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## Most of Canada's 61 aboriginal languages continue decades-long slide

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INUVIK, N.W.T. - The lively five-year-olds in Sandra Ipana's language class chant through the calendar in Inuvialuktun.

On the floor, elder Emma Dick plays word games with two shy little twin sisters. The posters on the wall are bright and there are plenty of colourful books on the shelves. But even here, where the effort to revive the language of the Inuvialuit is strongest, Ipana says the chances of her young pupils speaking their ancestral tongue in their everyday lives are modest.

"As much as I want to say it, I don't think they'll be fluent," Ipana says. "But at least they'll be aware."

Ipana's struggle to keep Inuvialuktun alive in the mouths of the people who created it is being played out in classrooms and living rooms across the country.

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that the revitalization of traditional languages is a key component in the creation of healthy individuals and communities.

But according to new data released Tuesday by Statistics Canada, almost all of Canada's nearly 60 aboriginal languages are continuing their decades-long slide.

The 2006 census shows that about 21.5 per cent of those who identified themselves as aboriginal said they could fluently speak their ancestral tongue, down from 24 per cent in 2001.

There are exceptions. Inuktitut, spoken by the Inuit, and Cree and Ojibway, two primary languages of the First Nations, appear to be holding their own against the sea of English around them.

Among First Nations, about 29 per cent said they could speak an aboriginal language well enough to carry on a conversation; that's unchanged from 2001. The figure was much higher (51 per cent) on reserve than off reserve (12 per cent).

Interestingly, there are signs First Nations are trying to regain their languages. For example, about 12 per cent of all First Nations who spoke Cree in 2006 learned it as a second language.

Inuktitut remains strong overall, but both knowledge and use are declining. Sixty-nine per cent of Inuit speak Inuktitut, but they are less likely to speak it as their main language at home - 50 per cent in 2006, down from 58 per cent a decade ago.

The pattern of language loss is well established.

In 1996, Statistics Canada found the passage of aboriginal languages from one generation to the next was gradually breaking down. That year, the agency released data showing that for every 100 aboriginal people who spoke their mother tongue, the number who used it at home declined from 76 to 65 over the previous 15 years.

The reverse scenario unfolds in some isolated enclaves. In northern Labrador, virtually all children in the remote Innu settlement of Natuashish speak Innu-aimun at home and are learning English as their second language in the classroom.

This has posed unusual challenges for the mostly English-speaking teachers at the Mushuau Innu Natuashish School, said principal Jackie Williams.

"Sometimes you try to explain something, and there's just not the words in Innu to explain it."

While the students speak English to their teachers, they stick to their ancestral language on the playground.

"We might not be aware of the bullying that's going on," Williams said.

In 2005, a report commissioned for the federal government found nearly 70 per cent of aboriginal languages in Canada were either declining, endangered or critical.

Although the previous Liberal government promised in 2003 to spend \$160 million over 10 years to promote and develop aboriginal languages, none of that money was allocated or spent. The pledge was quietly scaled back in November 2006 by the Harper Tories. Ottawa currently spends \$5 million a year on its Aboriginal Language Initiative.

Almost all of the bright lights in Ipana's class now speak Inuvialuktun better than their parents.

"All these kids come from non-speaking homes," Williams said.

The same is true a few blocks away in Anna Pingo's Grade 10 Inuvialuktun class.

"The parents went to residential school," she explains. "If they spoke the language, they were punished."

"People in my generation, we're the ones that lost the language."

Pingo is learning the language herself, staying a few steps ahead of her students who are struggling through basic vocabulary and some simple phrases.

Tiara Bernhardt, a sharp, university-bound 17-year-old, has to ask Pingo for advice before introducing herself in Inuvialuktun.

"Inuvialuktun isn't really spoken much any more, so I don't really think it'll go any farther than in school," she says. "I've only been taught it in school, so it hasn't really been a part of my life."

Still, the Inuvialuit aren't giving up.

A new, more sophisticated curriculum was just introduced last year. Kindergarten students are taught in immersion classes and other students get 30 minutes a day all the way through high school.

"We're moving forward," Ipana says. "You have to think positive like that."

Things have come a long way, says Dick, who's been teaching Inuvialuktun to children for a decade.

"We were just learning ... little odd things," she says. "It just about died off and then they got the Inuvialuit texts."

"I love it. I like the little kids. They all call me Nannuk (grandma)."

The chance to save Inuvialuktun is now, says Pingo - if people want to save it at all.

"Unless we really pull together as a community, unless we take a stand and say, 'This is what we need to do' ... But many of us are on different pages in our life."

Dick, too, wonders about the future of the language that once surrounded her.

"If they would continue to hear it at home, that would be better, but nobody speaks it at home. They only hear it in class."

Why, then, learn a language of hunters and whalers in a world of computers and airplanes?

"It's part of my culture, my background, where my grandparents came from," says Bernhardt. "I would like to be able to understand more than what I know now."

Ipana says teaching kids even a little of their ancestral tongue has deeper benefits than just being able to talk about the weather in Inuvialuktun. Some of her students have troubled backgrounds and come in to her class with behaviour problems.

"Once they do that, the behaviour and stuff like that just goes," she says. "I've never had any major behaviour problems in here."

"Sometimes, when they come in here, they're lost."

"I've seen many, many children leave this classroom different. They're not so sad any more. I try to give them a little bit of their world. Their true world."