Dr. Andrea Bear Nicholas, Chair in Native Studies at St. Thomas University, is in the initial stages of a three-year programme aimed at rescuing and promoting Maliseet-language fluency at the St. Mary’s First Nations.

This pilot programme on the value of adult immersion as a method of reversing language shift in a First Nations community recently received $243,000 funding over three years from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. It is being undertaken in partnership with the St. Mary’s First Nation. The co-applicant is Gina Brooks, a Councillor from St. Mary’s, and the collaborator is Donna Goodleaf, director of the Kanienkehaka Onkwawenna Raotitiohkwa Cultural Center at Kahnawake, which has a very successful adult immersion programme.

Bear Nicholas says that the early stages of the initiative will involve community planning, encouraging and training speakers of the language to become teachers in the program, capturing interviews with elders, preparing texts in the language, and studying other First Nations communities that have adult immersion programmes.

From this starting point, the team will launch the full-time immersion classes for adults in the second...
year, focusing first on fluency and later on literacy. The final stage of the project will evaluate the success of this programme in creating new speakers and increasing the level of language use in the community.

**Teaching In the Language**

Bear Nicholas says that one important goal is to create fluent speakers who can become pre-school and elementary teachers in the medium of Maliseet.

“It is not merely about teaching the language, but about teaching in the language. This is based on the principle that immersion is the fastest and most efficient way to learn a language. It is also based on the need to produce child speakers of Maliseet to ensure that the language will survive into the future,” said Bear Nicholas.

“Immersion education is our only hope especially since the core programmes for teaching First Nations languages in school have existed now for several decades, but have totally failed to create any new speakers.”

Recently, the Province of New Brunswick promised to improve its core language programme for high school but Bear Nicholas questions the effectiveness of such programmes, stressing instead the importance of an immersion approach.

“There are so few speakers of Maliseet under the age of 60 now that these core programmes may actually be hurting our language insofar as they take the few remaining fluent speakers away from developing and teaching in critically needed immersion programmes. If these speakers could be redirected to developing an immersion programme year-by-year, in only a few years we would have no need for the kind of core language teaching programs we now have in high schools since our young people would already be fluent.

Another important benefit of education in the medium of the mother tongue is that Indigenous students in such programs generally do better academically than their peers educated in dominant languages (i.e., English- or French-medium schools). These astounding results have been consistent worldwide, in places such as Papua New Guinea, Norway, Hawaii, and even Canada. With the shamefully high dropout rate among First Nations children in Canada (about 50%), the promise of academic advantages from immersion should make education authorities take it more seriously than they do, said Bear Nicholas.

Bear Nicholas says the purpose of this project is to emphasize that fluency will best be reached if it begins at the preschool level when it’s easiest for children to pick up a language. For now, however, her attention and that of the community at St. Mary’s, will be focused on producing more fluent adults in order to make a pre-school and elementary immersion program possible in the future.

**The Challenges**
Since the SSHRC grant will fund only the planning, preparation, and research aspects of the project, funding for the full adult immersion program will need to come from a variety of sources, both private and public. So far the Chief and Council at St. Mary’s have already shown enthusiastic support for the programme. Other than obtaining support from the province, Bear Nicholas says that the St. Mary’s community will now have to get behind the project to assist in the planning and preparation.

This could be challenging since most speakers of the language went through school at a time when they were punished severely for speaking their language. As a result of this indoctrination, most speakers did not speak the language to their children. Considering that schooling both on and off-reserve has been, and still is, entirely in the medium of English, this too, has had a destructive effect on the language. As well, it has also constituted a denial of the linguistic rights of First Nations children.

“It will now be our responsibility to demonstrate not only that learning in the medium of one’s mother tongue will not harm children, but also that it offers important benefits, both academically and linguistically.”

“If it’s possible anywhere, it’s going to be St. Mary’s. There are still many fluent elders there, and a fairly motivated middle-age group of people who were denied the opportunity to become fluent speakers. They really feel the loss, but until this project came along they have not had any real reason for hope. St. Mary’s is also in a relatively good financial situation. It has its own elementary school, and being fairly large should make it possible to gather a good working group to begin the planning.”

“It really is possible to have child speakers once again, but only if we get moving, and moving fast.”

Bear Nicholas has published on various topics including treaties, language, education, women’s issues, and Maliseet history. Since becoming Chair in 1993, she has worked with Dorothy Lazore, the founder of the first Native language immersion programme in Canada, to develop the first university based Native Language Immersion Teacher Training Program in North America, and she has become involved nationally in the struggle for Indigenous language rights.