenario to explain the context… to being able to explain the context in the language, say this language that you want, and then ask in the language "is that right or does it work differently?" Being able to have a meta-conversation and say "okay, how is this word or this piece

> of language different from this piece of language?" and talk as a group about it has been really interesting to see. I think that has been a huge reason that we've gotten more proficient over the last while.

On some days, the participants would ask each other to open their personal notebooks[13] to a random page and present a list from that page. This practice was a form of mutual accountability, encouraging peers to review their notes, while also ensuring exposure to a variety of language structures, topics, and contexts.

Speak as Much as Possible

One of the most important aspects of collaborating with others is the opportunities it provides for speaking and interacting (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Wong & Nunan, 2011). As Aaron Fay pointed out, "if we want to speak the language, we have to speak the language." While activities like story recording can help learners practice output on their own, it cannot replace conversational practice. Almost all participants emphasized the importance of interacting with as many different speakers and in as many contexts as possible. Some found that speaking helped them retain language better than other kinds of practice: "Writing it down doesn't really help unless you're saying it… as much as you write it down, your brain is not really going to hold on to that" (Gordon George). Vanessa Campbell (Iyál) noticed a jump in her proficiency when she had an opportunity to spend time with other speakers on a regular basis:

> What happened there is we spent more time just trying to talk to each other, not working on curriculum or any agenda, but just trying to talk to each other… about anything, and that really changed our individual use of the language.

Speaking and conversing provide learners with opportunities for noticing language they need to work on. When we hear language, we may only pay attention to essential pieces of information rather than the grammatical forms being used (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Schmidt, 2001). When we speak, however, is when we need the correct forms, and we notice the forms of which we are unsure. Charlene George (S7atsáliya) observed:

> When we were in person… the first half of the morning would be a big immersion sprint.[14] That's a huge way to find holes in your pockets. What am I having a hard time actually conversing about? This is the essential thing that we're trying to do here is create conversational speakers. So, when you're there in person having a natural conversation, what are you unable to express? What are you unable to say?

One of the guiding principles that participants emphasized was not being afraid to make mistakes. They advocated for using all opportunities to test out language and the importance of taking risks. Kathryn Michel would try out new forms with first language speakers:

> I would challenge myself to start using them, to see if the way I'm using them is correct. So, I kind of do some informal testing with my mother, with different

> people… and I think it's the only way I was actually going to push through to get from an intermediate level to more an advanced level.

Cameron Adams described ordering at his local café in the language even though he knew the cashier wasn't a speaker: "Speak it everywhere you go!"

Create Space for Immersion

Ideally, learners can be immersed in the language (Green, 2017; McIvor, 2015; Tedick et al., 2011). In the absence of communities of speakers, however, participants emphasized the importance of creating immersion spaces. The Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Certificate and Diploma programs, as with other adult Indigenous language immersion programs, were created with this intention. First hosted at Simon Fraser University, the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh programs were eventually able to move into a house on Tsleil-Waututh Nation land which also created a physical *place* for immersion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the programs had to move online but participants were diligent about maintaining immersion in this virtual environment. The Stewardship participants continued with this commitment, designating specific immersion times and activities in their daily schedule.

Others not able to participate in full-time language learning found creative ways to create immersion spaces and places. Kathryn Michel had organized immersion lunches for learners together with first language speakers and Jasḵwaan had organized language camps where learners are on the land immersed in the language together. She had recently organized a camp where intermediate speakers planned learning activities to lead with more novice students:

> It worked out really well. With all of the preparation we did beforehand and everyone taking responsibility for certain activities to be carried out in the language, the responsibility of enacting language learning was not just resting on a few people's shoulders.

Hands-on Learning

Through the programs Karonhiióstha co-organized, she discovered that hands-on activities conducted in the language worked well for advanced learners. They organized everything from bowling nights to hide-tanning workshops. She noted the importance of having opportunities for using language in different contexts. Cheṅáx̱wtn (Swú7wu Billy) had made a similar discovery for advanced Sḵwx̱wú7mesh learning:

> Before [I thought] we're going to intensely learn the things like storytelling, comparing and contrasting, and all these things that you learn from the Oral Proficiency Interviews[15] to look out for in advanced language skills. But, in the end, it feels like it's more about having fun… speak as much as you can and try to set up contexts where you're doing these things naturally.

Many participants emphasized focussing on language relevant to their lives. In addition to hands-on language lessons, the WAYK method used by the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh learners involves activities such as immersion walks, coffee time, cooking, and cleaning

together. Many participants said they learned the most during these times because the context was memorable, the needs were real, and the language could be extended into their daily lives: “it has to be a part of your everyday life to really stay with you” (Nicholas George). Others also noted the power of hands-on, enjoyable activities. PENÁĆ liked playing cards in the language, Jade̓ George (Smnalh-tnaat) enjoyed creative writing and singing, and Myia Antone (Welwál̓tenaat) felt her language thrived when she was harvesting or engaged in other land-based activities.

Others spoke specifically to creating room for fun because “if you’re having fun and enjoying your language learning, you learn faster” (Cheṅáx̱wtn [Swú7wu Billy]). Some games can be specifically designed to reinforce or expand language learning. The Stewardship occasionally played Twenty Questions and other guessing games. I brought them additional ideas like Find the Differences activities and Circle Drills (see Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012). Reighen Grineage said “those were really helpful in stretching our language brains in ways that were fresh and new, and made things a little more exciting.”

Learning through Assessment

Teachers in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh immersion programs had adapted Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) from ACTFL to assess learning. Over the years, teaching assistants would sit in on the interviews, track aspects of language use, and collaborate with the assessor to provide a proficiency rating. Recently, the assessors also began including a list of three things that learners could work on to get them to the next level. These items were added to a shared document they called the “Three Things Document” which noted the language pieces each participant was working on. The Stewardship participants regularly reviewed this document and noted how helpful it was to keep themselves and others accountable:

> The Three Things Document has been really good to know what other people are working on and what I need to work on, and how to steer the conversation in a way that makes one of us use those things and help us grow a little bit more. (Nicholas George)

In addition, the Stewardship was committed to increasing everyone’s capacity for engaging with assessment. Jenna Hassan was trained by ACTFL and led practice sessions for the group that included education about how to understand and assess proficiency levels, reviewing previous OPI, and practice running OPI with one another and invited guests. She noted:

> The growth I’ve seen in people's proficiency since doing Oral Proficiency Interviews and creating the Three Things Document, I think has been really helpful… the process of doing them and being able to learn how to identify the holes in our pockets… what are some of the error patterns that I hear that I can think about, and that you can think about, and that we can work on together to help each other get more proficient? I think that has been really a huge part of the more intermediate-advanced growth in people's language skills.

Several participants noted how helpful these sessions were, not only to learn about assessment, but as opportunities for reflecting on their own language capabilities and needs.

Work in the Language

Participants' language learning excelled when they had opportunities to use the language outside of typical learning environments, including through work opportunities. Cameron Adams worked with a translator to develop an app for his language: "this really helped my language learning journey because lots of times I would hear the audio of the phrase multiple times as I was editing… and I got to hear pronunciations, how they differed." Jas̲kwaan, who was working as a language teacher and in the language office for her Nation, commented "I know that keeps improving my language, being able to just be immersed in it and thinking in it all day."

Most of the participants had taught or were currently teaching the language. Echoing other accounts of successful ILR practitioners (e.g., Johnson, 2017; Rātima, 2013), they described this role as key in their own learning journeys. They spoke of always needing to keep one step ahead of their students, and how teaching became a motivator for language study. PENÁĆ commented that it was "sink or swim" when he first started teaching. Relatedly, Kathryn Michel shared:

> It's really forced me to become more accountable for my language learning to have to teach it. I think a lot of times I sidestepped having to personally teach it and I think that I probably would be a lot further in my language if I didn't run away from that… anyone serious about language, turn around and teach it as quickly as you can, even if you're like me and don't consider yourself to be a teacher. If not you, who then?

The WAYK method also involves having learners lead others through lessons as soon as they can, and the Stewardship participants emphasized about how powerful that model was:

> Once you teach someone else what you've learned, you're actually reflecting on what you've learned yourself… Encouraging others to become teachers right away is not only beneficial for language revitalization in general, but there's also a huge personal growth aspect. (Breeann Baker)

Teaching is often paired with curriculum development, and participants found that creating language materials enhanced their learning. The Stewardship spent much time reviewing and creating lessons for the Certificate program. As they reviewed together, questions arose about spelling, grammar, and other language pieces, and often the group would take an impromptu dive into a given aspect of the language. Susanna Ciotti reflected "we will go back and talk about something that theoretically we all already know how to do and almost every time we do that, I learn something new from that conversation." I wrote in my notes: "learning to create lessons while learning language at the same time – learning *through* curriculum development."

Language at Home

Another important area to expand language use is at home (Bommelyn & Tuttle, 2018; Hinton, 2013). As previously discussed, participants advocated for focusing on language relevant to one's life and finding ways to incorporate language into daily activities. Many emphasized the benefits of using the language with friends and family. The

most influential motivation in this regard was raising children in the language. PENÁĆ said that committing to raising his daughter in the language was "the biggest solidifier, the catalyst for a lot of that change" (see also Underwood, 2017). Kahrhó:wane concurred: "children are naturally curious, and they ask a lot of questions, so it really forced me to use what I had and to remember the things that I was reading and listening to." Cheṅáx̱wtn (Swú7wu Billy) spoke at length about the benefits of raising his children in the language:

> I feel like one of the fastest ways to get fluent is to have kids… because it's so different… when I'm trying to talk to my kids when they've made a mistake and I'm trying to help them through the mistake and trying to support and encourage them, some of that language is really hard to think of. Sometimes I'm absolutely stumped…. There's just so much stuff that doesn't come up in other conversations, other than with family. So that's helped so much… I speak to them every day and it literally forces me to improve on my language.

Cheṅáx̱wtn and others noted that some of these benefits could be derived from speaking with other young learners, even if one does not have children of their own.

Discussion

The need to create advanced Indigenous language speakers is urgent. This study revealed unique strategies used by adult Indigenous language learners in their efforts to become advanced speakers in contexts with limited resources, supports, or first language speakers. As calls increase for greater collaboration between the fields of AL and ILR (B. Daniels & Sterzuk, 2022; McIvor, 2020), studies such as this one provide rich information that can be analyzed to the mutual benefit of both fields. Here, I discuss some topics of contribution, including areas of overlap that may expand understandings and possible ways forward for practitioners in both AL and ILR.

Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Directed Learning

Participants in the study were self-motivated, driven by their passion for the language, its connection to their identities, and a sense of responsibility to its future. AL scholars have written about intrinsic or integrative forms of motivation and how these influence learners' choices (Noels et al., 2000; Norton, 2013). Rātima (2013) and McIvor (2020) have explained that conceptualizations of motivation in AL do not fully account for Indigenous contexts in which learners are driven by a connection and responsibility to their own community rather than an external one, yet it is clear that intrinsic forms of motivation contribute to successful language learning. Winke (2022) explains:

> When language learning coincides with personal identity construction, a person changes from a mere learner of the language to an owner and rightful user of the language. A person who feels that way can experience a powerful desire to practice and learn. This is because continued improvement reinforces the person's linguistic identity. (para. 11)

Norton (2013) refers to deliberate action taken to support one's learning as "investment." Whether engaged in self-study, self-talk, or collaborating with other learners, the study participants' intrinsic motivation(s) drove them to continuously invest in their own learning.

Metacognitive and Metalinguistic Awareness

The participants' investment in language learning and the kinds of activities they engaged in to reach their language goals evidence metacognitive awareness. Green (2017) defines metacognitive awareness as "understanding, taking responsibility for, planning and evaluating one's own learning process" (p. 52) and argues that it is essential in advancing Indigenous language learning. Research in AL concurs, demonstrating the importance of metacognitive awareness and related strategies for successful language learning (e.g. Byrnes, 2012; Hardan, 2013). The learners in this study actively worked to identify aspects of the language that they needed to improve on, and deliberately planned and engaged in activities to advance these aspects.

Such planning also requires a level of metalinguistic awareness, which Green defines as "the process of developing an understanding of how a language is structured or functions" (p. 52). Many of the activities described in this paper demonstrate the participants' metalinguistic awareness, such as the "prove it" activity that the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh learners used to work on aspects of the language together or self-talk activities in which the learner deliberately alternates grammar patterns. Kahrhó:wane reflected on the process of increasing metalinguistic awareness, suggesting that as one advances in language proficiency, they move from knowing what to say, to how to choose words, to why those choices are made:

> If you know how to get there, that's where your language is really going to expand because if you know how, it means you can be thinking beyond just phrases and words. You're starting to think in the spirit of that language…. [and] if you can think of the why in your language… you're likely to be a master speaker.

Other participants described the role of noticing and of explicit instruction in the development of metalinguistic awareness. Here I elaborate on each of these.

Noticing

Throughout the study, participants spoke either explicitly or implicitly about the role of "noticing" in language learning. They shared several activities that provided opportunities for noticing pieces of language they needed to work on such as speaking as much as possible, and output-based activities like the story recording activity and OPI. They also noticed increasing abilities to identify patterns in audio, print materials, and others' speech. Brown and Larson-Hall (2012) explain:

> Input becomes intake and learning occurs… when we pay attention to input and have the subjective experience of "noticing" it (Schmidt, 1983, 1995, 2001). Psychologists agree that attention is basic to learning. We must attend to something in order for it to

> reach our long-term memory. Otherwise, the stimuli stay in short-term memory for a few seconds and then disappear. (p. 61)

Language learners do not just notice words and forms, they also interpret these words and forms through what they have already learned; they are "examples of the linguistic system" (p. 61). As knowledge about the linguistic system increases with increased language proficiency, so too do opportunities for integrating noticed language. Jas<u>k</u>waan referred to this when discussing the role of listening to stories in the language:

> As a beginner, it is important to just to hear how the language sounds in a narrative and, as you move along in your language journey, as you're further along the road, you're able to pick out complex aspects of language as a result.

Explicit Instruction

Immersion is considered one of the most promising options for ILR (Green, 2017; McIvor, 2015; Tedick et al., 2011), and many practitioners advocate for input-based approaches that do not teach grammar explicitly. However, research in both AL and ILR shows that strategic attention to grammar forms can benefit learners and that adults benefit from explicit instruction at all proficiency levels (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; DeKeyser, 2018; Green, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Rātima, 2013). This study demonstrates the usefulness of including some explicit grammar study for adult Indigenous language learners. Kathryn Michel used grammar texts to work through sentence examples, Karonhiióstha developed study techniques to work on verb conjugations, and the Stewardship listened to lectures on grammar rules. The "prove it" technique is an example of incorporating form-focussed learning within an immersion environment. These examples may be useful in providing others with options for explicit learning opportunities at the advanced level.

Language Use

This study highlights the important role of language use in advancing language proficiency. None of the participants had learned through input alone; they stressed the importance of speaking as much as possible. This finding aligns with the Input-Interaction-Output model (Gass & Mackey, 2006), and to other AL studies such as Wong and Nunan (2011) who found that "active use of the target language, with a strong emphasis on practice in naturalistic situations, was the most important factor in the development of proficiency" (p. 148). In ILR, Green (2017) found the same: "language use is the single most important factor for any individual seeking to become a speaker" (p. 45). Green explains that "language use necessitates learning, and that what is learned is of use for the purposes of real, meaningful and purposeful communication with other speakers or learners" (p. 45). Participants in this study demonstrated innovative ways to create opportunities for output in cases with few speakers, including creating immersive spaces with other learners and self-talk.

Relevance

One of the most salient findings in the study was the importance of focusing on language that was relevant to the learners' lives. Whether they were practicing storytelling about personal memories, tending to their children's needs, or engaging in hands-on activities, participants learning exceled when it centred on content they found enjoyable and useful. Indigenous scholars have called for culturally relevant materials and approaches to teaching (e.g., Battiste, 2013; B. Daniels et al., 2022; McIvor, 2015). In AL, Byrnes (2012) remarks "it seems that advanced L2 abilities are possible in instructed settings when instruction presents content that is worth learning and, in turn, requires learners to create content worth thinking and communicating about" (p. 515). This also appears to be true for self-directed adult Indigenous language learning.

Participants noted that at the advanced level, they were working more on understanding how and why to use language in different contexts than on learning new words or structures: "you have the puzzle pieces, now it's taking them and trying to fit them together" (Cheṅáx̱wtn [Swú7wu Billy]). They shared innovative examples of creating or replicating different contexts for language use, and of practicing pragmatic aspects of the language. While there is a wide body of research on teaching and learning pragmatics in AL (e.g., Barron et al., 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021), this is an area that has not been well-researched in ILR where examples of pragmatic language use have rarely been documented and cannot be easily accessed through media or other sources (DeCaire, 2023). Some communities with first language speakers are now working on recording projects to document everyday speech and casual conversations to ensure this language can be more easily shared with learners (e.g., Brant, 2024; Hermes & Engman, 2017). In communities with few or no first language speakers, questions remain about how teachers and learners can create diverse contexts to authentically practice pragmatic aspects of the language. For communities with shifting linguistic and cultural practices, limited resources, unique histories, and diverse goals, it will be important to carefully consider what is possible, appropriate, relevant, and useful.

Conclusion

The participants in this study have shown incredible dedication and innovation in their journeys to become advanced Indigenous language speakers who can carry their language forward to future generations. This paper highlighted advanced language learning strategies used in contexts with limited access to resources, supports, or a community of speakers. It showcased creative approaches to individual study, collaboration with other learners, assessment practices, and language use at work and home. These strategies were examined to identify possible areas of contribution and expansion between the fields of AL and ILR. These understandings will be further enhanced through an examination of the support factors and guiding principles that participants relied on, and connections between these and learning strategy choices (see Benson, 2024). As others seek to determine how to support advanced language learning, studies such as this one provide empirical evidence for promising practices and allow practitioners to assess how these may be replicated or adapted to their contexts.

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Notes:

[1] While the term "second language" is often used to refer to any language other than the first, I opt for the broader term "additional language." There have been calls for at least two decades to move away from the term "second language" in AL as the language may be the learners' third, fourth, etc. (e.g., Block, 2003). I also question the appropriateness of the numerical terms for languages in ILR contexts where learners may not consider the colonial language that they grew up speaking to be the "first" or most important.
[2] The Sḵwx̱wú7mesh learners were trained by the Where Are Your Keys learning organization, described later in the paper. However, all members of this group actively worked together to develop, test, and modify effective strategies.
[3] Also called Master-Apprentice Programs
[4] See Benson and Khelsilem (2021) for a description of Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim history and revitalization efforts.
[5] Three members of the Stewardship were no longer participating when my research began so they were not interviewed. I was also unable to conduct a second interview with two others due to scheduling challenges.
[6] Names are written as requested by each participant. I also sent participants the spelling of their language names in the Indigenous language and English for confirmation. They provided their preferred spellings and confirmed whether they would like the name to appear in both languages or only the Indigenous language.
[7] The ACTFL proficiency guidelines are commonly referenced in ILR and have been used to assess learners in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh immersion programs since their inception.
[8] The participant who did not self-assess felt that existing assessment practices were generally harmful in ILR contexts, consistently rating the number of speakers and their proficiency levels low on scales developed by non-Indigenous outsiders and contributing to deficit-oriented understandings of Indigenous languages and cultures.
[9] WAYK is an immersion-based approach for rapid language acquisition that involves hands-on, game-like lessons and collaborative activities for both language learning and community building. See Gardner and Ciotti (2018) for a fuller description of the approach.
[10] For various reasons, Brent, Sarah, and Victoria were no longer participating regularly with the Stewardship when my research with the group began so I was unable to observe or interview them.
[11] See Hermes & Engman (2017) for a discussion on innovative approaches to, and benefits of, transcription by Indigenous language learners.
[12] "Hunt" is a WAYK term for "elicit."
[13] The WAYK team provides learners with what they call "hunting books," small notebooks with sections for tracking different aspects of language learning (see Giffen, 2018). Most Stewardship members used these or other notebooks to record aspects of language they were working on.
[14] An "immersion sprint" is a WAYK term for a time set aside for conversing in the language on any topic(s) of interest.
[15] Here Cheṅáx̱wtn is referring to the Oral Proficiency Interviews developed by ACTFL to assess language proficiency levels.

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