

**Education through the Medium of the Mother-Tongue:
The Single Most Important Means for Saving Indigenous Languages**

Rationales and Strategies for Establishing Immersion Programs

drawn from

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To understand what must be done to save Indigenous languages requires a deep understanding of the world-wide forces and factors at work bringing minority and Indigenous languages to the brink of extinction. The following points have been drawn from a variety of sources, but mainly from the works and presentations of speakers at our symposium. They are synthesized here in point form for the use of immersion educators and others seeking to save their languages.

1. Points made by guest speakers, Drs. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, that seriously challenge common assumptions about Indigenous languages and education:

- a. The main point was that there IS a major correlation between schooling through the medium of English (or French, or some other dominant official language) and the destruction of Indigenous languages around the world.
- b. Any education which imposes a dominant language by ignoring, stigmatizing, and replacing or displacing the mother tongue of minority and Indigenous children is **subtractive language education**. It subtracts from the children's linguistic repertoire, instead of adding to it.
- c. This form of education is also called **submersion education** because it is accomplished by submersing the children of Indigenous and minority peoples in the culture and (official) language of the dominant society using a whole array of strategies, both subtle (carrots) and blatant (sticks), and expecting the children to sink-or-swim. It teaches the children (some of) the dominant language at the cost of their mother tongues. It neither respects the mother-tongue, nor promotes fluency in the dominant language.
- d. When any language is imposed by a powerful state onto dominated Indigenous or minority linguistic group with the purpose of destroying minority languages and reducing the number of languages in the world, it constitutes **linguistic imperialism**.
- e. That most of the world's spoken languages will become extinct in this century cannot be called either "language loss", or "language death", or even "language suicide", as it is not a natural phenomenon, nor is it without agency.
- f. This extinction of most of the world's indigenous languages is a direct consequence of **linguicism** (the unequal division of power between linguistic groups) and **linguicide** (the killing or murder of languages) wherein the agents involved are identifiable—the powerful economic, social, educational, political, and techno-military systems of the world.

2. **How linguistic imperialism violates human rights:**
 - a. The practices aimed at extinguishing the world's languages were defined as linguistic genocide in Article III(1) of the Final Draft of what became the UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948): "*Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group.*" Even though Article III was deleted in the General Assembly by 16 states and is thus not part of the Genocide Convention, there was an agreement among all member states about the definition itself – therefore it can still be used. Where schools do not mandate the use of Indigenous languages as teaching languages in all subjects, and where teachers do not usually know these languages, the children are effectively prohibited from having their language used in school as the medium of instruction.
 - b. But today's Indigenous education fits other definitions of genocide under the present UN Genocide Convention. Article II(e) of that Convention defines genocide as "*forcibly transferring children of the group to another group*". There is little question that imposing an alien culture and language on children serves the same purpose and has the same effect as forcibly transferring children from one group to another.
 - c. Linguicide in education invariably produces poor educational outcomes for colonized and dominated peoples around the world, and there is mounting evidence that this practice actually stunts children's cognitive growth, which makes linguicide fit another UN definition of genocide-- "*causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*" (Article II(b)).
 - e. Insofar as linguicide is now known to produce adverse material, social, economic, psychological, and political consequences for dominated peoples, it appears to fit yet another of the UN definitions of genocide – Article II(c) "*Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.*"
 - f. Linguistic genocide violates not only the UN Genocide Convention, but also the linguistic human rights of Indigenous peoples and minority linguistic groups worldwide.

3. **The consequences of Linguistic Genocide:**
 - a. As many as 90-95% of the world's spoken languages, including most of the Indigenous languages (a prognosis also used by UNESCO), may be facing extinction before the end of the present century.
 - b. Linguicide in education contributes to adverse social, economic, political and psychological consequences for Indigenous and minority peoples, which serves, in turn, both to enable and to justify further domination of these peoples. It is, therefore, a threat to the social, economic, political, and cultural survival of those peoples. Ironically, it is the dominated minorities that are generally blamed for the resultant disarray, when it is the school and society that are really to blame.

- c. To destroy the language of a people is to eradicate also the history and cultural knowledge of that people for all time.
- d. The destruction of the world's languages poses a serious threat to the planet for just as variety and diversity enhance and strengthen an ecosystem, so does linguistic and cultural diversity enhance and strengthen human chances for survival, since much of the knowledge of how to maintain biodiversity is encoded in the Indigenous languages of the world.

4. How states get away with Linguistic genocide:

- a. Where war was once the chief means by which colonial powers appropriated the lands and resources of a people, the most common means by which colonial and multi-national powers still get away with appropriating the lands and resources of Indigenous Peoples is by destroying the languages and cultures that tie those peoples so totally to their lands. It is here that linguicide still plays a central role as much in the domination of Indigenous Peoples, as in the depletion of the earth's resources. It is precisely why linguistic diversity is actually declining faster than ever before in human history, and at a faster rate than bio-diversity.
- b. Clearly, it is the powerful economic, political, and techno-military interests and their drive to exploit the world's resources, which fuel this agenda, ignore the research on multi-lingualism, and maintain the misinformation about the benefits of a multi-lingual world.
- c. An important aspect of this agenda for economic, political, and techno-military interests is to deflect blame and responsibility, hence the ideology of blaming the victim-- the children, the parents, their culture, or their genes for the supposed deficits in the children, and for the social, political, and economic disarray caused by linguistic genocide worldwide. Even the so-called "loss" of the world's languages is generally blamed on the Indigenous and minority linguistic groups themselves, when, in fact, it is educational systems controlled by the powerful economic, political and techno-military interests that are directly to blame.
- d. Thus, when Indigenous parents and grandparents do not use their language with children and grandchildren, it is not generally seen as a consequence of the punishment, shame, and indoctrination they experienced as dominated peoples in schools taught through the medium of English or French. And when Indigenous communities in Canada still allow, and may even opt for, education in the medium of colonial languages (English or French), it is not seen as a direct consequence of the shame and indoctrination that the adults experienced in linguicidal schools in the past.
- e. Likewise, no one notices that the parents are given no choice as to the alternative of mother-tongue medium education with good teaching of English or French as a second language. Nor are the parents given reliable information as to the long-term consequences of monolingual education in the dominant language. Instead, educational alternatives are presented to them as an **either/or choice** between mother tongue and traditional identity, **or** the dominant language and jobs plus social mobility. But in fact, both mother-

tongue fluency and dominant language fluency are perfectly possible to achieve.

- e. Still another way that states get away with linguistic genocide is that linguistic human rights are still not adequately protected in either national or international law, again clearly a consequence of powerful economic, political, and techno-military interests at work.

5. Canada's record and current position regarding linguistic human rights:

- a. Canada (as in most western countries) has been, and continues to practice both linguistic imperialism and linguistic genocide, in its official promotion of a policy of linguicide, most notably in residential schools, and in its ongoing promotion and maintenance of subtractive language learning and submersion educational policies and practices. That most Indigenous languages in Canada are heading for extinction is poignant testimony to these policies and practices both in the past and in the present.
- b. Mother-tongue language classes in English- (or French-) speaking schools have been completely ineffective in creating or maintaining a reasonable level of fluency in Indigenous children. For example, fluency rates in most Indigenous languages in Canada have dropped drastically in the last thirty or so years, to the point where there are no child speakers in most Indigenous languages of Canada, and few if any speakers under 40 years of age.
- c. This last thirty or so years of drastic decline is precisely the same period that Indigenous children were integrated into public schools, and it is the same period that Indigenous languages have been taught as core subjects in dominant language schools.
- d. It is also the same period that teacher education programs have been teaching fluent speakers of Indigenous languages to teach in the medium of English (or French). That most of these teachers then returned to their communities to teach in English (or French) has effectively ensured that submersion education remained the dominant practice in our own schools.
- e. In terms of saving Indigenous languages, the policy of offering language classes in dominant language medium schools may actually be counter-productive insofar as it serves more as window-dressing for those schools. By suggesting falsely that they are effectively maintaining Indigenous languages these programs serve to attract Indigenous students into monolingual dominant language schools (submersion education), and they keep an ageing and declining number of Native language teachers working in an ineffective strategy, rather than in a strategy that is known to be effective--immersion.
- f. That there are now very few child-speakers of any Indigenous language in Canada has been used to argue that there is no need for, or right to, schooling in Indigenous languages. But, as Skutnabb-Kangas has demonstrated, the mother-tongue of all First Nations children IS the language of their community, the language they identify with, regardless of whether they have learned to speak it. To deny any child the right to become fluent in his or her mother tongue, as Canada and most western countries continue to do for

English- (or French-) speaking Indigenous children, is therefore, a violation of their linguistic human rights.

- g. Native language immersion programs exist in all but two provinces in Canada (NB & PEI), but only in ten Indigenous languages (Secwepemc, Okanagan, Blackfoot, Cree, Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Algonquin, Mi'kmaq, and Inuktitut) out of sixty-one, and then only in a handful of communities out of a total of more than 600 Indigenous communities.
- h. It has been an enormous struggle for Indigenous communities to establish immersion programs. That these programs got established at all has been accomplished entirely through the determination and hard work of parents and educators in those communities, and almost entirely without the help or support of government.
- i. The 51 other Indigenous languages in Canada now face imminent extinction unless mother-tongue medium schools can be established in those languages.

6. The benefits of education through the medium of the mother-tongue:

- a. Immersion is the means by which existing speakers of all Indigenous languages learned to speak and function in their language. It is, by far, the most effective means for achieving fluency in any language.
- b. Insofar as immersion education promotes fluency in children, it significantly enhances the survivability of a language into the future.
- c. Research is now showing that high-level bilinguals (people fully fluent in two languages) also gain many other benefits as compared to monolinguals (people fluent in only one language), in terms of prerequisites for general academic achievement (creativity, several aspects of intelligence, cognitive flexibility, divergent thinking, ability to learn additional languages, etc.). In other words, knowing two languages is academically beneficial, and not detrimental, as is still commonly believed.
- d. Research also shows that Indigenous and minority children who learn through the medium of their mother-tongue also learn to speak, read, and write English (or French) more quickly and more proficiently.
- e. Another outcome of mother-tongue medium education, well-known to researchers, is that Indigenous and minority children in such schools do as well as, and generally better, academically than Indigenous and minority children learning entirely in a dominant and monolingual medium (English or French). This illustrates graphically that the harm and destruction of submersion or subtractive language education, with its 50% plus drop-out rate for Indigenous children in Canada, cannot even be justified in terms of supposed educational benefits.
- f. One of the most important means of maintaining Indigenous forms of life is to maintain the language, for traditional knowledge is encoded in each language, and for the most part, it is not translatable into other languages. Thus, intergenerational transmission of knowledge (from elders to younger people) is most effective when children are able to learn through the medium of their mother tongue.

- g. For Indigenous histories to survive will require the languages to survive, for the history of a people is also encoded in their language.
- h. If the nationhood of a people is compromised by assaults on their language, then revitalizing a people's language is a prerequisite for revitalizing their nation. There can be no true self-determination for Indigenous Peoples in the language of the colonizers.

7. Guidelines for communities wishing to establish mother-tongue medium education programs:

- a. The rule of thumb in bilingual communities that want their children to be fully bi-lingual is that school should be taught in the language least likely to be learned up to a high formal level. In Canada the languages least likely to be learned are the Indigenous languages.
- b. While we still have speakers fluent in our languages we have the opportunity to teach in our languages through **additive language education**, which promotes and respects the right of children to become high level bilinguals (able to speak, read, and write English or French, as well as their mother-tongue).
- c. There is no time better than the present to begin immersion programs, for with each day and year that passes there will be fewer speakers young enough to teach in an immersion program. For most Indigenous languages in Canada this window of opportunity may be gone in the next 10-20 years or even earlier, since most speakers are already 50 years of age or older.
- d. We do not have time, either, for our communities to reach a consensus on immersion education. The best advice is just to work with the parents who want to provide it for their children, and just do it.
- e. One of the main barriers to communities wishing to develop immersion programs has been the apparent non-availability of funding, BUT the latest news is that under current laws Canada is already obligated to cover the cost of education in the medium of Indigenous languages at public expense. (David Leitch) We just need to press the issue.

8. What Canada and must do to promote the survival of Indigenous Languages and to protect the linguistic human rights of Indigenous Peoples:

- a. Recognize and acknowledge its past role in attempting to eradicate Indigenous languages, and its on-going role in violating the linguistic human rights of Inuit and First Nations Peoples.
- b. Accept its responsibility and obligation to learn from research on the benefits of bilingualism and the critical importance of maintaining Indigenous languages.
- c. Institute specific linguistic human rights laws that guarantee to every child
 1. the option of an education through the medium of the mother-tongue,
 2. the knowledge needed to make a wise choice,
 3. the opportunity to become fully bilingual, and
 4. respect for identifying with a mother tongue.

- d. Do what it can to rectify the damage done to Indigenous languages in Canada, by assisting Inuit and First Nations Peoples to make schooling in the mother-tongue available in every Indigenous language, and in every Indigenous community that wishes to have it.

9. What universities can and should be doing to promote the survival of Indigenous Languages and to protect the linguistic human rights of Indigenous Peoples:

- a. Teach about linguistic imperialism and linguistic human rights.
- b. Support Indigenous language survival by
 - 1. teaching the Indigenous language(s);
 - 2. teaching non-language courses in the Indigenous language(s);
 - 3. promoting and supporting education of Indigenous children through the medium of Indigenous language(s) from early childhood to adulthood;
 - 4. offering teacher training (Bachelors and Masters degrees) for Immersion education in the Indigenous language(s);
 - 5. assisting in curriculum development for immersion programs;
 - 6. promoting literacy, arts, and publishing in the Indigenous language(s);
 - 7. sponsoring research on linguistic imperialism, linguistic human rights, Indigenous languages, bilingualism, multilingualism, immersion education, and other language matters.
 - 8. Promoting discussion and dissemination of knowledge on Indigenous language matters through conferences, seminars, and other means.