



LESSON PLAN

Recording a Dying Language



RELATED FILM

Marie's Dictionary

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Recording a Dying Language

Key Idea

At a rapid rate, indigenous languages around the world are becoming endangered. Individuals, linguists, and organizations are developing ways to preserve and rehabilitate native languages and cultures.

Background

This film tells the story of Marie Wilcox, a Native American woman who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni and a dictionary she created that documents the language. The Wukchumni tribe is part of the broader Yokuts tribal group native to Central California; the tribe has yet to be recognized by the federal government. As many as 50,000 Yokuts lived in the region before European contact, but numbers have greatly diminished. Today, it is estimated that fewer than 200 Wukchumni remain.

UNESCO estimates that half of the 7,000 living languages spoken today will disappear if nothing is done to preserve them. In the United States, many Native American languages are struggling to survive—more than 130 of these languages are currently at risk, with 74 languages considered “critically endangered,” according to UNESCO. Each of these endangered languages preserve priceless cultural heritage.

Preserving the Wukchumni language has become Marie Wilcox’s life. She has spent more than seven years working on the dictionary. The language is now being taught to tribe members at a local career center, yet the language still struggles to gain traction and move beyond an elementary level. Through her hard work, Marie hopes that her dictionary will support the revitalization of the Wukchumni language for future generations.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.



Film: 9 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- English Language Arts
- Modern World Studies

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- History
- Sociology

THEMES

- Identity
- Preservation of a culture
- Endangered languages

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



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College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior and individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the film by telling students that they will be watching a film about a Native American woman who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni and that she is creating a dictionary of the Wukchumni language. Wukchumni is one of 7,000 languages spoken today in the world. Ask students to think about the most commonly spoken languages in the world by answering the following questions:

- What is the most commonly spoken language in the world?
Answer: Mandarin Chinese with 874 million speakers
- What is the second most commonly spoken language in the world?
Answer: Spanish with 414 million speakers
- What is the third most commonly spoken language in the world?
Answer: English with 341 million speakers*

Ask students if they are surprised to see Mandarin, Spanish, and English as the top three languages spoken in the world. These world languages are used beyond their places of origin. They are also spoken by children worldwide, a factor which ensures the vitality of a language. Endangered languages, like Wukchumni, will need future speakers to stay alive and active. Indigenous languages around the world are vanishing at a rapid rate.



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Ask students what relationship they have to their native language. Do they speak the first language of their parents or grandparents? How does language reveal characteristics of their culture? How does language provide a sense of identity? What if English disappeared? Would it be better if everyone spoke English? Why or why not?

*Dr. Dennis O'Neil, "[Language and Culture: An Introduction to Human Communication.](#)"
Palomar College, July 3, 2013.

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to note as they watch the film that Marie has devoted the last seven years writing the Wukchumni dictionary—a 156-page document. As a child, Marie spoke Wukchumni with her grandmother and much later she recorded words from memory to create the dictionary. While watching the film, students should observe how important it is for her to preserve the Wukchumni language. What would it be like to be Marie, the last speaker of a language? Ask students: Do you think it matters if a language is lost when no one speaks it?

Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Why is the dictionary important to Marie? Do you think archiving or preserving a dying native language is important? Why or why not?
- What would've happened if Marie hadn't created her dictionary? Do you think it matters?
- In the film, Marie's great-grandson Donovan has an easier time speaking Wukchumni with Marie than her daughter. Do you think young people are better able to learn a foreign language? Why or why not?
- What role does technology play in the film? How do you think it will affect the future of the Wukchumni language?



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- Oral storytelling has been a part of the human experience for thousands of years, providing a way for language to be remembered without documentation. Stories can come in the form of jokes, ghost stories, or songs, including the “Alphabet Song” or “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” “How We Got Our Hands” is an oral story told by Marie in the film. Do you recall an oral story from your childhood that made an impression on you? Why do you think we remember these stories so well?
- If you were Donovan, Marie’s great grandson, what would you do to make sure that Wukchumni would survive past the present century?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story:

1. A historical and cultural museum is creating an exhibit called “Vanishing Lan-guages.” If you had to convince the museum to feature the Wukchumni language as part of its exhibit, what would you include in your proposal? Why do you think her work should be recognized in the museum? How might Marie’s actions impact the future of the Wukchumni language? How could her actions provide a historical context of her people? (C3.D2.His.3.9-12)
2. In the film, we see how Donovan is learning and embracing the Wukchumni language by speaking with his great-grandmother Marie. How can youth become active participants in preserving endangered languages? In New Zealand, Maori-speakers created language nests where grandparents would teach toddlers in their native tongues. In Australia, the dying Kamilaroi language was used in a pop song that teenagers loved. What could be another innovative solution? (NGSS.HS-LS2-8)
3. Filmmaker Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee said that Marie’s story is important to document. “In America, there are many cultures, like the Wukchumni, whose stories, histories and families are connected through that language,” said Vaughan-Lee. As these languages



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become extinct, people can lose these connections. Why do you think it is important to preserve languages? What connections do you think could be lost when a language, like Wukchumni, goes extinct?
(CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)

Resources

[“One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages Story Map.”](#)

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

(Radio Interview) [“Preserving a Dying Language – Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee & Marie Wilcox.”](#) National Geographic Radio, September 27, 2014.

Peter K. Austin, ed. *One Thousand Languages: Living, Endangered and Lost* (California: University of California Press, 2008).

[“Language and Linguistics: A Special Report.”](#) National Science Foundation.

[“Disappearing Languages: Enduring Voices-Documenting the Planet’s Endangered Languages.”](#) National Geographic.