

Indigenous Language Revitalization in California

Grade Level: 3-5

Subjects

English language arts, History, Social studies

Themes

Cultural preservation, Identity, Language revitalization, Resilience

What Students Will Uncover

The significance of language and Indigenous language vitality

Essential Questions

- How is language alive?
- What is the importance of language preservation?
- How are language and place interconnected?

Lesson Overview

Students watch a film about a Native American woman, Marie Wilcox, who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni. For seven years, she created a dictionary in order to keep her language and culture alive. Students engage in learning activities to explore the importance and meaning of language, language loss, language revitalization efforts, and changes which take place in communities over time.



RELATED STORY

Marie's Dictionary

Length: 10 min.

Materials

[Online access to the film *Marie's Dictionary*](#)

Equipment for showing the film

[Endangered Languages Map](#)

[Google Earth](#) or map

[Note-taking sheet](#) (Included)

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

SEL Competencies

NCSS Themes

CCSS ELA Standards

Key Issue

At a rapid rate, Indigenous languages around the world are becoming endangered. Individuals, linguists, and organizations are developing ways to celebrate, revitalize, and preserve Native languages and cultures.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Explain what it means for a language to be endangered.
- Understand the importance of Indigenous language vitality.
- Recognize people in society whose language and cultural heritage are at risk.

Background

Putting the Film in Context

Intended for the educator, this section provides information about the story as well as an overview of language loss and Indigenous language revitalization efforts.

Marie's Dictionary tells the story of Marie Wilcox, a Native American woman who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni. She created a dictionary in order to keep the Wukchumni language alive. The Wukchumni are a non-federally recognized tribe that are part of the broader Yokuts tribal group native to Central California. 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.

Preserving the Wukchumni language has become Marie Wilcox's life. To date, Marie has spent more than thirteen 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.

In the United States, many Native American languages are struggling to survive—with 75 languages considered “critically endangered,” according to UNESCO.¹ Endangered languages preserve priceless cultural heritage. According to the UN, it is estimated that half of the world’s 7,000 living languages will disappear by 2100 if nothing is done to preserve them.²

From declared war on tribal nations, genocide, and forced assimilation, to more hidden systems of oppression, centuries of European colonization have contributed to widespread loss of Indigenous life and culture, including language. Read [“The World’s Indigenous Languages in Context”](#) for an overview of the causes of language loss as well as language revitalization efforts taking place worldwide.

¹“Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.” UNESCO.

²“2019 | International Year of Indigenous Languages.” UN.

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Engage students with this exercise before introducing the story.

Ask students to consider their own language(s) with the following questions:

1. What language(s) do you speak? Who speaks more than one language?
2. What language(s) do your parents or grandparents speak?
3. How does your language allow you to express who you are?
4. Share the following quote from Leanne Hinton. How might a language reflect “great verbal art”?

“Language... allows members of a group to communicate with each other in great detail and to express and create great verbal art.”

—Linguist Leanne Hinton, Ph.D.

Explain to students that there are about 7,000 languages spoken around the world and that this number decreases each year. Ask students, “What do you think it means for something to be *endangered*?” Write student responses on the board. Guide students to discuss the meaning of the word *endangered*. Ask students if they think

a language could ever go “dormant,” which is another way to say that a language is asleep or not actively spoken.

Engaging with the Story

Before watching the film, introduce students to Marie Wilcox and to the place where she lives.

1. Tell students that they will watch a film which takes place in Visalia, California, a city located in the Central Valley. Use [Google Earth](#) or a map to show students this location. Next, show students a picture of Marie at the beginning of the film *Marie’s Dictionary*. Have students make predictions on what they think the film is about. Write these predictions on the board.
2. Introduce the story. Tell students that they will watch a short film called *Marie’s Dictionary*. The film is about Marie Wilcox, a Native American woman who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni. For seven years, she worked on a dictionary to keep her language alive. Let students know that they will see subtitles at the bottom of the screen. Explain to students that they will need to read the subtitles as well as listen. Teachers may also read the subtitles aloud to the class. Ask students to think about the following question while watching the film: If languages are living, can they also be asleep?

Delving Deeper: Learning Activities

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the story. (Note for educators: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Watch the film *Marie’s Dictionary*. (10 minutes)
2. After viewing, go back through the film and pause it at the noted times. Ask the following questions:
 - 0:14** - What do you think it means to be a fluent speaker of a language?
 - 3:53** - How do you think Marie feels about being the last speaker of Wukchumni? Why do you think Marie started to write down the words of her language?
 - 7:15** - Why do you think Marie gets emotional when she talks about her language?
 - 8:25** - How are Jennifer and Donovan helping to preserve the Wukchumni language?

8:52 - Why do you think the story—"How We Got Our Hands"—is included in the film? What would happen to this story if the Wukchumni language was no longer spoken?

3. Look at students' predictions that were made before watching the film. Ask students to reflect on their predictions. What did they predict correctly and incorrectly? What information did they use to make their decisions?
4. As a whole class, explore the [endangered languages map](#) from the Endangered Languages Project. Make sure students understand the key, which includes the following categories: At Risk, Endangered, Severely Endangered, Dormant, Awakening, and Vitality Unknown.
5. Look at the [Yokuts language dot in Central California](#). This location is where Marie Wilcox lives. Explain that Wukchumni is one of the dialects of the Yokuts language family.
6. Have students individually select one dot on the map to report on. They will need to know the location and how many people currently speak the language in that place.
7. Have students share and discuss their findings with a partner.
8. As a whole group, find a dot on the endangered languages map close to where you live. Look at the vitality of that language. Are there any revitalization efforts taking place?
9. Ask students: How is language shaped by where you live?
10. Have students reflect on how and why communities change over time.
11. Ask students: Why might it be important to preserve a language? What do you think would happen if a language is dormant, or no longer spoken? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Reflecting & Projecting

Challenge students to consider the story's wider implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view. (Note for educators: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Students will write a letter to Marie Wilcox. Ask students to respond to the following questions in their letters:
 - What part of Marie's story had the most impact on you? Why?
 - How might Marie's dictionary impact her culture for future generations?

- What questions or comments do you have for Marie?
 - Do you consider Marie a hero?
 - Share responses as a class.
2. Ask students: How would you describe or define a hero? What are the qualities of a hero? Ask students to think of a hero in their lives. How has this person helped others or stood up for something they believe in?

What's Happening Now

Provide students with follow-up activities and resources to explore current updates.

1. Five years after filming *Marie's Dictionary*, the director returned to visit Marie at her home in Visalia, California and made the film *Wukchumni* (15 minutes). He learned that today, Jennifer is regularly teaching Wukchumni classes to members of the community. Ask students to consider the following questions while watching the film:
 - What has changed since Marie created the Wukchumni dictionary?
 - Describe how the family combines learning the Wukchumni language along with traditional Wukchumni skills. Why might it be important for Marie's great-great-grandson Oliver, who is featured in the film, to speak Wukchumni?
2. Divide students into small groups. Give each group one of the following films to watch: *Karuk* (21 minutes), *Tolowa Dee-ni'* (17 minutes), or *Recording Kawaiisu* (16 minutes). Each story documents Native families and communities in California and their efforts to revitalize their languages. Ask students to discuss the following questions in their groups:
 - What are some ways in which the Native speakers and community members are preserving and revitalizing their languages? How are children involved in these language activities?
 - What are some similarities between the story they selected and the film *Marie's Dictionary*?
 - Ask students to share their responses with the class.



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you become an advocate for Indigenous peoples?

Marie Wilcox is taking action and advocating for the future of her language and culture.

1. Tell students they will be learning about the Indigenous peoples who are the original stewards of the land on which they live.
2. Visit the web resource, [Native Land](#), with students. Explain to students that this online platform, created and maintained by Natives, is a place to learn more about Indigenous tribes, territories, and languages.
3. Enter your city and state.
4. Whose land are you on? Learn the name of the local Indigenous tribe, territory, and language.
5. Explore the websites and related maps with students. What did you learn?

SDG 4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.* **4.7:** *Sustainable development and global citizenship.*

Companion Texts

The following texts highlight Native voices and are recommended by teachers who are currently using Marie's Dictionary in their classrooms:

- *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorrell
- *Shi-shi-etko* by Nicola Campbell
- *When Turtles Grew Feathers: A Folktale from the Choctaw Nation* by Tim Tingle (Choctaw)

Resources

- [Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival](#). (Organization)
- ["One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages Story Map."](#) Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.
- ["The Catalogue of the Endangered Languages."](#) University of Hawaii at Mānoa. (PDF)
- [Endangered Languages Project](#). (Website)
- [Native Land Digital](#). (Website)
- ["The Land You Live On: Getting to Know Native Land, An Education Guide by Native Land."](#) (Teacher's Guide, PDF)
- ["Celebrating Indigenous Languages."](#) (Google Earth Voyager Story)
- ["Exploring Indigenous Language Vitality."](#) Global Oneness Project. (Lesson Plan)
- ["2019 | International Year of Indigenous Languages."](#) UN. (Website)

Connections to National Curriculum Standards & Frameworks

SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.
- **Relationship skills.** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS) Themes

- **Theme 1: Culture.** Cultures are dynamic and change over time. What is culture?
- **Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change.** Studying the past makes it possible for us to understand the human story across time. What are our personal roots and how can they be viewed as part of human history?
- **Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments.** Learners develop an understanding of spatial perspectives, and examine changes in the relationship between peoples, places and environments. Students identify the key social, economic and cultural characteristics of populations in different locations as they expand their knowledge of diverse peoples and places.

Common Core English Language Arts

- **CCSS.ELA-SL.3.1-5.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-W.3.4.** With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.
- **CCSS.ELA-W.4.4-5.4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Note-taking Sheet

Use this note-taking sheet to write down your observations, insights, and evidence from the story. Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, use the film, photo essay, or essay to justify your reasoning.

Story Name and Location	Observations and Insights	Evidence from the Story

We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

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