



Doyon Foundation's

# Where Are Your Keys Training Evaluation Report

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with guidance from  
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August 2014



Well my uncle always told me that culture is nothing.  
It's the language that is important.  
The language carries the culture.  
He said you can express yourself better in your own  
Native language than you can in English.

– Participant in the November 2013 Where Are Your Keys Training



## Background

In November 2013, Doyon Foundation hosted a training on the Where Are Your Keys (WAYK) language learning system. WAYK founder, Evan Gardner, facilitated the training, which took place in Fairbanks. The intent behind this system of learning is to train people on how to quickly become fluent speakers of indigenous languages through the creation of a safe learning environment using interactive play, cooperative learning, and the use of sign language to stay in the target language and eliminate the use of English. Thirty people attended the training, coming from different Athabascan villages throughout the Doyon region, and representing the Denaakk'e (Koyukon), Dinjii Zhuh K'yaa (Gwich'in), Nee'aaneegn' (Upper Tanana), Han, Lower Tanana and Deg Xinag languages.

## Method

Of the 30 participants, 16 were purposely selected for interviews based on the following criteria: age (elder or non-elder), gender, fluency, and language group so that accurate feedback from the entire Interior region could be gathered. Of those 16 participants selected, 14 agreed to be interviewed. The following is a report of the interviews, which were conducted between mid-June to early-July 2014. Our aim was to find out how effective the language training was, what participants liked, what needs improvement, the importance of learning language, and their status as language learners and speakers.

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## Where Are Your Keys Language Learning System and Relevance to Indigenous Language Learning<sub>ii</sub>

The WAYK instructional approach is created to be a system for learning a skill or language. It is a collection of techniques designed to rapidly reach proficiency in a target language. This system is expansive since the technique collection is always growing and learners, or players, are encouraged to discover and integrate new ways that allow players to teach and learn faster. The system, in a sense, borrows, adopts or creates best practices and methods from any source that works for the learners in order to accelerate and make the learning easier, understandable and engaging. WAYK is constructed as a game and has a process for creating and maintaining a safe learning environment, which addresses issues of historical trauma that may frequently arise in working with endangered, indigenous languages. As a game, there is no separation of teachers and learners, like in a classroom. Rather, players are learners and, at the same time, are responsible to teach one another, which cultivates collective, cooperative learning. This instructional gaming approach of focused play drives the language acquisition process, aligns with Athabascan group values and cultivates a community of learners. WAYK builds upon a philosophy that is based on the belief that the process for learning language can be made increasingly faster and that fluency is easy, which sends a message of hope to the Athabascan people of the Doyon region, who have been repeatedly conveyed the message that Athabascan languages are some of the hardest languages to learn.

## Reasons for Learning Language

There were many reasons for why the participants were interested in learning or continuing to speak their Native language, but they all had a common theme. Some liked the sense of fulfillment and pride it brings them when their elders encouraged and commended them for taking it upon themselves to carry on their culture. One participant said, **I want to communicate with our elders and make them proud to hear me speaking. It's a good feeling.**

Others wanted to pass their knowledge onto their children and grandchildren so that their language and culture will live on through the ages. **I'm finding when I was younger and when I was taking classes and just from what I learned growing up, I was able to tell stories in our language to my children and I still want to be able to do that with my grandchildren.**

Participants also stressed the importance of their identity as Native people of this land and what it means to them to learn or speak their language and how it builds a stronger connection with their culture. **This is our identity. We are the people of the land and this is our land, our language, our culture, our people,** said one participant. Another said, **It is a part of who I am as an Athabascan woman born and raised here in Tanana, part of my culture, part of who I am as just a unique indigenous person.**

## Experience with Language

There were speakers of all skill levels within the group, most of them still learning their language but just as passionate as those who are fluent speakers. Some started at an early age learning from their grandmothers or older relatives who still spoke the language well. **I think I could remember when I was 2 and my mom gave me a bag of biscuits and told me to take it down to this old lady, 'take this down to your grandma and tell her mom sent you biscuits.'** All the way down I kept saying [in Han], **'mama, biscuit, mama, biscuit,'** so I wouldn't forget.

Others had their start later on in life, taking classes at the University of Alaska Fairbanks or participating in other language workshops. **I started language classes I think when I was 25, 26, and was able to do some really interesting things with the language. Since then I have taken audio classes over the phone with a linguist that was fluent in our language.**

There was one non-Native participant from outside of Alaska who found interest in learning the Native language of the area. **I've been doing it since I came to Alaska in 1968, and I was a 17-year-old Vista volunteer. And I heard the language on the street of the place where I was living in ... and then I'd taken a number of classes from Eliza Jones at the university distance delivery and different workshops.**



## Why Learning Language is Important

When asked why learning language is important to them, many expressed that the language must be kept alive to continue our Native culture and way of life.

But one participant explained it best saying, It's just a way to communicate better and it's a lot more meaningful to learn my language because things are more expressed, I think, more beautifully in our language.

Another participant, who is a distinguished fluent speaker of his language and a young elder in his own right, had this to say, It's a living language and in order to keep it alive we have to participate and speak the language, learn it, really push ourselves.

Others had the interest of the children's future in mind. I think it's really important that we learn our language because in the future it's gonna turn back to the old days, so I think the young generation should learn about it.

One participant expressed that it's important to learn language simply because it is our right as citizens of this free country to learn what we want to learn. We have the freedom of this great country that we're in to practice our teaching and practicing our way of life and especially teaching our language because we have that freedom. So we really should work together and learn as much as we can every day.

## How Language is Used

After the language training, some participants took the knowledge that they gathered, applied the WAYK system to their home communities and schools, and found amazing results in the process. For others, it was difficult to find time or people interested in hearing about what they learned from the training, but still did their best to relay as much knowledge as possible to those who were interested. When asked if they have used what they learned in the training in their own community, one participant said, Well in my household yes because I'm reinforcing it, but we have a lot of young people who just aren't exposed to it.

Another participant, who is an educator, had this to say, Even though I'm just a beginner, I was teaching Koyukon Athabascan language to high school kids at Effie Kokrine [Charter School] and I used the sign language and some of his [Evan Gardner's] techniques in my language class with my students and the kids remember that.

There were even a couple participants who collaborated and went as far as applying the WAYK system of learning to language training that they held. So in early August we have another six-day immersion class for Denaakk'e and another one in Gwich'in here in Anchorage, so we're planning to use the Where Are Your Keys method, one participant said.

Trying to teach anything, whether it is language or math or history, will definitely be a challenge, but it's plain to see that despite the obstacles these participants are dedicated to learning and teaching Native language no matter what stands in their way.



## Inspiration to Learn Language

The group participants found their inspiration for learning language in many different ways. Some found it through encouragement from elders. I got to meet a bunch of elders that I had not met before but they knew my family. They really created a sense of belonging and just embraced me and would say they were really proud of me and it really hooked me in to wanting to learn more and learn more about my language but also more about my culture.

Others wanted to step up and take the place of their older relatives who speak the language, so they can one day pass it on. I have only one aunt left who is a speaker of the language, fluent speaker, and none of my siblings speak, none of my cousins speak so that's what's making me learn the language.

One participant's inspiration came from what is a strong motivation when it comes to language loss: fear. When asked what motivates you to learn your language, this participant said simply, The danger of losing it, we're very close to losing it.

Another participant found his inspiration through the struggle that his grandmother endured during her time in boarding school. Grandma inspired me because she grew up being a passive speaker so her parents would speak to her in Denaakk'e and then they wanted her to respond in English because at the time it was seen as a disadvantage to speak our language ... she went away to a boarding school and met a whole bunch of other Native people there who had held onto their language ... so from there she went home when she was a teenager, like 16 or 17, and practiced with her family so she just relearned or learned how to speak fully for the first time. It kind of encouraged me to think that I could do the same thing, even though there are fewer speakers.

Overall, the participants had nothing but positive feedback when asked what they thought about the WAYK system. Many said that it was easy to learn as well as fun. The actual process in and of itself was a blast and so I think that the sign language aspect is just a great way to connect our whole body to our language and memorizing, and it was also so much fun ... you wanted to do it, you wanted to do more, and it was actually sticking.

Some of the participants who are educators found the WAYK approach to be effective in their own classrooms. When I went back to review, they knew it ... their body movements, their hand movements, and just having to move from one place to the next, to rotate, helped them remember the language better.

WAYK also brings together people who have common interests to work in groups, which was a highlight for many of the participants. I like it, I enjoyed it. I was happy to sit in a room with lots of different people who were interested in learning the language.

For others, a highlight was the instructor, Evan Gardner, and how well he facilitated the language training. One participant had this to say, I liked how the instructor kind of asked participants to help him with the demos and involved us and was actively trying to transfer the skills and just get the method out there, not really being proprietary or trying to, like, sell something. He just wants to facilitate language learning; that was good.

The participant shared that it can be difficult as an educator in the village to engage the community or students' families to participate in school activities, but with the WAYK method, this village school teacher has a new tool in her teaching arsenal. She said, It's just a great way to work with kids and families, which is so hard.

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## Other Methods

Some of the participants mentioned that the WAYK system is a good instructional approach, but that there are other methods that can be used to teach language as well. One participant summed it up best saying, I think Where Are you Keys is pretty good. It's not the only method but it's a good one. There isn't going to be one single method that does everything for everyone but we have to start catching up with some of the more recent methods.



## Next Steps

When asked what the participants would like to see done differently in the next language training, some said they didn't necessarily want to see anything different but had an answer similar to this, I want to continue to see elders in it. Many others, actually most of the interviewees, stressed the need to involve youth. The youngest participant there had this to say, Get more young people. I think I was the youngest person there. I'm 28. He added, So yeah, getting kids or younger high school or college-aged people there who have the attention span to sit there for a week and actually do that [learn language].

In addition, one of the elder participants said, We really need to include youth, we need them involved in everything, especially within the language, if we could speak our Native language to each other then let's do so.

Another idea for the next training is to provide a manual or handbook that covers the sign language included in the training. This former educator said, I think having part of it written down, you know, the sign language thing because I wrote them down, I took notes, but when I went back to my notes and tried to remember what the sign meant, I forgot. Just having it recorded so that we can look at it to review, something like that.

An elder participant, who is a language teacher in his village, had suggestions for "at home" techniques

that can be used to learn language. We could label everything around the house, the school, and build up on that. Start with the nouns and, of course, we have to start from the very beginning, basic questions and answers and build up our dialogue and conversations on that. He added, We need to use modern technology within our language teaching also.

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## Continued Involvement with Language Efforts

Participants were asked if they would like to be involved in Doyon Foundation language efforts in the future. All of them had a similar answer like, Of course, Yes and It would be my pleasure. Some of the participants wanted to express their gratitude toward Doyon Foundation for hosting the WAYK language training, saying:

I just was so grateful to be part of it and wish more people could have learned about it and been there, but it was such a great opportunity.

I'm just thankful to [have] been able to participate.

I'm glad that this work is going on ... keep up the good work.

Thank you for doing this for our future.

## Conclusion

From the feedback gathered from the participants, the training on the WAYK language learning system was an overall success. Key themes and feedback from participants are summarized below:

### Reasons for Learning Language

- Recognition and respect from elders
- Passing cultural knowledge on to children
- Instilling or affirming strong sense of identity

### Experience with Language

- Life-long speakers
- College classes and language workshops
- Raised around language speakers but not fluent themselves

### Why Learning Language is Important

- It's a better way to express yourself more accurately
- It's a living language, it's our responsibility to keep it alive
- The children are the future, they must learn it in order for it to survive
- It is our right to learn what we want

### How Language is Used

- Struggling to use it on a community level, but using it in household
- Introducing WAYK method in the school
- Participants collaborating and applying WAYK method to other workshops

### Inspiration to Learn Language

- Encouragement from elders
- Take place of older fluent speakers
- "The danger of losing it"
- The perseverance of their elders

### Where Are Your Keys Method to Learn Language

- Easy and fun to learn
- Easy to teach
- Produces great results
- Brings people together
- Knowledgeable, engaging instructor
- Great way to work with families

### Other Methods

- There are many other language learning methods, find what works best for you.

### Next Steps

- Continued elder involvement
- More youth involvement
- Written manual or handbook
- "At home" language learning techniques
- Incorporate technology and online language learning

It is now time to reverse the loss of Native languages and start revitalizing them. There are passionate and dedicated Native and non-Native people who are working hard to ensure that our Native language will continue to be spoken for generations to come. The Where Are Your Keys accelerated system of learning language greatly contributes to the language revitalization movement and will be an effective and relevant instructional approach for individuals and communities.

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i Intern position made available through a partnership with First Alaskans Institute Summer Internship Program.

ii Paraphrased from <http://www.wherereyourkeys.org/what-is-wayk.html>. Retrieved August 27, 2014 and integrating November 2013 WAYK training participant-observations from M.Chase, Doyon Foundation Language Revitalization Program Director.





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