

THE LANGUAGES WE SPEAK: ABORIGINAL LEARNERS AND ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

A Literature Review of Promising
Approaches and Practices

Executive Summary

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N.B.: The views expressed in this literature review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth.

2009
Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth Cataloguing in Publication Data

428.2497 The languages we speak : Aboriginal learners
 and English as an additional language : a
 literature review of promising approaches
 and practices—Executive Summary.

ISBN 978-0-7711-4312-0

1. English language—Study and teaching as
a second language. 2. Native peoples—Canada—
Education. 3. English language—Study and teaching
as a second language—Manitoba. 4. Native peoples—
Canada—Education—Manitoba. I. Manitoba.
Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth.

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Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth
School Programs Division
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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*The world is richer
than it is possible to express
in any single language.*

—Ilya Prigogine

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following individuals in the development of *The Languages We Speak: Aboriginal Learners and English as an Additional Language: A Literature Review of Promising Approaches and Practices*.

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Context and Purpose of the Literature Review

As part of its ESL Action Plan and its efforts to develop an English as an additional language (EAL) strategy for Aboriginal learners, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth initiated the following review of literature related to the teaching of Standard English (SE) dialect to Aboriginal learners.

It was written by Ruth Epstein, who is an educational consultant in the areas of English language learning and instructional design/distance and distributed learning. She holds a Masters of Arts in TEAL and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational Communications. Her interests, research, and publications include the following:

- the development and delivery of distance-delivered courses and programs for Aboriginal people and for EAL teachers
- instructional development
- selection and adaptation of EAL teaching/learning materials
- language curriculum and program development and evaluation
- English instruction for Aboriginal and additional language learners in schools

Although this review was published by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, it is a report of Ms. Epstein's findings, and does not necessarily reflect the Department's philosophy or policy.

This literature is reviewed with respect to the theories, research, and perspectives presented on teaching SE to Aboriginal learners, with a particular focus on schools and school systems in which English is the primary medium of instruction. The review is divided into two parts: Part One outlines census information and discusses challenges and issues identified in the literature; Part Two presents recommendations from the literature and implications for educators, administrators, and government.

This review was originally prepared as a background and information piece for *The Ways We Speak*, a provincial symposium on EAL and Aboriginal learners, which was held on February 22-23, 2007. The review and symposium were initiated as a result of the 2005 ESL Action Plan and the ESL Program Review, where there was a broad evaluation of a wide range of learners and their needs. This study showed that further attention to the experiences and needs of Aboriginal EAL learners in Manitoba was required.

The Action Plan comprises 11 specific initiatives intended to improve access to quality EAL programming in Manitoba schools over the next several years. One initiative that has already been undertaken is the adoption of the more inclusive and comprehensive term "English as an additional language," as it suggests learners of English may already speak a number of languages and dialects, which is often the case for many Aboriginal learners. The term "EAL" also reflects an orientation to language learning that values and encourages linguistic diversity and sees the teaching of English as an additive process. The following general initiatives that are relevant to Aboriginal EAL learners came about in response to the Action Plan:

- In the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 school years, the EAL Support Grant was enhanced to provide additional support for EAL learners
- Actions to address ethnocultural equity were implemented to focus on Manitoba's capacity to respond appropriately to school and community diversity and to enhance anti-racism education
- Development of an EAL curriculum framework was initiated in November 2005 and projected for completion in 2008
- A full-time EAL consultant position was secured
- Accountability measures are being established (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth)

More specifically, Action 2 of the ESL Action Plan focuses on Aboriginal EAL learners. The text of this action follows:

2. The Department work collaboratively with schools, Aboriginal organizations, and communities to address the linguistic diversity of Aboriginal learners by

- establishing a provincial group to undertake research and study the linguistic diversity of Manitoba's Aboriginal student population and English as a Second Dialect (ESD) issues, to develop a school and teacher support document on Aboriginal linguistic diversity and best instructional and programming practices. This would include collecting and analyzing relevant student data, reviewing literature, consulting with schools, and gathering examples of best practices in Manitoba and other jurisdictions.
- developing culturally appropriate and relevant ESL programming resources and supports, especially with regard to the development of an Early Years screening protocol or instrument for assessing the linguistic diversity of Aboriginal learners
- encouraging and supporting school divisions in developing Aboriginal Academic Achievement initiatives to address the ESL, ESD, and Aboriginal languages learning needs of Aboriginal learners

This action illustrates the importance of developing a common understanding of the linguistic diversity of Aboriginal learners and their needs, and developing a common understanding among Manitoba schools of what are considered appropriate EAL programming and supports for Aboriginal learners. Addressing the EAL needs of Aboriginal learners is one of the Department's priorities (Turner).

Part One: Background—Census Information and Issues and Challenges in the Literature

According to Canadian census data and interpretations, the Aboriginal population is growing, particularly in younger age groups and especially concentrated on the Canadian prairies. Between 1996 and 2001* there was improvement in educational attainment among Aboriginal people, but there is still a significant disparity between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population. In addition, there is increasing evidence that Aboriginal languages continue to be threatened with extinction. Historically, government policies have not generally recognized the need to maintain Aboriginal languages or recognize Aboriginal culture as distinct within Canada; however, this is beginning to change in Manitoba and some other jurisdictions. This is significant since language is directly tied to culture, identity, self-esteem, and overall attainment, all of which relate to Aboriginal peoples' goals to lead fulfilling lives and contribute to society in meaningful ways.

From 1996 to 2001 in Manitoba, the population reporting an Aboriginal identity/ethnicity increased in all age groups, yet the number of people speaking an Aboriginal language decreased, with the exception of speakers of Dakota Sioux and Blackfoot, which increased slightly.

The literature identifies “dialects” (or alternate terms such as “vernaculars” or “varieties of English”) as ways of communicating that are as structurally regular and valid as all languages and language varieties. Thus, negative views of less common dialects are unfounded, but may have serious repercussions for Aboriginal learners.

The complexity of teaching Aboriginal learners with diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds is discussed in the reviewed literature. Aboriginal learners may attend schools ranging from northern and/or remote and relatively homogeneous communities, where teacher turnover may be high, to urban and suburban “multicultural” communities, where prejudice and racist attitudes are common. Because of language or dialect use and inappropriate assessments, they may be mislabeled as cognitively challenged and consequently experience low teacher expectations.

Bernhardt points out some of the consequences of misdiagnosing learners with linguistic difference as cognitively challenged: they may receive unneeded remedial therapy, consequently missing classes, being stigmatized by peers, performing lower because that is the expectation of them; they may be further marginalized and devalued as a group; and learners with genuine language delay may go undiagnosed and unserved. She adds that diagnostic error is the result of lack of information on Aboriginal English dialects, including the standard, the use of assessment tools based on SE, and attitudes toward non-standard language use.

* At the time of this literature review, data from the 2006 census were not yet available.

Most often, SE is the medium of instruction, and learners are taught using a curriculum designed for the dominant English-speaking, western-based culture. As a result, Aboriginal learners are marginalized, and may face linguistic challenges as well as barriers and inequities that have been embedded in history and exacerbated by their current socio-economic situations. Aboriginal learners (and their families) are also challenged to retain traditional culture and values that are often not understood or valued by peers or teachers within an institutional culture that they may see as alien. When they feel disempowered, learners may use their languages, accents, or dialects more deliberately to signal difference and develop group solidarity. While educational gains are increasing, particularly as more Aboriginal parents graduate from high school and post-secondary programs, school retention is still low among Aboriginal people compared to the non-Aboriginal population. Schools are challenged to serve the needs of linguistically diverse Aboriginal learners because of the lack of explicit policy, programming and planning, curriculum, resources, funding, and appropriate and adequate teacher preparation.

In addition, because Aboriginal learners may not be exposed at home to SE, school norms, and the dominant culture, school represents an unfamiliar institutional culture. Teacher-learner communication styles and expectations are new to them and they may require orientation, academic development, and ongoing support to ensure their success. It is important to these students that these needs be addressed. Some writers have argued that learners' civil rights are violated when schools and school systems do not take their dialects into account.

Schools and school divisions face a number of challenges in addressing these learners' needs. First, there is a serious lack of research that is directly relevant to Canadian Aboriginal learners and their language goals and needs. Where there has been relevant research, there have not been any findings and theories translated into appropriate policy, programming, or instructional practices. In addition, solutions to address the range and diversity of goals and needs are costly. There is a lack of teacher preparation particularly related to cross-cultural understanding and socio- and applied linguistics, post-colonial perspectives, and power issues. This makes it difficult for teachers to know how to address the range of linguistic needs, let alone how to be learner advocates and effect change.

Theorists note the colonial nature of education as a form of social and cultural reproduction of the dominant culture. They call for governments, school systems, and educators to engage in critical discourse with input from Aboriginal people to effect changes that will contribute to the success of Aboriginal learners in achieving their goals and needs. They add that this necessitates strong home-school connections to promote understanding and negotiation of education directions, programming, and planning.

The reviewed literature notes the importance of multilingualism and linguistic diversity to maintain cultural diversity and to connect learners to their families and community. Language and cultural rights are discussed as human rights issues, reflecting the relationship between governments and minority groups. The ability to use one's language is tied to one's concept formation and worldview, as well as the transmission and expression of culture and cultural values, identity, history, literature, self-esteem, and understanding of oneself. In general, it allows for advances in human potential. The literature calls for linguistic equity. A major issue in the maintenance and revitalization of the vast varieties of local languages and dialects is knowing how to structure education so that it is economically, developmentally, and pedagogically practicable.

The contribution of first language (L1) development to second language (L2) learning because of language transfer is highlighted in the literature. Demise of language occurs in disempowered or marginalized communities whose languages are not valued in modern society. A critical mass of young people must speak a language for it to survive, and languages must be integrated across the curriculum to ensure their maintenance and development. Researchers contend that multilingualism is an academic asset that helps to develop learners' cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and abstract, critical, and creative thinking. Knowledge of both languages supports learners' success in the dominant society as well as in traditional life, ensuring a connection to family and community.

Part Two: Recommendations from the Reviewed Literature Related to Language Education for Aboriginal Learners

Appropriate education for Aboriginal learners, as outlined in the literature in this review, may be divided into the following eight categories: policy; programming; assessment and evaluation (testing); learner placement; correction; curriculum materials and resources; pedagogical approaches to language; and professional development and support for instructors.

- **Policy:** Policy is seen as a pivotal point in improving education, social equity, and empowerment for linguistically diverse Aboriginal learners. Policy for Aboriginal learners requires the identification of purpose, visions, goals, and needs. Input on policy must be from a range of stakeholders including administrators, educators well versed in socio- and applied linguistics, as well as families and the Aboriginal community. It is important to pay attention to inclusiveness and to the political nature of education, as well as to incorporate language and cultural awareness programming. It is also essential to offer professional development to those who are implementing policy. In Manitoba, the development of an Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy has been an important step in stimulating change and providing goals for enhancing educational opportunities. Saskatchewan Learning has included the "adaptive dimension" in its educational policy to address diversity in schools.

Policy affects curriculum and programming in a number of important ways. Policies have been implemented in Manitoba and elsewhere to ensure classroom practice that encourages the integration of instructional practices and strategies to make learning more effective for a range of learners. These policies include diversity and equity in education, differentiated instruction, and inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth's consultative study *Belonging, Learning and Growing: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Action Plan for Ethnocultural Equity* listed a large number of actions that are to be implemented over several years beginning in 2006–2007. These include capacity-building to ensure safe, inclusive schools that address diversity and anti-racist education. This is done through multicultural policy renewal, engaging families, training staff, and educators, recognizing foreign credentials and encouraging diversity in staffing, and providing resources for teaching international and Aboriginal languages.

The Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth document *Success for All Learners: A Handbook on Differentiating Instruction* encourages, and provides concrete ideas for, differentiating instruction to better address particular learner goals and needs. Differentiated instruction acknowledges learner differences in learning rates and styles, and allows for personalized instruction through a range of teaching strategies, approaches, and activities so that learners can develop in a variety of ways and each achieve their full potential. The Department has also developed a policy on inclusion, and emphasizes making adaptations to classrooms and instruction to accommodate the needs of learners with diverse needs. Manitoba's *Appropriate Education Act* also emphasizes providing all learners with appropriate educational programming.

- **Programming:** There is a range of possible programming and planning solutions, including the continuum from monolingual to bilingual programming, language and cultural awareness programs, providing adjunct support, and local or community-based programs. Identifying learners' linguistic characteristics is recommended in program development. Honouring learners' cultures, dialects, and languages is essential to programming, and including the L1 revitalization is recommended with an additive approach to L2 programming. The literature acknowledges the high cost of individualized programming to address diverse needs.
- **Assessment and Evaluation (Testing), Learner Placement, and Correction:** Appropriate assessment and evaluation (testing) and learner placement are vital in serving Aboriginal learners. Because of the dire implications they have for learners, assessment and evaluation and learner placement must be conducted properly and on an ongoing basis. It is important to pay attention to languages or dialects spoken at home and in interviews to determine instructional requirements. Evaluation should also be built into the policy, programming, curriculum, and implementation of language education for Aboriginal learners.

Initial and ongoing assessment enables proper placement and tracking of learner progress. Use of triangulated assessment measures is recommended, with attention to the development of linguistically and culturally fair assessments. Assessments are ideally administered by educators who are knowledgeable in learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The use of language benchmarks or standards may facilitate assessment and placement, as well as clarify explanations of learner needs and progress to families, mainstream teachers, and administrators.

Assessment policies and practices should reflect a "balanced" approach that recognizes the importance of assessment *as* learning, assessment *for* learning, and assessment *of* learning (summative assessment or evaluation).

The "linguistically informed approach" to assessment ensures learners are not negatively graded for language or vernacular use when they actually understand academic content. This is especially important for high-stakes tests. It is also suggested that teachers be open to the possibility that students resist using SE and address this openly with learners in class discussions.

- **Curriculum Materials and Resources:** In addition to facilitating assessment, benchmarks, standards, the use of explicit learning outcomes, bandscales, curriculum frameworks are increasingly being used in Canadian provinces and beyond to inform curriculum and instruction and to monitor learner achievement. Development of curricula and materials and resources inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives, values, themes, and traditions will ensure balanced instruction that is engaging for Aboriginal learners. With respect to the curriculum, Manitoba recognizes and celebrates the province's richness of cultural, linguistic, and faith groups by preparing all learners for participation in society and for linguistic and cultural development, and by encouraging intercultural understanding. It is suggested that professional curriculum writers and Aboriginal educators collaborate to ensure inclusive, culturally appropriate curricula. Curriculum and materials development place high demands on resources, requiring funding, time, creativity, and expertise. While learners themselves can generate some materials, resources should be allocated for materials development.
- **Pedagogical Approaches to Language:** Language teaching approaches are defined by philosophies about what should be taught (e.g., oral communication, grammar, literature, etc.), as well as how it should be taught. This includes objectives of the method; selection and organization of language content within the method; and the roles of learners, teachers, and instructional materials. Eight pedagogical approaches to teaching the SE dialect and maintaining L1 are covered in the literature:
 - **Contrastive analysis and code-switching** values learners' L1/dialect by grounding instruction in SE in the learners' L1/dialect. Learners are linguistic informants and research linguistic variations with their peers. This approach is empowering in facilitating learners' awareness of which contexts are appropriate to use one language variety over another. Language and cultural awareness programs are often taught in conjunction with these approaches.

- **Adapted forms of English instruction** specifically for EAL learners is one way to address the needs of these learners. “EAL-designated” courses in Manitoba provide a mechanism for teachers to adapt Department-developed courses at the high school level for EAL learners to support EAL and content-based learning. In Saskatchewan, EAL plans define specific ways to incorporate Saskatchewan Learning’s adaptive dimension through adjustments to curriculum, academic content, instructional practices, assessment, and the learning environment, as well as making students more responsible for their learning. Teaching is learner-centred and experiential, making use of student knowledge and experience, appropriate role models, and cultural activities, traditional pedagogy, and culturally appropriate materials and resources.
- The **lexical approach** focuses on vocabulary development, seen as essential for academic success. English language learners are always playing catch-up in terms of vocabulary development. Knowledge of metaphor is particularly important at the secondary and post-secondary levels, where academic content is often grounded in written text that includes a great deal of metaphorical language use. It is suggested that learners be involved in the process of identifying the need for a word/phrase, searching for it, and evaluating its usefulness. Developing independent word-learning strategies is also recommended.
- **Communicative content/task-based language teaching** develops learners’ communicative skills and involves them in real-life tasks and meaningful projects. The approach supports experiential learning and constructing new knowledge. Using learner groupings is seen as an effective way to address linguistic variety within the class.
- **Literacy pedagogy** acknowledges the importance of literacy in academic settings where educational outcomes are closely related to literacy. Literacy pedagogy uses a variety of reading and writing activities and culturally based literature as springboards for language development. The focus can be on comprehension, reading and writing skills development, vocabulary development, or grammatical analysis. It is suggested that teachers specifically address speech-writing differences. Use of Aboriginal vernacular in literature can be used to contrast SE and Aboriginal language varieties.
- **Using the first language (L1)** or dialect as the medium of instruction builds upon theory related to cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and language transfer. Use of L1 facilitates early comprehension in school and demonstrates the value of L1 and learners’ cultures. It is also congruent with post-colonialist theory, and emphasizes the importance of linguistic diversity. Implementation of L1 teaching varies according to local contexts.

- **Indigenous pedagogy** includes a range of techniques and resources to ensure appropriate teaching and learning occur, and that Elders and knowledgeable Aboriginal community members are involved. Traditional teaching techniques are important in transmitting information, understanding learners' life experiences, developing identity, and maintaining Aboriginal heritage and traditions. Linking academic content to learners' life experiences and prior knowledge is important, as is the use of relevant materials and resources.
- **Critical or transformative pedagogy** addresses the teaching of disempowered and marginalized groups, based on the belief that schools are sites of both domination and liberation. Critical theorists see school as economic and political institutions that perpetuate the status quo. Techniques include problematization, problem-posing, biliteracy, critical literacy, discovering one's voice, and discussing language maintenance as part of the struggle for justice and equality. These techniques may require professional development for teachers. Associated with this is the need to recognize the complexity of learners and their identities. Teaching in multimodal ways will help all learners construct meaning in what is being taught, recognize their gifts, and support the development of their identities so that they can reach their full potential within all of their communities.

A long list of other practices supporting language and content education for Aboriginal learners is also cited in the literature, including the following:

- making recommendations for appropriate early childhood education
- involving community, parent/caregiver, and Elders
- implementing learning strategy training/academic development (similar to CALLA and Foresee)
- creating safe learning environments staffed by caring teachers
- ensuring learners are sufficiently challenged with relevant, purposeful language and materials
- adding variety in teaching
- cultivating meaningful, experiential learning
- valuing and using learner knowledge
- using peer teaching and learning groups
- developing communities of learners
- developing respect
- valuing students and reinforcing their self-image as intelligent learners
- meeting learners' emotional needs

Additionally, the literature suggests teachers use personal experiences to do the following:

- convey information to learners
 - model and demonstrate
 - use appropriate class management and discipline techniques
 - reflect upon their teaching and be aware of how learners receive the teacher's message
 - act as mentor, coach, and trusted friend
 - involve parents/caregivers in their children's education
- **Professional Development and Support for Instructors:** The need for adequate teacher education, ongoing professional development and support, and opportunities to network is emphasized throughout the literature, since EAL instruction has become "more complex and demanding as schools admit learners who are more linguistically and culturally diverse" (Freeman, qtd. in Franken). The literature calls for the involvement of institutions that provide teacher education, as well as for appropriate training for coordinators, managers, teachers, and teacher assistants/associates in the following domains:
- pedagogical skills and theory
 - communication skills
 - knowledge of applied and socio-linguistics
 - development of materials and resources
 - decision making
 - skills in developing students' learning strategies (academic development)
 - speech and language pathology

It is important to encourage the development of reflective educators who are committed to honouring Aboriginal languages and cultures, and viewing L2 acquisition as an additive process. Educators should also receive training in intercultural competency and engage in learning about post-colonial discourse to heighten their sensitivity to prevailing inequities so that they can effectively participate in advising on policy, programming and planning, curriculum, and pedagogical reform. It is recommended that teachers are empowered and supported by management.

The literature identified the following implications for government, administrators, and those teaching Aboriginal learners, teacher educators, and researchers:

- There is a need for informed policy related to language and academics for Aboriginal learners grounded in the reality of Aboriginal people's history and socio-cultural circumstances as well as the literature. Such policy should have input from local teachers, school administrators, applied and socio-linguists, as well as learners, their caregivers, and the community.

- A range of programming options allowing Aboriginal learners from diverse backgrounds and contexts to succeed academically, socially, and linguistically.
- Appropriate, practicable curriculum based on reformed policy, again with input from stakeholders, particularly Aboriginal people.
- Need for adequate resources including sufficient funding, human resources, materials, and time to develop the curriculum. Support for both language and content teachers and teacher assistants is also required to implement reformed policy, programming and planning, curriculum, and pedagogy.
- Education and professional development for all those involved in education of Aboriginal learners, including managers and coordinators. Also, opportunities for educators to meet regularly to discuss ongoing goals and needs; revisions to policy, programs, and curriculum; and sharing of materials and resources.
- Involvement of the Aboriginal community, particularly Elders and parents/caregivers.



Printed in Canada
Imprimé au Canada