

PROJECT REPORT

Dah Dzähge Nodesidē/We Are Speaking Our Language Again: The Implementation of a Community-Based Tāltān Language Reclamation Framework

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As a member of the Tahltan Nation, I carried out research that centred on community experiences of language reclamation. The investigation focused on how language reclamation is connected to health and healing, as well as what has been done and what still needs to be done to revitalize and reclaim the Tahltan language. Language reclamation is the start of a process in which our people heal from the impacts of colonization and assimilation by reclaiming our language, culture, and identity, thereby allowing our voices to become stronger and healthier. From what was learned from community co-researchers, scholars who have worked with our communities, Indigenous community language revitalization experts, and international language revitalization scholars, I developed a Tāltān Language Reclamation Framework focusing on governance; language programming; documentation; training and professional development; and resiliency, healing, and well-being. This report will discuss the ways in which this framework has been implemented in community over the last decade, highlighting examples such as the formation of a language governing body, Dah Dzähge Nodesidē (Tahltan Language Reclamation Council); the implementation of language nests; the development of a Tāltān language school K-8 curriculum; the creation of learning materials based on old and new recordings of first language speakers (e.g., digital apps and videos, websites, alphabet book, grammar resources); post-secondary fluency/proficiency community programming; and documentation training. Finally, we continue to focus on the relationship between language reclamation, intergenerational trauma, and healing, resiliency, and well-being. This will be done through community-based immersive programming that focuses on the nurturing of relationships with first language speakers in order to create not only learning resources, but safe and supportive environments for all speakers—learners, second language speakers, silent speakers, and first language speakers.

Keywords: Indigenous language revitalization; Indigenous language reclamation; Tahltan; Tāltān; language planning; language framework

Location

Edösdi ushye. Taksetān didene hots'iyē esdāts'ēhi. Tsesk'iyē esdāts'ēhi. My name is Edösdi, my English name is Judy Thompson, and I am Tahltan from the Tsesk'iyē (Crow) Clan. I was the director of my nation's Language Reclamation Department from 2012 to 2019. In the role of mentor and advisor, I continue to guide the implementation of the community-based Tāltān language reclamation framework in our communities.

Tahltan Nation and Our Language

Within Tahltan territory, there are three communities (Figure 1).

In our language, we refer to ourselves as *Didene*, the people, with our language a member of the Dene language family. We use Tahltan to refer to our nation and Tāltān for our language.

Below are Tāltān terms (Table 1) that I will refer to in the report.

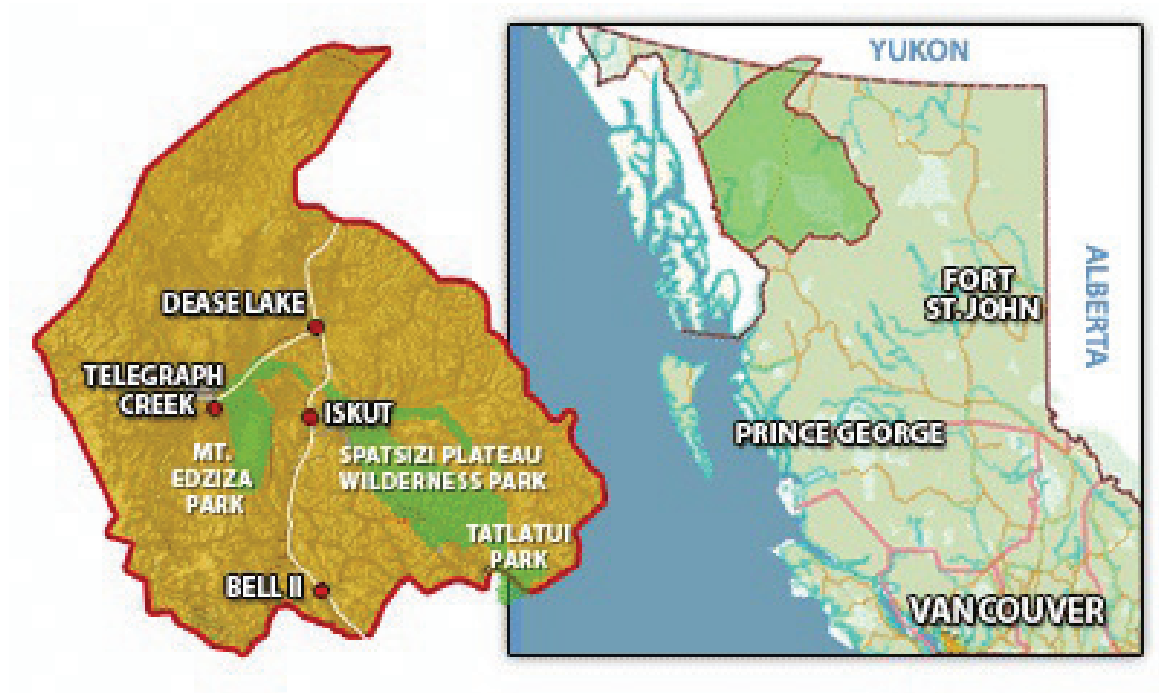


Figure 1: *Left*, map of Tahltan Communities: Luwechō (Iskut), Tāt'ah (Dease Lake), Tlēgo'īn (Telegraph Creek); *right*, Tahltan territory in British Columbia. Image from *Warrior Publications* (<https://warriorpublications.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/b-c-s-sacred-headwaters-to-remain-protected-from-drilling/tahltan-territory-map/>).

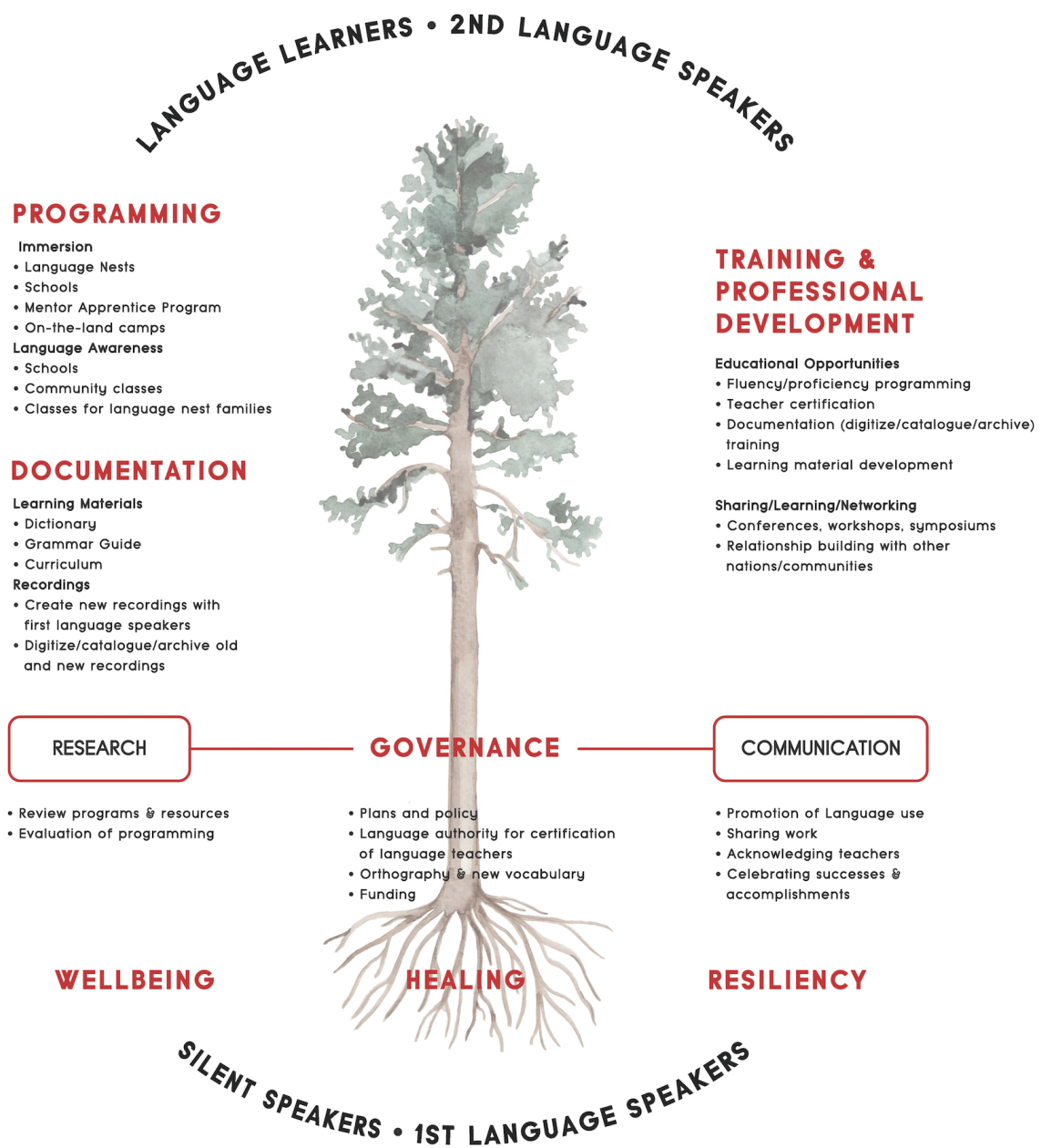
Table 1: Glossary of Tāltān terms. *This statement means that if we are speaking our language, we are able to understand and know our people’s worldview through the language.

ts'esbedze	black spruce tree
echishchō	blueberries
Didene Ekune Mehōdihī Eku Desijihī	All Tahltan People are living the Tahltan way of life*
Dah Dzāhge Nodesidē	We Are Speaking Our Language Again
tsū/tsūtsū	grandmother/term of affection for grandmother
Dzimēs Chō T'oh	Swainson Thrush's Nest
K'asba'e T'oh	Ptarmigan's Nest
Meska'ā T'oh	Seagull's Nest

Introduction

My doctoral work focused on Tahltan community experiences of language reclamation. I focused on how language reclamation is connected to health and healing as well as investigated what has been done, and what still needs to be done, to revitalize and reclaim our language. The development of the Tāltān Language Reclamation Framework came from two of my research questions: “In the past and present, what has been done to maintain, preserve, and revitalize our Tahltan language?” and “In the future, what do my people need to do to continue to maintain, preserve, and revitalize the Tahltan language?” (Edōsdi 2012, 152, 180). In answering these questions, I was able to complete an investigation of what steps had already been taken and to develop a strategy for what still needed to be addressed. Regarding the first question, specific answers can be found in my dissertation. For this report, I will focus on the answers to the second question, which will speak to the articulation of a language reclamation framework using the image of *ts'esbedze* (Figure 2): the trunk represents governance; the crown of the tree represents programming, documentation, training and professional development; and the roots represent healing, well-being, and resiliency. The framework was implemented in 2012 and continues to guide community-focused language reclamation work.

TĀLTĀN LANGUAGE RECLAMATION FRAMEWORK



Created by Edōsdi / Judy Thompson; Designed by Tšēmā Igharas; Updated July 2020

Figure 2: Tāltān Language Reclamation Framework. Image created by Edōsdi/Dr. Judy Thompson, designed by Tšēmā Igharas. Updated July 2020.

Starting with the trunk (governance), I will discuss the language governing body. The crown of the tree (programming, documentation, training and professional development) will highlight the accomplishments and achievements of the language team (Figure 3), which comprises members of the nation who are at different stages of their language learning journey with diverse language revitalization expertise; school language teachers; first language speakers who serve as language mentors; and allies who support our work. Finally, I will explore our future goals to nourish the roots of the tree: healing, well-being, and resiliency. This will be done through the community-based programming that will continue to strengthen the trunk and the crown of the tree in order to create safe and supportive environments for all speakers—learners, second language speakers, silent speakers, and first language speakers.

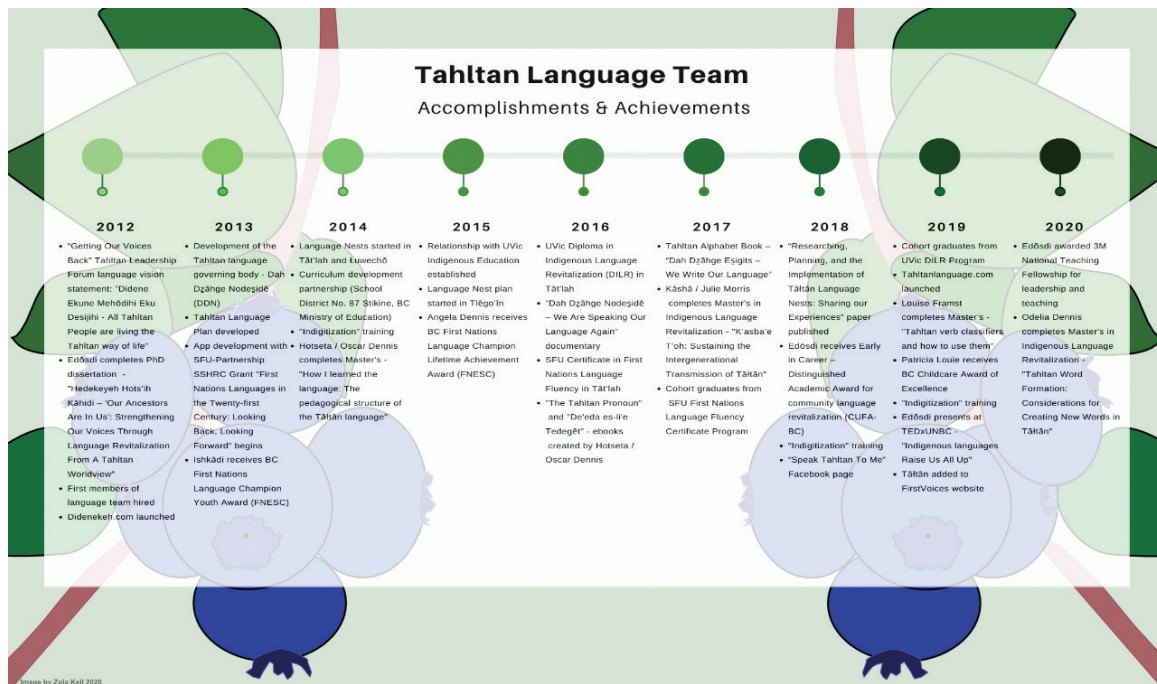


Figure 3: Timeline of the language team's accomplishments and achievements.

Community-Based Tāitān Language Reclamation Framework

Our work focuses on the revitalization and preservation of our language. Revitalization is being immersed in the language, creating new speakers, and increasing the fluency and proficiency of all speakers. I compare this to flourishing berry bushes, such as *echishchō*, which grow around *ts'esbedze*. Preservation is documenting the language: creating recordings, dictionaries, grammar guides—the tools of language learning. I compare this to the preservation of *echishchō*. If we just jar or dry *echishchō* and do not work to keep it alive and thriving, eventually we will not have any more *echishchō*—or, in the case of our language, any more speakers (Edōsdi 2019). The trunk, crown, and roots of *ts'esbedze* are all interconnected. The trunk provides guidance and structure for this work to occur. The specific work we do to revitalize and preserve our language happens at the crown, which consists of the branches and foliage that grow outward from the trunk. Both revitalization and preservation are components of the larger vision of language reclamation, which is analogous to the foundation, the roots of *ts'esbedze*. The reclamation of our language is a powerful way for our people to reclaim our identity and highlight our resiliency, leading to self-determination and cultural renewal.

Trunk

Governance

In March 2012, a Tahltan Leadership Forum called "Getting Our Voices Back" was held to discuss social and cultural issues facing our nation. Specific to language, the vision statement was determined to be "Didene Ekune Mehōdih Eku Desijih," with a list of goals, actions, key milestones, and deliverables articulated. I was brought on to lead the language portfolio and, more specifically, to develop a language governing body and to manage and coordinate language efforts for our nation.

The language governing body, Dah Džāhge Nodesidē (DDN), was created to be apolitical and to focus specifically on language, so first language speakers and school language teachers make up the majority of the members on the board. Overall, the role of DDN, according to its terms of reference, is to provide leadership to the team to ensure that we create more language speakers, with communication and research serving as foundations of this support. Specifically, DDN provides guidance in the creation of short- and long-term language plans and the development of a language policy; serves as the decision-making body for language reclamation; acts as the authority for the certification of language teachers; and deals with issues of orthography and the creation of new vocabulary. DDN also supports the language team in seeking funding opportunities.

Regarding research, DDN is able to oversee research on traditional and cultural protocols, to guide the review of new programming and resources for the language, and to support the evaluation of current and past language programming. In terms of communication, DDN focuses on promoting language reclamation with our people to encourage and motivate us to use the language in all areas of our lives. It is also important to both share what we are doing and to acknowledge whom we have learned from. To honour our teachers, DDN supports the team in communicating and sharing these teachings, such as presenting at conferences and writing about our work (Edōsdi et al. 2018). We also have an online presence, with a language documentary (Edōsdi and Bourquin 2017), a TEDx Talk (Edōsdi 2019), and many of our language learning materials available (see “Documentation” below).

Our people, along with DDN, emphasize the importance of celebrating individuals who have made a positive difference in the reclamation of our language—to “potlatch our successes and accomplishments” (Vera Asp, personal communication, 2012). Many of the members of our team are “language champions,” which the First Peoples’ Cultural Council (FPCC) defines as people who are advocates for their languages, who work “to develop teaching resources, archives, documentation, and to teach the language to others” (2010, 24). Several have received awards from external organizations to acknowledge their Indigenous Language Reclamation work.

Crown

Programming

Immersion: Language Nests

A language nest is early childhood language immersion programming that is conducted entirely in the Ancestral language of an Indigenous group (McIvor 2005) and is not the same as a pre-school program or daycare centre (Edōsdi et al. 2018). First language speaker and language teacher Angela Dennis has spoken about the importance of a nest emulating a home-like setting: “It’s like living at your grandma’s place. It’s like Tsūtsū’s house when you go to the language nest” (Edōsdi and Bourquin 2016). A maximum of eight children, aged up to five years old, attend the nests for a minimum of fifteen hours a week, with staff and Elder first language speakers engaging with the children in the language. Staff also provide support to increase the use of Tāltān among families at home, including parent classes and the development of language learning materials. Two language nests were opened in 2014, one in Łuwechō (Dzimēs Chō T’oh) and one in Tātl’ah (K’asba’e T’oh). Plans to open a third nest (Meska’ā T’oh) in Tlēgo’īn began in 2015, with capacity issues and the Alkali Lake Fire in 2018 causing the postponement of the opening.

Language Awareness: Tāltān Language K–8 Curriculum Development

In 2014, in consultation with Tahltan language teachers and first language speakers, the language team partnered with School District No. 87 (Stikine) and the BC Ministry of Education to develop a Curriculum Framework document for Tāltān Language K–8. The curriculum will be piloted in classrooms in Łuwechō, Tlēgo’īn, and Tātl’ah. Since most of our first language speakers are elderly, there is an urgency to learn our Elders’ and Ancestors’ knowledge and wisdom in order to create language learning materials. This connects directly with documentation work, one of the key strategies in revitalizing and preserving our language.

Documentation

Over the last eight years, we have been building relationships with first language speakers to respectfully record stories and narratives (e.g., about growing up, traditional practices, lessons, histories), conversations about activities on the land (e.g., gathering of food and medicines, hunting), and conversations about everyday activities (e.g., changing diapers, gossiping) to create language learning materials that support the development of speakers.

Learning Materials

A variety of learning tools have been developed. These range from digital collections—such as Tahltan language websites and FPCC’s FirstVoices website, to which Tāltān has been added—to hard copy, such as the materials for the K–8 curriculum and an alphabet book, *Dah džāghe ešigits: We Write Our Language*. In community, videos featuring a Tāltān-speaking puppet have been created for use by language nest families. Working with Jetpack Games, we have also designed a selection of simple youth-directed language-teaching games. From 2013 to 2019, the nation was part of a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), “First Nations Languages in the Twenty-First Century: Looking Back,

Looking Forward,” in partnership with Simon Fraser University (SFU). This project supported documentation, archiving, and development of web and mobile apps for language learning.

Recordings

Our work with previous recordings is ongoing to ensure that they are digitized, catalogued, and archived. Starting in 2012, team members recorded language conversations with family members, collecting over five thousand entries in a digital database/archive. We continue to build on these recordings in order to develop a dictionary and a learning management system. We have been working to develop a grammar guide to build on Hotseta/Oscar Dennis’s master’s research (2014) and publications (2012; 2016a; 2016b).

Training and Professional Development

There is a continued need to provide educational opportunities that will lead to the increase of speakers, such as training to: become more fluent and proficient in our language, become trained teachers in immersion, document and transcribe our language, develop language learning materials, and become technologically fluent. As well, our people need to attend conferences, workshops, and symposiums in order to build relationships with individuals, communities, and nations who are also working to reclaim their languages.

Educational Opportunities: Fluency/Proficiency Programs

Since 2012, we have had several members of our nation complete post-secondary certificates, diplomas, and degrees that focus on Indigenous language revitalization. In 2017, a cohort of students completed SFU’s Certificate in First Nations Language Proficiency. In 2019, a cohort of students completed the Diploma in Indigenous Language Revitalization (DILR) through the University of Victoria (UVic). Since the majority of first language speakers live in our three communities and play an integral role in creating immersion settings, we brought these two programs to Tātł’ah to put them into practice. This was essential for maintaining our commitment to relationship-building and reinforcing our commitment to community.

Documentation Training

Indigitization (<https://www.indigitization.ca/>) is a collaborative initiative that works with Indigenous communities and organizations such as Northern BC Archives (at the University of Northern British Columbia), the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, the Museum of Anthropology, and the School of Information (all at the University of British Columbia) to provide instruction in digitization of audio and video media. This ranges from file management and storage to project planning and workflows, as well as training with digitization equipment. Team members undertook training through this program in 2014, 2018, and 2019.

Roots of the Tree

Healing, Well-Being, and Resiliency

Since the creation of the framework, much work has been done to revitalize and preserve our language. The crown of ts’esbedze continues to grow more branches and leaves as we continue to work on programming, documentation, and training and professional development specific to language reclamation at the community level, with the trunk of the tree—through DDN—providing leadership, guidance, and support. All of this has been done to nourish and nurture the roots: the health, well-being, and resiliency of our people. Ts’esbedze takes in sustenance through both the leaves and the roots via a transportation system. Phloem transports food and nutrients from the leaves (crown) through photosynthesis, while xylem transports water and minerals through the roots. While our emphasis has been on the crown (branches and leaves)—the creation of new speakers—we also need to ensure that we are taking care of the roots: first language speakers and silent speakers. This needs to be done by providing a safe environment for healing to occur from the effects of intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and assimilation. My continuing research through UVic, and more specifically through the NETOLNEW partnership (<https://netolnew.ca/>), funded by a SSHRC Partnership Grant, will focus more strongly on the connection between language and health and well-being. NETOLNEW is a Canada-wide research partnership that supports projects interested in adult language learning. Our plan is to evaluate the Diploma in Indigenous Language Revitalization (DILR) program and our language nests with the support of language learning assessment tools created with NETOLNEW.

We will continue to work closely with our first language speakers to create immersive environments in community. This will include establishing language nests and school immersion in all three communities and providing more opportunities for adults to become proficient in our language, such as the Mentor Apprentice Program and continued post-secondary programming. As well, we will continue to nurture our relationships with first language speakers and record their teachings as a way of continuing to develop

language learning materials that will be used for community programming. Since the implementation of the framework in 2012, our language has moved out of the “Critically Endangered” level into the “Declining” level, with our team working hard to achieve the level of “Thriving” (Amrhein et al. 2010; Gessner et al. 2014). Our goal is to get to the point where we have flourishing echishchō amongst thriving ts'esbedze, which means we are reclaiming our language and living up to our vision statement: Didene Ekune Mehōdihi Eku Desijihī.

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