

*Yukon Indigenous Languages  
Discussion Paper*



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The contents contained in this document do not reflect the position of Yukon First Nations, or any individual First Nation, and should therefore not be considered a consultation document. This document was developed for information purposes, and to support regional discussions on the proposed federal *Indigenous Languages Act*.

**“We are very blessed to have many resilient speakers in our communities to speak and teach us. On top of that we have a younger generation of people who strongly value our language and want to learn. I believe with strong partnerships and lots of work, we will achieve our language goals.”**

Survey Participant, August 2018

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2016, Canada committed to enacting an *Indigenous Languages Act*. The legislation would be co-developed with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples with a goal of ‘preserving, promoting and revitalizing’ Indigenous languages.

The Government of Canada has noted that this new federal legislation would have to be compatible with, and respectful of, any Modern Treaty, Land Claim and Self-Government Agreements. In engaging with the federal government on this legislation, Yukon First Nations sought an approach that would reflect their unique needs and circumstances. In response to this need, Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Yukon Regional Office was directed to coordinate this Discussion Paper to provide data, information, and considerations directly relevant to First Nations in the Yukon.

This Discussion Paper provides an understanding of the current health of Indigenous languages in the region, current language initiatives and practices, proven methodologies for Indigenous language revitalization, considerations related to cost, and key conclusions and recommended next steps. The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to be informative not directive. The goal is to reflect what is going on in our region and provide a voice for Yukon First Nations with regard to the realities they face working to revive their languages.

It has often been said that language is what defines us and lies at the very core of the way we perceive the world. There is power, protection and comfort in hearing our Indigenous languages being spoken. Without them, we are lost from the most sacred connection of our identity, the way in which our Ancestors addressed each other, the land, the animals and their Ancestors before them. Any endeavour of importance to Indigenous communities revolves around, and depends on, our languages being spoken.

The core element of language revitalization is increasing fluency. Methodologies that have proven to be effective in increasing fluency revolve around experiences of language immersion (Master-Apprentice Programs; Language Nests; Daycare and School Immersion). Language initiatives that provide only occasional exposure to Indigenous languages, such as occasional classes, language camps and adult language classes are positive in increasing awareness, but will not lead to gains in fluency.

The situation of Indigenous languages in Yukon is dire. There are very few fluent speakers remaining in our communities, and most communities report that no young children are learning their languages at home as their mother tongue. Data reveal that the language situation among Yukon First Nations is worse than it is for Indigenous communities in Canada as a whole. Having said this, there is some diversity among the different First Nations in Yukon.

Yukon First Nations are looking for profound change in language use over the coming decade. They are not looking for symbolic use of their Indigenous languages. There is an increasing awareness of the vital importance of language revitalization in Yukon's First Nation communities, and of what methodologies will lead to increased fluency. However, current programs and initiatives are not yet fully adopting these proven methodologies. Most existing initiatives in Yukon provide occasional opportunities to hear and learn Indigenous languages. There is a huge opportunity to accelerate progress through greater adoption of immersion methodologies.

Yukon First Nations report that the biggest barrier to making progress is a lack of capacity in the community to design and implement programs. There are many systems, resources and tools that need to be put in place and sustained. While language revitalization needs to be a community-owned and driven process, our language warriors will need significant and sustained support to build capacity, systems, resources and tools. To be successful, we also need to have honest conversations and create safe and healthy spaces for dialogue and learning. Above all we need to recognize, hold up and invest in our language warriors.

Funding is a key part of the picture. Language immersion programs involve significant investments, particularly at the start-up phases. Based on existing cost estimates, if all 14 Yukon First Nations put 7-10 language learners into an immersion program the cost would be between \$7.6 million and \$10.9 million per year (for the Yukon as a whole). Further in-depth program design and costing is needed, as the existing cost estimates are preliminary in nature.

First Nations with Self-Government Agreements in Yukon have and will continue to put in place their own legislation and legislative provisions related to their Indigenous languages. Self-Governing First Nations have this law-making authority unlike Indian Act bands. Regardless of this difference in law-making authority, Yukon First Nations have the same needs as other First Nations for funding, tools and resources to support their language revitalization efforts. The new federal legislation should include a strong provision stating that Self-Governing First Nations will have equal access to any program funding, tools or resources that flow from the federal legislation.

Recommended next steps include: a) Seeking a formal commitment from the Government of Canada that any program funding, resources or opportunities that flow from its new legislation will be equally available to Yukon First Nations; b) Additional research and engagement with all Yukon First Nations on the health of Indigenous languages, proven methodologies for language revitalization and how these methodologies can be applied in each of their communities; c) In-depth analysis of what it would cost to implement proven methodologies across Yukon over the next 10 years; and d) Legal analysis of the draft federal legislation to identify areas of concern to First Nations with Self-Government Agreements in Yukon

## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

### Background

In December 2016, Canada committed to enacting an *Indigenous Languages Act*. The legislation would be co-developed with First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples with a goal of ‘preserving, promoting and revitalizing’ Indigenous languages.

In their engagement discussion guide on the proposed *Indigenous Languages Act*, the federal government notes that:

"Recognition that modern treaty, land claim and self government agreements describe unique rights and, in some cases, law-making jurisdiction in the areas of language and culture and that any legislation would have to be compatible with, and respectful, of those agreements."

In engaging with the federal government on this legislation, Yukon First Nations sought an approach that would reflect their unique needs and circumstances, especially given that 11 of the 14 Yukon First Nations hold Final Land Claim and Self-Government Agreements.

At the May 29-30 AFN Yukon Chiefs' Summit, Resolution 2018-08 was passed directing the AFN Yukon Regional Office to continue liaising with Canadian Heritage and other partners to coordinate a Yukon approach to the *Indigenous Languages Act* engagements. This work would include a pre-engagement session to prepare for the federal engagements, hosted on August 22, 2018, as well as the coordination of a discussion paper around the proposed *Indigenous Languages Act* to provide data, information, and considerations directly relevant to First Nations in the Yukon.

### Purpose

The purpose of the Discussion Paper is to inform and support Yukon First Nations as they engage with Canada on the development of its *Indigenous Languages Act*. Discussion Paper focus areas include:

- Conducting a survey of all 14 Yukon First Nations to gain a stronger understanding of the current health of Indigenous languages in the region and to collect basic information on language initiatives and practices;
- Interpretation and analysis of data from this survey along with additional publicly available data from the 2016 Census;
- Collection and analysis of existing information on proven methodologies for Indigenous language revitalization that could be applied by Yukon First Nations, along with considerations related to cost;

- Key considerations related to Yukon First Nations with, and without, Land Claims and Self-Government Agreements; and
- Recommended next steps in the process, including further data collection and a legal analysis of the draft legislation specific to Yukon First Nations.

The purpose of the Discussion Paper is to be informative not directive. The goal is to reflect what is going on in our region and provide a voice for Yukon First Nations with regard to the realities they face working to revive their languages.

It is intended to be a useful initial step in building a Yukon-specific knowledge base. This is only a beginning step and much more extensive and in-depth research and analysis will be required over time.

### Related Work

This paper should be read along with the legal considerations and analysis being prepared by Victoria Fred. In addition, there are key messages that came out of the August 22, 2018 pre-engagement session that provide excellent additional context and considerations.

## RESEARCH PROCESS

### Yukon Indigenous Languages Key Informants Survey

We built this survey on a previous survey conducted by the National Assembly of First Nations (AFN) office to provide a basis for costing. Four Yukon First Nations originally replied to the AFN survey.

The new survey includes both the original AFN questions and more in-depth information on the health of Indigenous languages in the Yukon, and what Yukon First Nations are doing to revitalize their languages. We now have responses from all 14 Yukon First Nations to the original set of AFN questions and the additional survey questions. Our survey was distributed and completed in July-August of 2018 to key informants with knowledge and expertise in the area of language revitalization.

### Review of Census 2016 Data

We used publicly available data from the most recent Census to develop a clearer picture of the situation here in the Yukon. The purpose was to add further information to the key informants survey, and to get a sense of how Yukon compares to all of Canada.

### Literature Review

We reviewed literature on proven methodologies in the area of Indigenous language revitalization.

### Engagement with Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC)

In doing this work we met with the YNLC to get their input and support.

### Data Limitations

The language surveys ask respondents to give their individual understanding of their situation (i.e. do you know enough of a language to carry on a conversation?) or their community environment (i.e. how frequently is your language spoken in community gatherings?). The answers given might vary from one respondent to another might based on the way they understand and interprets the question. For example, how does a person interpret the word “conversation”? There is also no external verification of the answers given. In addition, the surveys have fairly small sample sizes as is common in small communities in the North.

Given these common limitations readers should not interpret the data as an exact representation of reality. Rather they provide a general idea of what is going on and provide a basis for more extensive research in the future.

## YUKON'S UNIQUE SELF-GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

In the Yukon, the majority of First Nations have signed final Land Claim and Self-Government Agreements. First Nations with Modern-Day Treaties direct their own affairs, and for the most part, the *Indian Act* no longer applies to them, their Citizens, or to settlement land. First Nations with Self-Government Agreements have the authority to raise taxes and make their own laws in relation to many areas including heritage, language and culture.

Similar to other pieces of federal legislation, the new *Indigenous Languages Act* would be a law of general application unless it has a clause stating that it would not apply to self-governing First Nations. As a law of general application it would apply to self-governing First Nations unless a First Nation had passed its own language laws.

As of 2016, 22 comprehensive self-government agreements have been signed by the federal government. 11 of Yukon's 14 First Nations have signed self-government agreements, meaning that Yukon is home to approximately half of all comprehensive self-government agreements in Canada.

Yukon First Nations with Self-Government Agreements	Yukon First Nations Who Have Not Signed Modern-Day Treaties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carcross/Tagish First Nation</li> <li>• Champagne and Aishihik First Nation</li> <li>• Kluane First Nation</li> <li>• Kwanlin Dün First Nation</li> <li>• Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation</li> <li>• Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation</li> <li>• Teslin Tlingit Council</li> <li>• Selkirk First Nation</li> <li>• Ta'an Kwäch'än Council</li> <li>• Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation</li> <li>• Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White River First Nation</li> <li>• Ross River Dena Council</li> <li>• Liard First Nation</li> </ul>

## DEFINITIONS

### Language Health

There are several factors which indicate the general health and vitality of a language. One of the most important factors is to identify if the language is being transferred and taught from one generation to the next. Just from that one factor alone much can be deciphered for the state of that language's health. Language health can be evaluated by the level of risk of endangerment assessed on a continuum identifying stability to extinction. The following chart illustrates the gradient of levels of this continuum defined by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages.<sup>i</sup>

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
<i>safe</i>	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
<i>unsafe</i>	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
<i>definitively endangered</i>	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
<i>severely endangered</i>	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
<i>critically endangered</i>	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation.
<i>extinct</i>	0	There exists no speaker.

### Language Shift

Language shift occurs when a language is gradually replaced by another language. Yukon Indigenous communities were forced to shift their Indigenous languages to English through Canada's assimilation policies and legislation. Today the dominant language spoken is English.

### Language Loss

Simply put, language loss refers to the death or loss of a language. Specifically, there are no living fluent speakers and the language has not been documented or preserved.

"It is vital that we remember that these languages exist nowhere else in the world. When they die here, they die forever. Stripping Indigenous peoples of our languages was a deliberate policy of the residential school system, and despite a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that acknowledges this, there is yet to be any concrete action to reverse this damage."<sup>ii</sup>

## Fluency

Language fluency is a difficult term to define and means different things to different people. Generally, fluency is achieved when speakers are able to engage in a smooth flowing conversation with other speakers without long periods of silence and at a fairly sophisticated level of comprehension. Increased fluency among members of our communities is ultimately the factor that will reverse language loss and gradual extinction.

## Language Revitalization

Language revitalization works to reverse language loss and employs methodologies designed to increase the level of fluency or to revive an extinct language. Many Indigenous languages across Canada are threatened and highly endangered. For this reason, a focus on language revitalization, rather than just language documentation and preservation, is urgent and extremely time sensitive due the rapid decrease of remaining speakers who are largely our Elders.

## Language Revival

Languages can be brought back from states of extinction if they have been properly documented. This process seeks to revive unspoken languages into a state of high fluency.

Language maintenance indicates continuing use of a language despite competition from a regionally and/or socially more prominent and powerful language.

Language Preservation is an effort to save a language and stop it from becoming extinct.

## Language Documentation

Language documentation in linguistics works to create a body of materials including audio and video recordings, a written system known as an orthography, which serves to understand the grammatical body of the language. It seeks to provide a thorough basis of the language in preserving the language but also for uses in revitalization initiatives.

## Language Curriculum and Resources

Tools and lessons in language learning can take numerous forms such as; books, audio recordings, assessment tools, videos, online and phone apps, YouTube videos, games.

Language Spoken Most Often at Home (Statistics Canada definition):

'Language spoken most often at home' refers to the language the person speaks most often at home at the time of data collection. This is also referred to as a person's "home language".

Mother Tongue (Statistics Canada definition):

'Mother tongue' refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the person at the time the data was collected. If the person no longer understands the first language learned, the mother tongue is the second language learned. For a person who learned two languages at the same time in early childhood, the mother tongue is the language this person spoke most often at home before starting school.

Knowledge of a Language (Statistics Canada definition):

'Knowledge' of a languages refers to whether the person can conduct a conversation in that language.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE AND WHAT LANGUAGE LOSS MEANS TO AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

“Language suppression, particularly for Indigenous peoples, is “a form of disempowerment and oppression” that impacts self-identity, well-being, self-esteem and empowerment, all of which are key ingredients for individual and community healing (Cohen, 2001, p. 143).”<sup>iii</sup>

Out of the 60 Indigenous languages that currently exist in Canada,<sup>iv</sup> few are predicted to survive if immediate and strategic action is not taken to change this trend and dire forecast. In the Yukon one of our Indigenous Languages is currently defined as “extinct” because there are no fluent speakers left. This language is Tagish.

The remaining seven languages; Gwich'in, Hän, Upper Tanana, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Inland Tlingit, and Kaska are currently in a state of critically endangered, based on extremely low rates of fluent speakers remaining. None of the Yukon Indigenous languages are predicted to survive if the current rate of language loss we are experiencing continues. The thought of this is beyond devastating, and it is inconceivable to truly grasp the full repercussions and the impact this will have on Yukon Indigenous people, their culture, their identity and their purpose.

It has often been said that language is what defines us and lies at the very core of the way that we perceive and understand the complexities of the world in which we exist. There is beauty and strength in speaking one’s inherent language and in the context of Indigenous peoples, it is as though they have a fluid and open connection to their ancestors by doing so. Our languages contain concepts and world views simply lost when translated into the English language, thus disconnecting us from the unique paradigms and world views only existing in that particular culture, those clans, families and lineages.

With each passing of a language speaker (our Elders), vast understandings are lost to the community simply by never hearing their voice speak in the language again. There is power, protection and comfort in hearing the language being spoken, even if we cannot fully grasp what is being said, just hearing it voiced infuses strength into the community. Without this, we are lost from the most sacred connection of our identity, the way in which our Ancestors addressed each other, the land, the animals and their Ancestors before them. It is their voices and teachings that must persist through us and onward, their voices and teachings that guide the journey of ceremony, self-determination and resilience. Any endeavour of importance to Indigenous communities revolves around and depends on our languages being spoken.

Our languages contain history, knowledge, understandings, paradigms and ways of telling us how the universe was assembled and functions in the natural order of the Creator. Language loss comes at a most critical and fundamental expense; as it is so intrinsically tied to the very heart and soul of the identity of the Indigenous person. The loss of language has impacted all levels of Indigenous community by the displacement of culture and identity so pivotal to wellness and wholeness. There has been a tremendous sense of grief that has persisted for decades in the Yukon over the loss and inevitable threat of language extinction. The disconnect between the individual and their sense of identity has caused massive social upheaval.

In the Yukon there are eight Indigenous languages: seven belonging to the Athabaskan Language family and Inland Tlingit is a separate language. All of these languages would classify as endangered with few fluent speakers left over the age of 65 and declining rapidly. Despite this devastating prediction, there still remains a flicker of light and hope that we in fact can reverse language loss and extinction. Substantial language revitalization movements have occurred among other Indigenous nations who have designed, created and implemented revitalization methodologies that quite easily can be adopted here, but require immediate and strategic action.

## LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION METHODOLOGIES

In order to save our languages, we must increase the amount of people speaking the language to a certain level of fluency, creating a solid core group who in turn will be able to transfer the language to the younger generations. Language revitalization requires immediate action and tremendous focus on proven methodologies that have shown success in increasing the fluency of speakers. There are numerous examples to shed light and experience from other Indigenous communities who have broken trail in language reclamation and revitalization.

Indigenous people in Canada often look to the successful language revitalization efforts of the Maori (of New Zealand) and the Hawaiians. Revitalization infers that something is being re-infused with life and brought back. Revitalization efforts are largely grassroots. They happen at the community level, championed by the people themselves, and are built upon the natural process of how humans learn language.

Immersion is the way in which all human beings have learned to speak and understand their first tongue; by naturally hearing it spoken over and over again by their parents, grandparents and community all day, everyday. Successful language revitalization methods have recreated this process through language nests and other immersion programs.

Many Indigenous communities across Canada are currently and actively working towards revitalization in numerous ways. For the purpose of this discussion paper, we present three proven methodologies that have been identified often as viable and effective processes that Yukon Indigenous people can focus their energies on. Noting that they will invariably be created, further developed and implemented by the communities themselves.

### Language Nest

“I was one of the first generations of children to attend the language nests. It was in the basement at the marae and our Mothers and Grandmothers ran it, they had many challenges but they just kept going. Today I can speak Maori.” – Adult Maori<sup>v</sup>

The Language nest (Te Kōhanga Reo) method originated among the Maori in Aotearoa (New Zealand) in 1982 in their efforts to revive their language in an immersion-based approach, which emphasized a natural way of language learning, and at a grassroots level.

Language nests are built on the idea of recreating natural processes and environments where babies and preschool aged children are exposed to their language daily in an immersion setting without any English being spoken by fluent speakers, namely the Elders in the community. In the Maori and Hawaiian examples, this approach has been highly successful by allowing speakers to transfer language learning to young children at an age when learning language is much easier than adults learning a second language.

The language nest has also been successful in Canada in the community of Adams Lake, BC where the Secwepemc Nation have been operating a language nest and immersion school for over twenty years. Their commitment and dedication to language revitalization was spurred on by one individual who heard a Maori share their story in Vancouver. From there an entire movement was born in their community which has seen tremendous success in increasing fluency.

*“A community member suggested] ‘there’s an empty building that’s not being used, maybe you could write a letter or talk to chief and council about using the building.’ I just basically was naïve and had lots of energy and had this dream and went around organizing, getting the building, saying that we’ll fundraise, we’ll figure out a way to hire the Elders to do this, and I made some posters up, some brochures, and we got a couple of people interested and that’s how it started. I fundraised enough throughout the summer to hire one Elder in the fall and then I volunteered to be the caregiver for the kids. On our first day of opening we had this big empty building with maybe a couple of things in it, not much, with one Elder hired and myself and we had my child, [another teacher’s] two-year-old and another lady on the reserve’s child who*

*was the same age. So we had about three two-year-olds and that went on for about three weeks, then a couple of others trickled in. By the end of the year I think we had seven or eight children.”<sup>vi</sup>*

A language nest requires a physical space such as a building or room that can accommodate a daycare style setting for preschool-aged children. Fluent speakers are also necessary in this equation, thus creating a space reminiscent of a nurturing home. The nest will also need curriculum and other learning lessons but mainly a willingness to create a “Grandma’s House” atmosphere. Creating a language nest does not require immense and insurmountable resources to operate. However, time is of the essence as Yukon Indigenous communities are losing our few remaining fluent speakers quickly.

### Master-Apprentice

The Master-Apprentice method of language revitalization has also proven to be an effective way to increase fluency and create more speakers. This approach pairs a fluent speaker and a language learner who engage in daily immersion sessions over a period of time, for example three hours a day, five days a week over a time span of three years. In this process, the learner will increase their fluency profoundly in a short period of time. Many arrangements will bring a fluent Elder as the Master (Mentor) and a younger learner as the apprentice. The purpose is to, like the Language Nest, create a space, time and a natural environment where a learner and speaker can work together in a comfortable arrangement, yet be serious about their goals, thereby increasing fluency raising the core of fluent speakers.

“This is a one-on-one language immersion program. A “mentor” (a fluent speaker of a language) is paired with an “apprentice” (learner). The mentor and apprentice spend 300 hours per year together doing everyday activities using the language at all times. In this program, learners become more fluent, which is especially valuable for languages where only a couple of fluent speakers are left.”<sup>vii</sup>

### Immersion Schools

‘Immersion’ is a method used to teach a language by using only that language in an everyday context. Once our children move on from the Language Nest, it is vital that they are able to move forward in their immersion style language learning. We have seen that sporadic language classes in English speaking schools does not produce the fluency needed in the equation of language revitalization. Immersion has long been viewed and proven successful in producing high-functioning fluency among children and adults. Immersion schools conduct lessons all day in a certain language, and only that language is spoken. Immersion is used all over the world as an effective way in learning language and creating the

ability to be bilingual. In addition to increasing fluency in the indigenous language, they also are proven to benefit the child academically.

“Hawaiian and Maori immersion schools are the longest running immersion programs and have high levels of student success and retention rates. In 22 Hawaiian public immersion schools, the 1,700 enrolled students outperform the average for children in non-immersion Hawai‘i public schools, with 100% of students graduating from high school and 80% attending college (Aha Punana Leo). The linguistic, cultural and academic success of students enrolled in schools taught through Hawaiian has led to continued growth in their enrollment rates (Wilson 2014). Only 5-15% of Maori students used to finish grade 13 (high school equivalent). Now, with immersion instruction, Maori language immersion school students’ rates are 75% (Pease-Pretty On Top 2002).”<sup>viii</sup>

Maori and Hawaiian students can attend immersion schools from the Nests and into Post-secondary institutions, completing a PHD in their language if they chose to do so. Immersion can also occur on the land during traditional activities and pursuits, as long as only the language is being spoken in true immersion style.

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING PRACTICES THAT ARE NOT EFFECTIVE IN REVERSING LANGUAGE LOSS**

### Occasional exposure to our languages

School programs that only offer twenty minutes of language lesson a day, or three times a week, do not produce language fluency. Occasional language camps do not produce language fluency. Weekly language lessons for adults do not increase fluency to a rate needed to ensure our languages survive. Only learning a few songs or prayers in the language or being able to introduce yourself does not increase fluency.

Adult language classes that are sporadic and inconsistent are also not effective in increasing fluency. It is great that people can speak a few words or phrases but it simply is not enough to reverse language loss.

Further, focusing only on documentation and not revitalization does not increase fluency.

## **KEY LANGUAGE ASSETS**

- Our languages are well documented and archived
- Yukon Nation Language Centre
- Very dedicated and committed Language Warriors exist in every Yukon Indigenous community



- A very strong vision and desire to reverse indigenous language loss/death in the Yukon

## 2018 KEY INFORMANTS SURVEY: STATE OF YUKON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

*All of Yukon communities indicate they are in the same basic mode: revitalization*

In our 2018 Survey we asked respondents to indicate what they believed to be the state of their Indigenous language. They were given the following options:

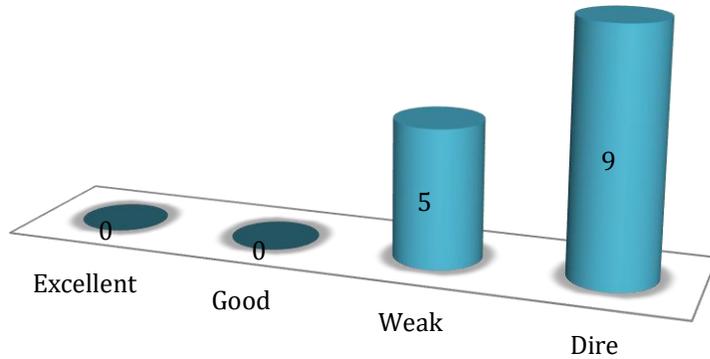
- Reclamation: The community has no fluent speakers. There may or may not be speakers in other communities. Very little if any documentation exists.
- Revitalization: The community's use of the language is declining. Intergenerational transmission is decreasing or non-existent. Only adults beyond child bearing age speak the language and intergenerational use is limited.
- Maintenance: The community continues to have fairly strong to very strong usage of the language. There is intergenerational transmission. Children and young people learn from fluent speakers in the usual way.

100% of our respondents selected the “Revitalization” option. This is consistent with Statistics Canada data which indicate that intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages is very low to non-existent. When we compare this result to other parts of Canada, we see that Yukon is worse off in that it has no “Maintenance” communities, but much better off in that it has no communities indicating that they have no fluent speakers and no documentation.

*Most communities indicate that the health of their language is “dire”*

We asked respondents to describe the overall health of their Indigenous language. 64% indicated that the health of their language was “dire”, meaning that under 5% of their citizens are fluent and that language is used rarely in government, education, business and community affairs. The remaining 36% indicated that the health of their language was “weak”, meaning that between 5-10% of citizens are fluent, and the language is used occasionally in government, education, business and community affairs.

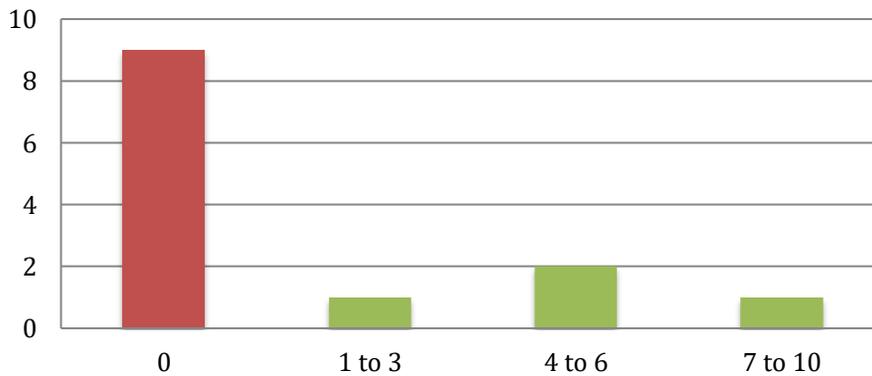
**Overall Health of Your Indigenous Language  
2018, Q.20**



*Very few children are learning their language at home*

The biggest threat to Indigenous languages in Yukon is, despite the fact that there are fluent speakers remaining, very few children are learning their language at home as their mother tongue. 69% of communities who responded to this question indicate that there are no children learning their language at home as their mother tongue.

**How Many Children Learning at Home as Mother  
Tongue? 2018, Q.22**

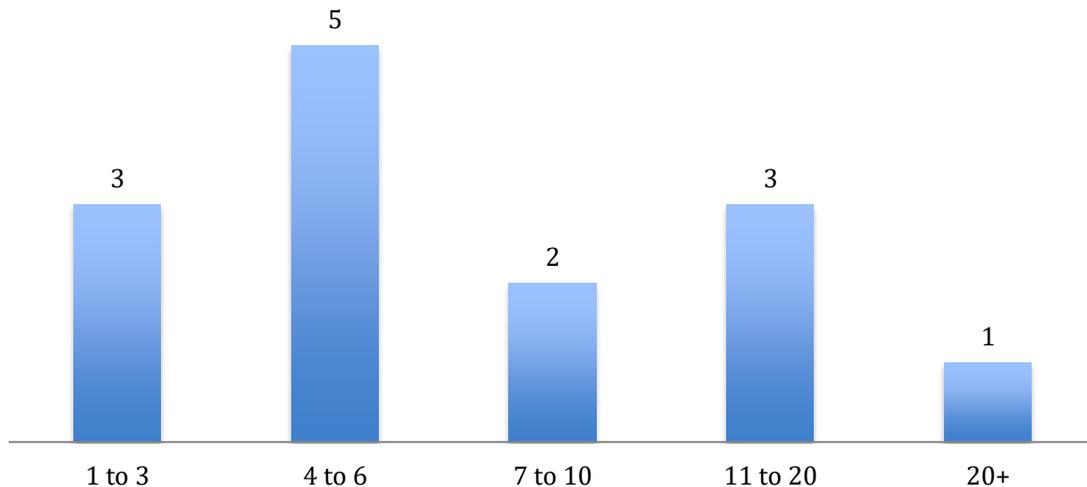


### *Those with the ability to teach are a rare and valuable resource*

Over half of Yukon First Nations indicate that they have 6 or fewer people in their community with the knowledge and ability to teach their Indigenous language. This makes these language keepers an incredibly valuable resource to their whole community.

It also means that communities will have relatively little choice about who they work with to revitalize their language. If language speakers don't want to teach or have personal issues such as mental health or addictions, communities will need to find ways to overcome these barriers.

**How Many People Able to Teach?  
2018, Q.23**



When we look at the number of potential teachers who are under the age of 65, the situation is even more critical. For example, five Yukon First Nations indicate that they have no more than two people under the age of 65 with the knowledge and ability to teach their Indigenous language. This highlights how absolutely critical and urgent Master-Apprentice programs are.

## *Language teachers need support to build their confidence*

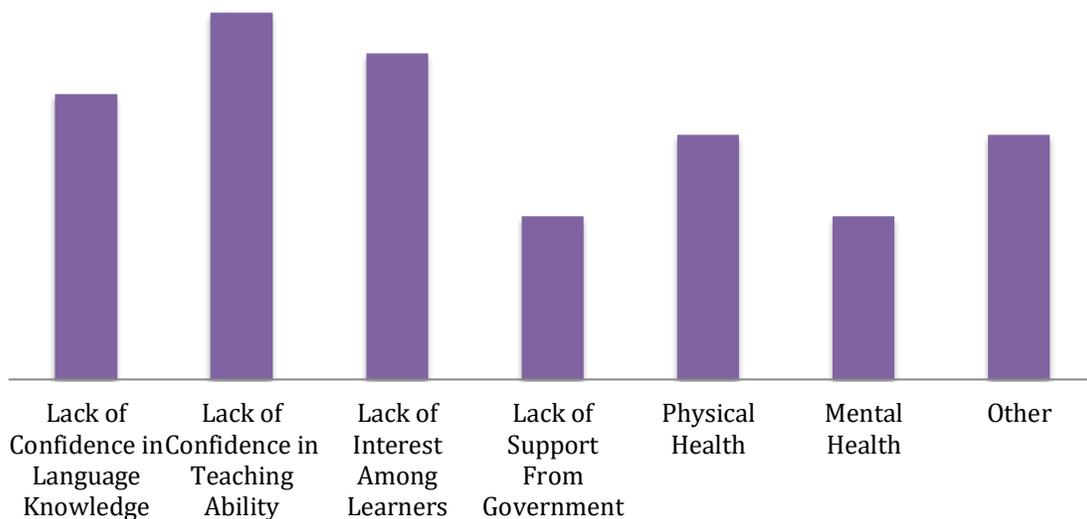
The biggest barriers faced by language teachers relate to confidence. Teaching an Indigenous language in Yukon today is a hugely important and challenging task, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically.

Being a language learner involves “putting yourself out there”. Too often, when they do they can become targets for unkind criticism and lateral violence. In this tough environment, teachers must maintain their language skills often without enough resources and mentorship.

Not surprisingly, survey respondents indicate that the biggest barriers faced by Indigenous language teachers are lack of confidence in their teaching ability, lack of confidence in their knowledge of the language and lack of interest among potential learners.

A major priority for action needs to be providing language teachers with opportunities and support to build their skills and confidence. In addition, it is essential to create a healthy environment around them, and protect them from meanness and lateral violence.

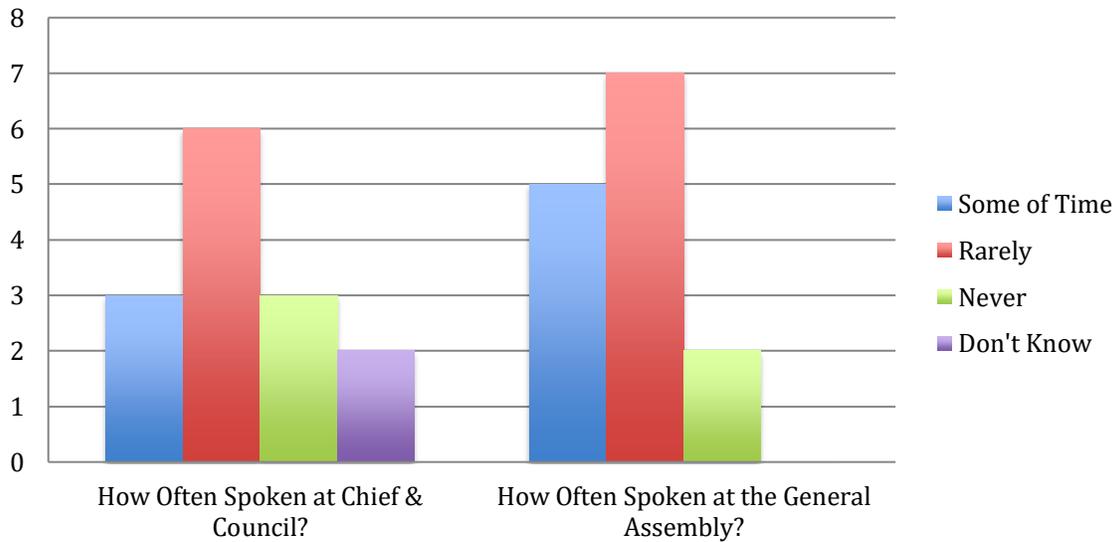
**Barriers Teachers Face Teaching?  
2018, Q.25**



*Indigenous languages are being heard in important community gatherings, but rarely*

In the large majority of Yukon First Nations, Indigenous languages are rare to non-existent at Chief and Council meetings and General Assemblies. When they are heard, they are often symbolic in nature and are not used to conduct business. On the positive side, there are communities where the language is being used in both settings some of the time.

**Use of Language in Gatherings  
2018, Q.28-29**



## 2016 CENSUS: STATE OF YUKON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

### *Yukon's Indigenous languages are in dire straights*

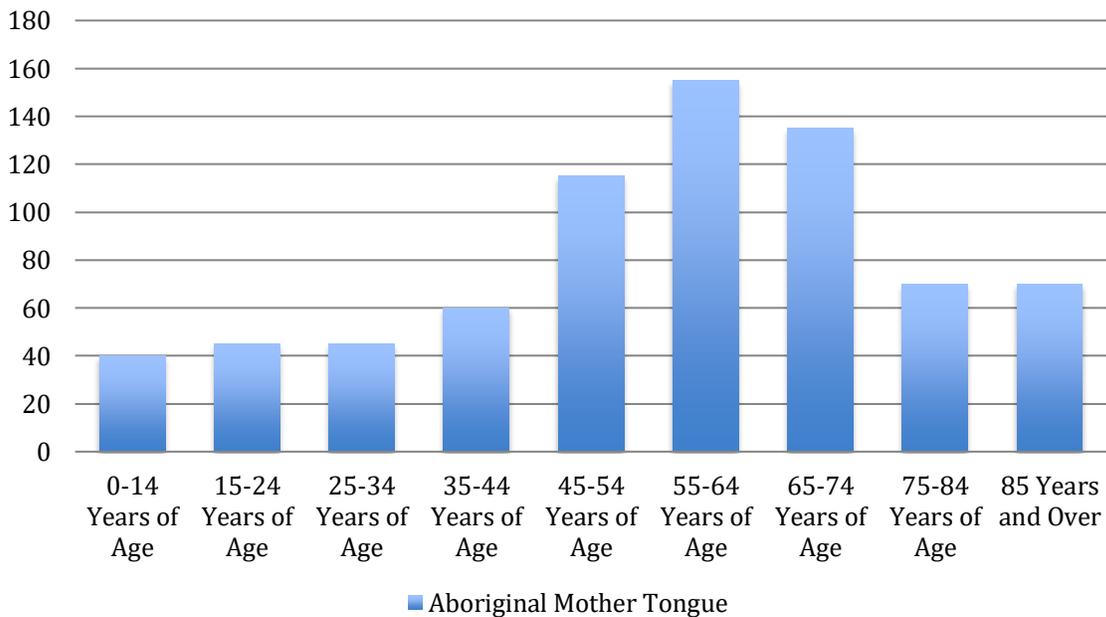
Looking at 2016 Census data for Yukon we see that only 11% of the First Nations population has an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.

Not surprisingly, the situation is worsening among the younger age groups. For example, in 2016 there were 155 people between the ages of 55-64 who had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.

Among those 0-14 years of age only 40 had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.

These trends indicate that Yukon Indigenous languages will not naturally sustain themselves over time. If the languages are to survive, significant and sustained efforts will need to be made to teach Indigenous languages outside the home.

**Aboriginal Mother Tongue, Age Groups, Yukon 2016**



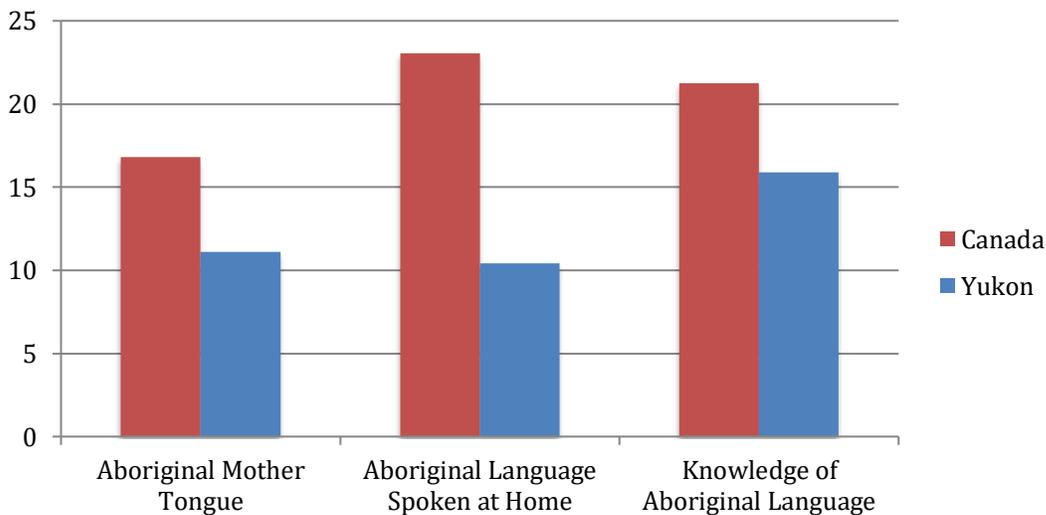
*The situation is worse in Yukon than other parts of the country*

When we compare the Yukon to Canada as a whole we see that Indigenous languages in our region are doing worse. For example, almost 17% of First Nations people in Canada as a whole have an Aboriginal mother tongue, compared to Yukon's 11%.

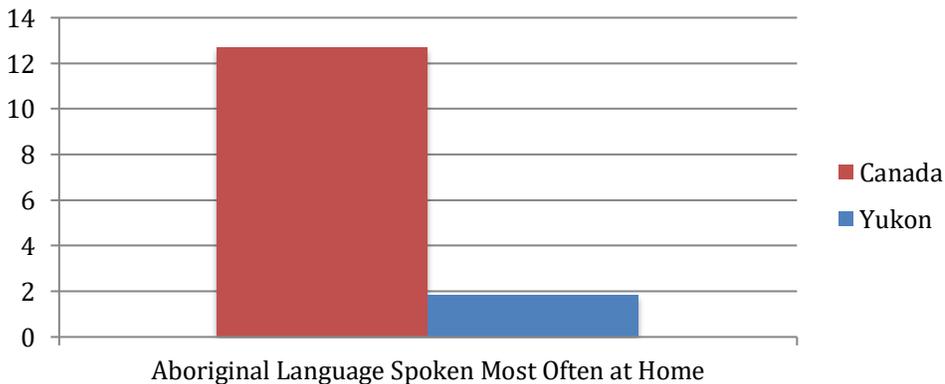
In Yukon, we see 10% of the First Nation population reporting that an Aboriginal language is spoken at home, compared to 23% for Canada.

Perhaps most worrying, only 2% of Yukon First Nation people report speaking an Aboriginal language most often at home, compared to 13% for Canada as a whole.

**Percentage of First Nations Population, Language Characteristics, Yukon, 2016**



**Percentage of Aboriginal Identity Population, Aboriginal Language Spoken Most Often at Home, Canada, Yukon, 2016**



### *Current initiatives and programs are making a difference*

Evidence for this is the fact that the percentage of Aboriginal people in the Yukon who report that they understand an Aboriginal language well enough to carry on a conversation is higher (16%) than the percentage of those who report an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (11%). This is a positive indication that current efforts to teach the language are having an impact.

### *There is some diversity in communities across the Yukon*

When we look at communities across the Yukon, we see differences in whether or not people have knowledge of an Aboriginal language or have an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. Some of these differences may be due to differences in the way survey questions were interpreted.

Considering the percentage of people in a community who report an Aboriginal mother tongue we see:

- 3% of Aboriginal people in Dawson
- 3.4% of Aboriginal people in Whitehorse
- 10% of Aboriginal people in Watson Lake
- 11% of Aboriginal people in Carcross
- 13% of Aboriginal people in Teslin
- 16% of Aboriginal people in Old Crow
- 17% of Aboriginal people in Mayo village
- 21% of Aboriginal people in Ross River
- 32% of Aboriginal people in Pelly Crossing

Considering the percentage of people in a community who report having knowledge of an Aboriginal language we see significant variation as well, for example:

- 6% of Aboriginal people in Whitehorse
- 14% of Aboriginal people in Carcross
- 30% of Aboriginal people in Burwash Landing
- 34% of Aboriginal people in Old Crow
- 35% of Aboriginal people in Pelly Crossing
- 56% of Aboriginal people in Ross River

There are likely multiple reasons that explain these differences, including the extent of geographic isolation, the percentage of children who attended residential school, and the strength of First Nation government efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages.

## 2018 KEY INFORMANTS SURVEY: GOVERNMENT ENVIRONMENT AND INITIATIVES

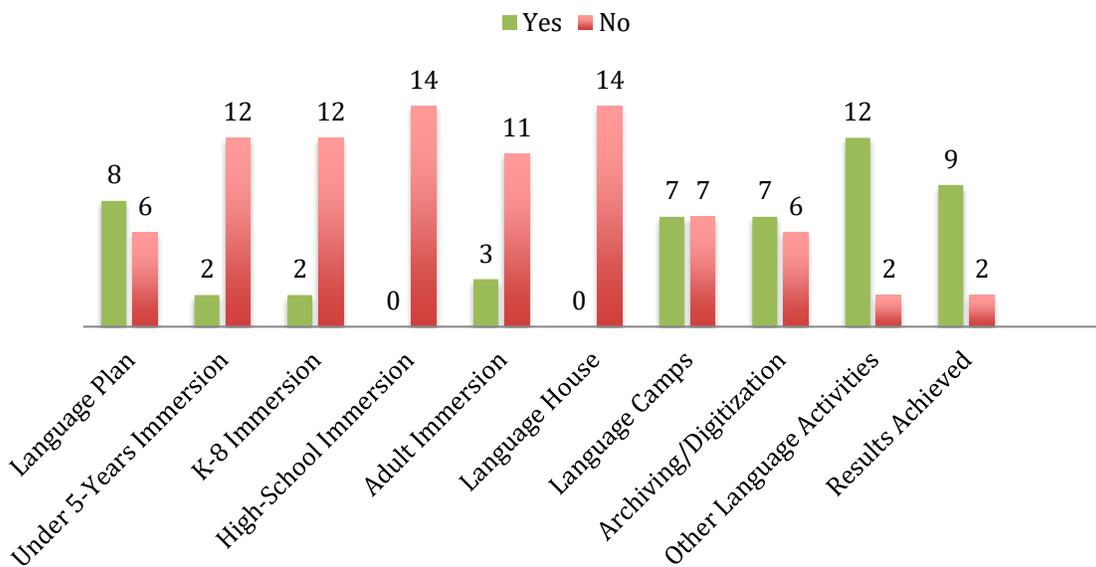
*There is a major opportunity for growth in immersion programs*

Language revitalization can't succeed without language immersion. It is a proven methodology for learning a second language.

When we look at what Yukon First Nations are doing, we see positive signs. Most have a language plan, indicating the growing awareness and priority First Nations are putting on language. We also see that half are offering language camps, and archiving/digitization. Most also have other language activities, which we discuss further below.

Where there seems to be major opportunity for growth is in immersion from birth onward. While immersion is also a more intensive effort and investment, it holds out greater chances of success. We also see that no First Nation indicates having a dedicated “language house”.

**Yukon First Nation Language Activities, 2018, Q.9-Q.18**

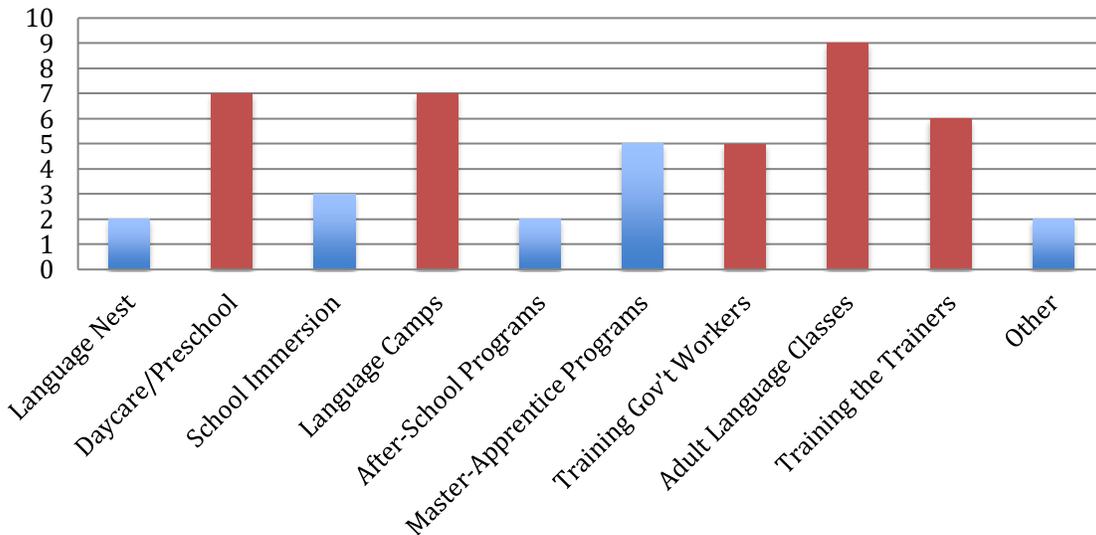


*There is major opportunity for growth in proven methodologies*

The most common language initiatives reported include adult language classes, training the trainers, language camps, daycare/preschool programs, and training for government employees. While these are positive, it is also clear that providing occasional experiences for adults to learn some language will not be adequate to get them near fluency.

There is strong opportunity for growth in methodologies that have proven to get results in language revitalization. These are language nests, school immersion and master-apprentice relationships. It is very positive to see the awareness in some Yukon communities of these methodologies, and the fact that daycare programs are being used as a key tool.

**Yukon First Nations - Main Language Initiatives  
2018, Q.36**



### *It's challenging to know what's working and what's not working*

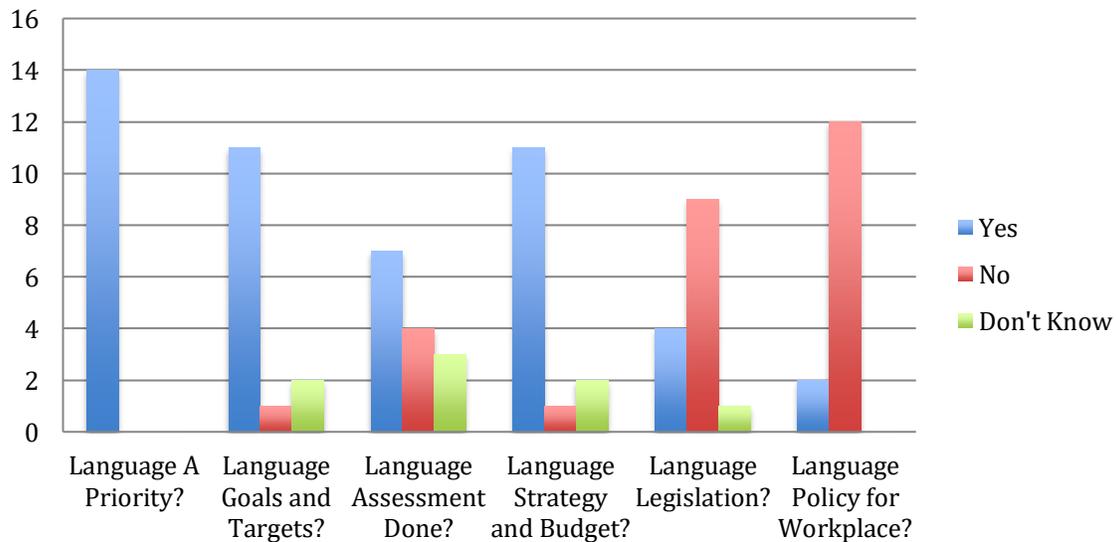
In the survey we asked which initiatives respondents felt were getting the best results. In most cases, respondents merely repeated the main activities they are engaged in. This indicates that people are saying whatever we're doing is working best for us. This is probably not a strong indication of what is actually getting good results in comparison to other methods.

This is not a criticism of those running language programs. Having the expertise, time, funds and tools needed to effectively evaluate the outcomes of specific programs is hugely challenging. It is unrealistic to expect individual First Nations to meet this challenge alone.

### *Yukon First Nations are getting organized to meet the language revitalization challenge*

Most Yukon First Nations have identified language as a priority, are setting goals and targets, doing language assessments and putting in place strategies and budgets. While some of these products are in development, and quality will vary, it is very positive to see that Yukon First Nations at a minimum have language revitalization on the radar. More work is needed to understand the quality and strength of these efforts, however, and the degree to which the broader workforce and community is aware of them.

**Yukon First Nation Government Initiatives  
2018, Q.30-35**



*There remains a significant opportunity to leverage legislative and policy tools*

While most Yukon First Nations are putting in place priorities, plans and budgets to revitalize their languages, relatively few have dedicated legislation and policy. Some that do have legislative provisions do so through broader pieces of legislation on Heritage for example.

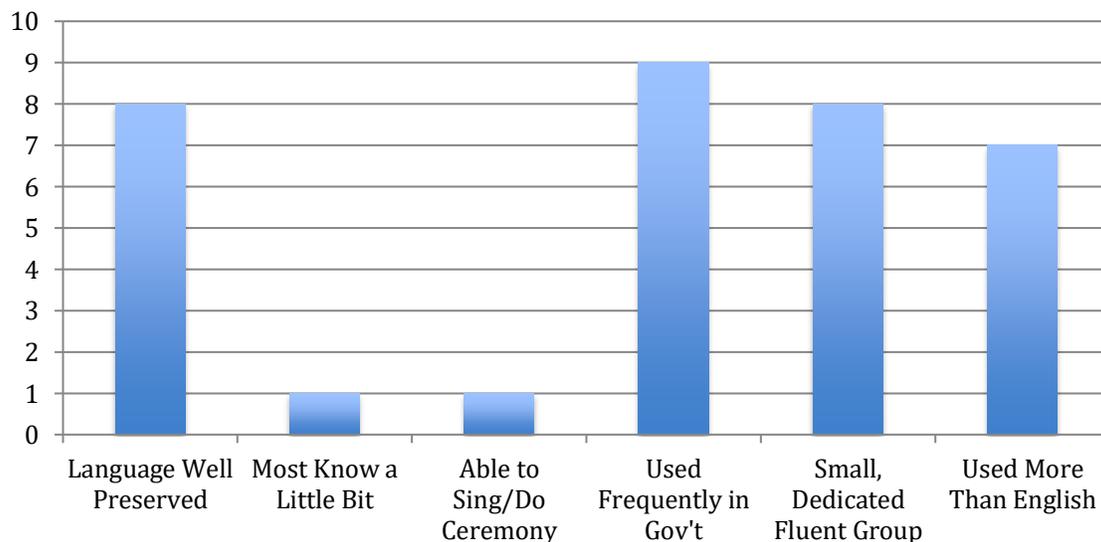
Most do not have any policy for the use of Indigenous language in Government communications and operations.

*The goals of First Nation people in language revitalization are for major not minor change*

We asked survey respondents what success looks like to them in the area of language revitalization. It is clear that people don't want their citizens to learn just a little bit of language in order to pay lip service to it. People want to see:

- Their languages well preserved for future use;
- Their language used frequently in Government;
- A small, core dedicated group becoming fluent; and
- To eventually hear their language more than they hear English.

**What Does Success Look Like?  
2018, q.39**



*There is perceived public support for baby/child immersion programs*

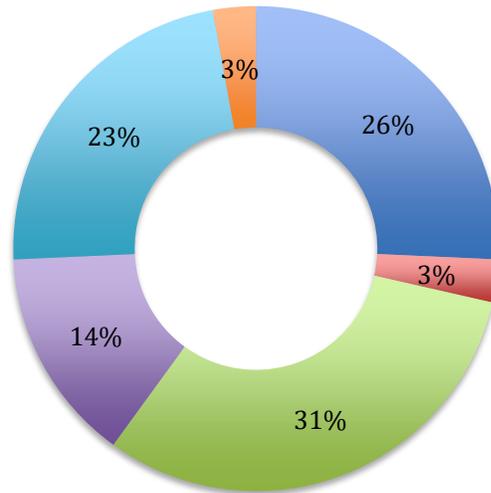
Survey respondents were asked if they believe that people in their community a) would support their government investing more money in language immersion for babies and young children, and b) if governments did invest more in these immersion programs would families send their children to participate. 100% of the answers to both questions were yes, the support and participation would be there.

*The main barrier is a lack of capacity in the community*

Survey respondents were asked what they thought the main barriers were to language revitalization. The most common answer was “Lack of capacity in the community to design and implement programs” (31%). The other two main perceived barriers were: “Lack of interest among community members” (24%), and “Not enough fluent speakers left to teach” (24%).

**Barriers to Language Revitalization  
2018, Q.38**

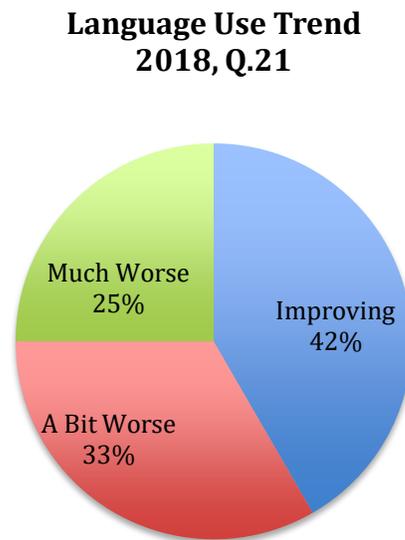
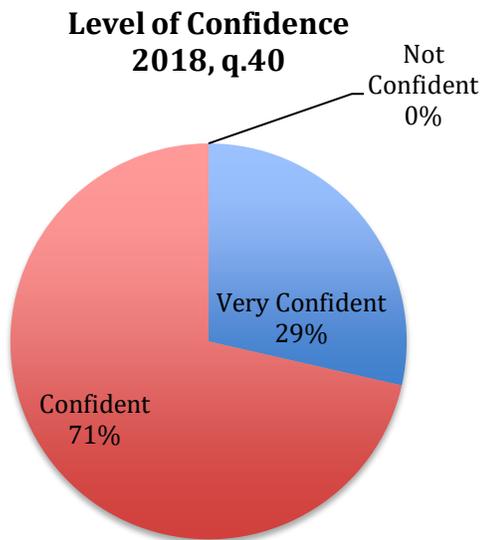
- Lack of Interest
- Not a Gov't Priority
- Lack of Capacity
- Lack of Funding
- Not Enough Speakers
- Other



*Despite the challenges, there is optimism!*

There are many challenges facing those working to revitalize Indigenous languages. Despite these challenges, those working in the field appear to believe we are working our way up from what was the low point. When asked what was the trend in language use over the past 10 years, the most frequent response was “improving”.

In addition, when asked how confident they are they will hear more language in the future, most respondents said they were either “confident” or “very confident”.



## IN YOUR WORDS – KEY THEMES

### *Language is part of healing from residential school*

“In our community we have a lot of residential school survivors, although the majority of us have lost their native tongue, we strive to move forward to revitalize and reclaim our language. We have committed survivors who intend to work hard to see that this never happens again. These survivors are the ones that lead the language by learning and teaching.”

### *Don't make people feel bad because they can't speak*

“Make language learning more fun and exciting in the schools and community. Immersion is important. Promote as a Nation and not get political...It would be awesome to encourage people to be a part of it. And don't make people feel bad because they can't speak the language. We need to build our people back up! History, language and culture are all one.”

### *Children lose the language when they leave the “nest” and go into the school system*

“In the language nest the children become semi-fluent and are leaving daycare with a Grade 4 level in the language, but with the curriculum which follows what YTG has set down as curriculum our children can lose the language in a matter of 3-6 months after attending the school. The 20 minutes allowable in the school is not working and it is not feasible if we want fluent speakers from our schools.”

### *Immersion approaches are essential*

“We need immersion rather than just simple lessons. There is a language nest in the strategic plan. Only one person working on language for the Government. Lots of commitment from this individual working in language. Need a space to commit to the language.”

“We are currently building capacity to do more language programming in immersion. That is why we are focusing on adults right now. We want to create more adult speakers who can teach others, run immersion programming, and raise/help raise children in the language. We are currently focusing on developing and teaching curriculum based on the Nselxcin curriculum developed by School of Spokane.”

### *Beginners can also be teachers*

“With the method we are using, beginner speakers can also teach. For example, I am learning our language and I am leading our adult immersion classes. So with this method, we have many more options for teachers.”

### *We need to use our existing resources effectively so we get results*

“I believe that a lot of the problems with our language programs have been more due to a misappropriation of resources. We have taken a lot of our best speakers, and made them teach basic classes over and over. They have not been appreciated for the depth of language knowledge they possess.”

“We are trying to address this by having younger people take over the responsibility of teaching, and have the older, fluent speakers as advisors and directors and content producers.”

### *Stable teaching places are essential to sustain momentum*

“Struggling for lessons for immersion but it’s in the work plan and budget. Worked with old tapes and a digitization company to save them. Language lessons were happening on an ongoing basis – then disrupted by having to move need a stable place.”

### *Digital approaches (i.e. Apps) hold potential*

“Going digital seems to reach the people.”

### *Supporting and valuing Elders can be a challenge, including taxation penalties and pension deductions*

“Barriers include high demand and responsibility on our Elders, inadequate funds to compensate for expertise and knowledge, lack of recognition and validation of expertise and knowledge, taxation penalties and loss of Pensions.”

### *Lack of interest among learners has historical and systemic roots*

“Lack of interest is due to funding disincentives, pay cuts, residential school trauma and blockages.”

## COSTING CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE YUKON

*The cost of language revitalization will be substantial when proven methodologies are applied*

The recent draft paper entitled *Costing to Reclaim, Revitalize and Maintain First Nations Language* (Draft 1 - July 18, 2018, Don Drummond and Ellen Kachuck Rosenbluth) contains relevant information to understand the cost of language revitalization. It is important to note that this costing analysis is a work in progress, and should not be quoted as final.

The paper refers to the fact that Champagne and Ashihik First Nation (CAFN) has done a detailed cost projection for a two-year adult immersion language program aiming at drawing 10 students. By year three the total annual estimated cost is \$785,115, or around \$78,000 per student, per year. Much of the expense is in human resource costs, spread across a lead instructor, a co-instructor, a program co-ordinator and a part-time language expert guide. With associated benefits, the full-time positions are projected to cost more than \$100,000 each. The largest single expense in the projections is \$347,500, or around \$35,000 per year, per student, for a student living allowance.

Based on these figures, if all 14 Yukon First Nations put 7-10 language learners into an immersion program, the cost would be between \$7.6 million and \$10.9 million per year for the Yukon as a whole. If other initiatives were included on top of this immersion program, the cost would rise substantially. Beyond immersion, there would be costs related to producing government documents/signage in Indigenous languages, translation costs, cost of teacher training and mentorship, curriculum development, etc.

Another basis for comparison is the N.W.T. Indigenous Language Action Plan 2018 – 2022. There are 20,860 Aboriginal people in the N.W.T. based on the 2016 Census.

In 2016-17, \$21 million was allocated to Indigenous Language and Culture Promotion, Preservation and Revitalization. As the funding applied to all Indigenous groups, that works out to about \$1,000 per person.

If that program were applied to the Yukon, which has some 8,195 people reporting Aboriginal, the cost would be \$8.2 million annually.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

- *Yukon Indigenous languages are in a critical state of endangerment. More significant, proactive and immediate measures are needed to revitalize languages or there will be no fluent speakers left.*
- *Yukon First Nations are looking for significant change in language use over the coming decade. They are not looking merely for symbolic use of their Indigenous languages. They want to see government using the language in a serious way. They want to see a core group of people in each community regaining fluency. Eventually they want to hear more of their Indigenous languages than they hear English. In the words of one survey respondent, their long term goal is:*

*“There are families raising their children in our language, we have programs to support their learning throughout their life (ie. language nest, Immersion programs in the school), our language is more naturally integrated into our lives.”*

- *There are proven methodologies that achieve measureable results in the domain of language revitalization. These methodologies revolve around almost full-time language immersion environments. Key examples are Language Nests, Master-Apprentice Programs and School-Based Immersion.*
- *Current programs and initiatives are not yet fully leveraging the proven methodologies. In reviewing current Indigenous language initiatives in Yukon we see quite a lot of focus in areas such as language camps, adult language classes, and training for government employees. These methods have value but will not be enough to achieve the vision that Yukon First Nations have for their languages.*
- *There is a huge opportunity to accelerate progress through adopting proven methodologies. There is an awareness of the importance of language nests, school immersion and master-apprentice programs but they are not yet prevalent or fully implemented. If real growth is to be achieved, every key actor will need to step up to put these things in place.*
- *While there is a growing commitment and awareness of what it will take to succeed, the community capacity and funding is not yet there. Achieving real progress will take significant new sustained investments and capacity building efforts. Yukon First Nations have the jurisdiction and authority to do what they want to do, but additional funding, tools and infrastructure will be needed.*

- *To be successful we need to have honest conversations and create safe and healthy spaces for dialogue and learning.* Above all we need to recognize, hold up and invest in our language warriors. There are key people working in every community for change. These “language warriors” are our most precious resource. Doing their job is very challenging mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. For many people discussing and promoting their Indigenous language is painful – it involves hurt, loss and grief. Those working to learn, share and revitalize the language can also become a targets for lateral violence.
- *To achieve success we will need to have opportunities to learn and become fluent that really work for people.* We can’t expect people to perform language miracles. Becoming fluent in a second language, especially one that is very different from your first language, takes a huge commitment of time, mental and emotional energy, resilience and resources. People will need financial support to take time away from regular employment to learn, practice and keep up their skills over time.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

The Government of Canada has made a promise to co-develop legislation that addresses the revitalization, recovery, preservation, protection, maintenance and promotion of First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages. They have agreed to co-develop legislation in a way that supports the full and meaningful implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the federal government's commitment to a nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit-Crown relationship.

Yukon First Nations with Self-Government Agreements have and will continue to put in place their own legislation and legislative provisions related to their Indigenous languages. Self-Governing First Nations have this law-making authority unlike *Indian Act* bands.

Regardless of this difference in law-making authority, Yukon First Nations have the same needs as other First Nations for funding, tools and resources to support their language revitalization efforts. In fact, the situation in Yukon is worse than in many other parts of Canada, so significant additional funding and support is urgently needed.

The new federal legislation should include a strong provision stating that First Nations with Self-Government Agreements will have equal access to any program funding, tools or resources that flow from the federal legislation. This should be the case regardless of whether or not the legislation applies to Yukon First Nations in the same way as it does to Indian Act Bands. Yukon First Nations suffered the same historical legacy of residential school and attempted cultural genocide as other First Nations and do not possess the resources needed to revitalize their Indigenous languages. There is no reason Yukon First Nations should not have the same access to any resources or opportunities flowing from the new legislation.

### Recommended Next Steps

- **Formal Commitment:** Seek a formal commitment from the Government of Canada that any program funding, resources or opportunities that will flow from its legislation will be equally available to Yukon First Nations, even if the legislation does not end up applying to them in the same way it does to *Indian Act* Bands.
- **Research:** Additional research and engagement with all Yukon First Nations on the health of Indigenous languages, proven methodologies for language revitalization and how these methodologies can be applied in

each of their communities.

- **Costing:** In-depth analysis of what it would cost to implement proven methodologies across Yukon over the next 10 years. This costing would focus on immersion-based programming and master-apprentice relationships. It would need to include funds to develop teaching and testing tools.
- **Legal:** Legal analysis of the draft federal legislation to identify areas of concern to Yukon First Nations with Modern Treaties.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>iii</sup> *National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH)*. 2016. Culture And Language As Social Determinants Of First Nations, Inuit And Métis Health. 1. Retrieved: <https://www.ccnsa-nccah.ca/docs/determinants/FS-CultureLanguage-SDOH-FNMI-EN.pdf>

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