

Language Revitalization through Arts: Evidence across Media Including Film, Music, and Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Arts-based initiatives have emerged as significant instruments for language revitalization across diverse communities and cultural contexts worldwide. This study examines the role of film, music, and theatre in supporting endangered and minority languages through culturally grounded and community-driven practices. Evidence from multiple regions demonstrates that artistic expression creates meaningful opportunities for language transmission, strengthens intergenerational communication, increases public awareness of language loss, and fosters community participation in revitalization efforts. The study explores the theoretical foundations of language revitalization, emphasizing the importance of local ownership, cultural continuity, and alignment with everyday social practices. It further analyzes methodological approaches used in evaluating arts-based revitalization programs and identifies key indicators of effectiveness across media forms. Film contributes to revitalization by enhancing language visibility, prestige, and outreach, while music reinforces cultural identity, emotional attachment, and socialization through multilingual and intergenerational engagement. Theatre provides interactive spaces for language learning, community participation, and performance-based transmission that strengthen both linguistic competence and cultural continuity. Comparative analysis reveals that these artistic modes operate in complementary ways: film expands audience reach, music facilitates repeated language use across social settings, and theatre promotes collective participation and immersive learning experiences. Despite increasing interest in arts-based revitalization, significant gaps remain in the evidence base, particularly regarding long-term outcomes, comparative assessment frameworks, and systematic evaluation criteria. The study argues that arts-based approaches represent flexible, culturally resonant, and sustainable mechanisms for revitalization that move beyond classroom-centered models of language instruction. Future research should focus on developing rigorous indicators of effectiveness, documenting community experiences across contexts, and strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration between language revitalization scholars, artists, educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: Language Revitalization, Arts-Based Interventions, Indigenous Languages, Cultural Transmission and Intergenerational Communication

INTRODUCTION

Similarities in artistic expression can promote inter-communal awareness regarding language loss, creating shared spaces, programs, events, and platforms [1]. Evidence from diverse 1 countries and communities shows that arts-based initiatives support language revitalization efforts in film, music, and theatre, blocking shift, increasing learner numbers, and altering usage patterns; community ownership, interactivity, and alignment with daily life enhance efficacy. The systematic review therefore addresses five questions: [1] How have arts-led initiatives contributed to knowledge about language loss and recovery? [2] What factors and strategies influence language recovery efforts across artistic modes? [1] How do the interrelationships between the arts affect these contributions? [2] What evidence supports claims of associated impact? [2] Which additional avenues warrant systematic investigation, and how might studies be designed to highlight promising resources and responses?

Theoretical Foundations of Language Revitalization

Without folk-conceived policies that capacitate communities to initiate and sustain action, and progressively shape revitalization into a means of advancing local and indigenous agenda, the various projects considered (spanning films, songs, and plays in eight endangered languages) would not have flourished sufficiently to provide foundational insights about arts-based forms of revitalization the significance of which transcends locality and medium [2]. Current revitalization theory articulates a broad conception of space time meaning rescaling that encompasses arts-based projects alongside other household-level initiatives that nonetheless antedate contemporaneous language-shift discussions; distinct projects resonate with and presumably enhance designated Saharan-crossroads, holy, transformational and (collectively) places refined, expanded accounted as advances that play leading roles on a geopolitical-continent scale and shape agenda suited to each community (see 2 for further examination)[2].

Methodological Considerations in Evidence Gathering

Language shift, maintenance, and revitalization represent fundamental phenomena operating at both macro- and micro-societal levels. The heightened attention to endangered and minority languages in recent decades has stimulated the emergence of a global language revitalization movement [3]. In the context of scarce resources and competing priorities, arts-based revitalization grounded in linguistically and culturally relevant programming warrants exploration as a sustainable, effective, and flexible intervention [1]. Arts-based approaches mobilize various media including film, music, and theatre capable of fostering engagement and enjoyment, which are essential ingredients for revitalization. Language revitalization has taken many forms across continents. While highly varied articulations and trajectories exist, the overarching aim remains the same: to promote, support, or strengthen minority or dying languages. The arts afford practical avenues for transmission to take place, avoiding the conventional didactic trap of classroom delivery [1]. They also create pleasurable opportunities for the language to be used, harnessing natural motivation and curiosity towards revitalization objectives. Arts-based interventions often resonate with the broader community beyond the immediate target of revitalization, so audiences may engage despite lacking proficiency in the language. Intergenerational transmission constitutes a perennial challenge across the language spectrum, from indigenous communities to immigrant world regions, so solutions relevant to one community may provide insight elsewhere [1]. A range of evidence-related activities is necessary to explore thoroughly the impact of the arts across communities and media. Theoretically grounded criteria for assessing revitalization have been proposed together with an extensive inventory of potential indicators. All arts domains feature in the survey, and multiple indicators emerge for most, enabling comprehensive comparative analysis [2]. Cross-media and cross-community synergies have been noted, while efforts have been made to review existing frameworks. Elements appearing central and therefore candidates for evidence capture have been identified, although not yet surveyed systematically [3].

Language Revitalization through Film

The role of film in language revitalization is unprecedented, yet its potential remains largely untapped. Films can add publicity and prestige, introduce narratives or discourses absent from a language's immaterial heritage, and reach very broad audiences [2]. Four aspects influence a film's contribution to revitalization: narrative strategies employed, representation of language, audience reach to potential speakers, and metrics of engagement established to assess impact. In-depth examination of multiple filmed outputs for specific languages and languages undergoing serious revitalization reveals two statements regarding film-based revitalization when combined with corresponding music- and theatre-related insights [4]. First, films are commonly used in language maintenance or status enhancement activities but rarely support revitalization. Where film content reflects lived community experience, dynamiques of the plot and dramatic tension are often compromised [5]. Second, successful language revitalization through film can occur after cessation of a language-acquisition phase. Analysis covers indigenous languages of Americas, Celtic languages of British Isles, a North African Berber language, and Pacific Island and East Asian languages. Individual chapters focused on five languages document outcomes with discernible adjustments in language use [6].

Language Revitalization through Music

Language is intimately linked to culture, both conceptually and in life practices and losing a language is synonymous with losing a whole way of living [1]. The arts are deeply embedded within and are a key means of transmission of a culture, or a whole way of living. A key objective of the arts is to share culture: language is used in the arts as a medium to express culturally significant messages and share culturally relevant information about the community linguistics, social structure, and history [7]. Communities wish to expand their audience when presenting arts in order to stimulate interest in language revitalization, with the aim to educate the public about the importance of the endangered language in a culturally relevant way. The arts have the potential to influence intergenerational language transmission through nostalgia and socialization [2]. The arts strengthen the bond between the language and the people who have been displaced from their position as legitimate speakers of the

language and culture concerned, and it also deepens the engagement within the revitalisation group, lending weight to claims that enhanced language and arts are jointly working in revitalisation contexts [1].

Language Revitalization through Theatre

Theatre can enrich language revitalization by offering various performance contexts, styles, and social settings that engage audiences and create opportunities for community involvement and sponsorship. Languages play important roles in theatrical activities [8]. The selective use of indigenous languages in performances can foster a sense of safety and facilitate audience engagement. Performances often encourage audience participation, thereby transmitting language and culture. Theatrical productions that include educational components can teach a language while entertaining siblings, cousins, and peers. Programs incorporating language pedagogy into original scripts have reportedly contributed to shifts in language learning and usage [2]. In some communities, theatre groups have engaged directly with playwrights to develop works that reflect deeply held values and dramatic effects [3]. In these productions, cast members perform dramatic works created by playwrights from the same cultural community, enabling both the language and underlying messages to resonate authentically with actual speakers. Presenters have noted that the language of scripts is often preserved across multiple performances, indicating successful intergenerational transmission and prompting younger audience members to examine language use with peers [9]. Individuals in these communities have also used materials created for theatre initiatives to launch dedicated revitalization efforts, some extending back into childhood, thereby reinforcing the influence of theatre on language use across multiple spheres [1].

Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

Arts-based language revitalization programs exist for the majority of Indigenous and minority communities that are engaged in language revitalization around the world: for many the arts have been an essential component of revitalization efforts, helping to increase the intergenerational transmission of endangered and/or minority languages [1]. Nonetheless, so far little is known about the role of arts-based language revitalization programs across communities and geographic regions or about the specific ways in which they advance revitalization goals. To close this gap, a systematic transdisciplinary review of arts-based language revitalization programs was therefore undertaken [2]. The review drew on a wide range of literature from both academic and non-academic sources; a clear analytical framework informed both the identification and the characterisation of programs; and indicators extracted from the theoretical literature on language revitalization guided the evaluation of programs and their outcomes [3]. Evidence was gathered on film, music, and theatre, the three art forms with most extensive documentation, and the relevant findings have been grouped into three substantive bodies of information also covering photography, the visual arts, and literature [3].

Gaps in Evidence and Future Research Directions

Evidence for the effectiveness of arts-based language revitalization remains limited. Research on the integration of language and arts, in particular film, music, and theatre began in the 2000s but has concentrated on language preservation and arts-based pedagogy rather than revitalization [2]. Attention to revitalization in Māori, Sámi, Scottish Gaelic, and other languages has increased, but studies seldom define the term or articulate strategies, and the role of arts remains unexamined. A review of full-length films in Māori, Scottish Gaelic, and Sámi highlights narrative strategies, the predominance of story over language, audience reach, and measures of elicited engagement [3]. Film emerges as a mechanism for transmission between generations, a transmitter of learning, a reinforcement of revitalization, and a vehicle for inter-generational, multi-user community participation. [2] The use of music in revitalization has attracted attention in contexts such as Māori, Scottish Gaelic, and Yiddish. Genres, multilingual repertoires, community involvement, transmission modes, and changes in language use are relevant factors [2]. Theatre in revitalization has drawn research attention in Māori and Scottish Gaelic, addressing contexts, audience engagement, in-script pedagogy, and shifts in learning and use. Comparative assessment of film, music, and theatre reveals distinct yet complementary contributions: film and theatre cultivate shared community experience; film broadens outreach and multiplies audience; music reinforces use across settings; and music and theatre facilitate interactivity [3]. Evaluative criteria for arts-based revitalization remain underexplored. Emerging priorities include establishing indicators of effectiveness; addressing implementation challenges; documenting obstacles, successes, and lessons; and developing targeted approaches for specific languages and circumstances [10].

CONCLUSION

Arts-based approaches to language revitalization demonstrate the powerful relationship between language, culture, and creative expression. Film, music, and theatre provide dynamic and culturally meaningful platforms through which endangered and minority languages can be transmitted, practiced, and celebrated within communities. Unlike narrowly instructional models of language teaching, the arts create emotionally engaging and socially interactive environments that motivate participation and strengthen cultural identity. The evidence reviewed in this study indicates that arts-based revitalization contributes to increased language visibility,

enhanced prestige, and stronger intergenerational transmission. Film expands the public presence of endangered languages and reaches audiences beyond immediate speaker communities. Music strengthens emotional attachment to language through performance, memory, and collective participation, while theatre creates immersive spaces for linguistic practice, storytelling, and cultural continuity. Together, these artistic forms cultivate shared community experiences that support both language learning and broader social cohesion. The findings also highlight the importance of community ownership, cultural relevance, and integration with everyday life in determining the success of revitalization initiatives. Programs grounded in local traditions, narratives, and participation are more likely to foster sustained engagement and meaningful language use. At the same time, the review reveals persistent gaps in research concerning long-term impact, comparative evaluation, and systematic evidence gathering. Existing studies often focus on preservation or pedagogy rather than revitalization itself, and many lack clearly articulated assessment frameworks. Future efforts in language revitalization should therefore prioritize interdisciplinary research, community-led strategies, and the development of robust evaluative indicators capable of measuring social, cultural, and linguistic outcomes across contexts. Policymakers, educators, artists, and cultural institutions must collaborate to support sustainable arts-based programming and ensure equitable access to creative revitalization initiatives. Ultimately, the arts are not merely supplementary tools in language revitalization; they are central mechanisms through which communities reclaim identity, preserve cultural memory, and sustain linguistic diversity for future generations.

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