

Cultural Heritage: Recording a Native Language Dictionary

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects

Anthropology, English language arts, History, Modern world studies, Sociology

Themes

Cultural preservation, Identity, Language revitalization, Resilience

What Students Will Uncover

The significance of language and Indigenous language vitality

Essential Questions

- Why does it matter if a language becomes dormant?
- What are the connections between language, landscape, family, and cultural heritage?
- Why is Indigenous language vitality important?

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 experiences to explore the cultural element of language and consider the impacts of language loss and language revitalization efforts on Native communities.



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](#)

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

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

SEL Competencies

C3 Framework

CCSS ELA Standards

NGSS 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.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the importance of Indigenous language revitalization.
- Illustrate how language is an integral part of culture.
- 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.

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. With her hard work, Marie hopes that her dictionary will support the revitalization of the Wukchumni language for future generations.

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— with 75 languages considered “critically endangered,” according to UNESCO.¹ Endangered languages preserve priceless cultural heritage.

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. According to the UN, it is estimated that half of the world’s languages will disappear by 2100 if nothing is done to preserve them.²

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

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

From the Filmmaker

In this filmmaker’s statement from director Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, learn more about Marie Wilcox and the intentions and choices made in the film Marie’s Dictionary. Intended for both educators and students.

Throughout the United States, many Native American languages are struggling to survive. According to Unesco, more than 130 of these languages are currently at risk, with 75 languages considered “critically endangered.” These languages preserve priceless cultural heritage, and some hold unexpected value—nuances in these languages convey unparalleled knowledge of the natural world. Many of these at-risk languages are found in my home state of California. Now for some, only a few fluent speakers remain.

This short documentary tells the story of Marie Wilcox, the last fluent speaker of the Wukchumni language, and the dictionary she has created. I met her through the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, an organization that encourages the revival of languages like Wukchumni. Through training and mentorship, it has supported Ms. Wilcox’s work for several years. Ms. Wilcox’s tribe, the Wukchumni, is not recognized by the federal government. It is part of the broader Yokuts tribal group native to Central California. Before European contact, as many as 50,000 Yokuts lived in the region, but those numbers have steadily diminished. Today, it is estimated that fewer than 200 Wukchumni remain.

Like most Native Americans, the Wukchumni did not write their language until

recently. Although several linguists documented the grammar of the Wukchumni language in the 20th century, Ms. Wilcox’s dictionary is the longest work of its kind. Ms. Wilcox has also recorded an oral version of the dictionary, including traditional Wukchumni stories like the parable, “How We Got Our Hands,” featured in the film. The pronunciation of the language, including intricate accents, will be preserved, which will assist future learners of the language.

Although several linguists documented the grammar of the Wukchumni language in the 20th century, Ms. Wilcox’s dictionary is the longest work of its kind.

For Ms. Wilcox, the Wukchumni language has become her life. She spent more than seven years working on the dictionary and she continues to refine and update the text. Through her hard work and dedication, she has created a document that will support the revitalization of the Wukchumni language for decades to come. And Ms. Wilcox isn’t slowing down. Along with her daughter Jennifer Malone, she travels to conferences throughout California and meets other tribes who also struggle with language loss.

Although Wukchumni is now being taught to tribe members at a local career center, the language still struggles to gain traction and move beyond a rudimentary level. Few seem able to dedicate the time needed to learn Wukchumni and become fluent speakers. Without additional resources and interest, I fear the language, in any meaningful form, may soon exist only in Ms. Wilcox’s dictionary.

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Before watching the film, explore this exercise with students to learn about Indigenous languages and territories in North America.

1. Ask students: Do you know what Indigenous territory you live on?
2. Tell students they will use a map from [Native Land Digital](#) to learn the Indigenous history and geography of where they live. (Note: a teacher’s guide, [The Land You Live On](#), explains how to use the website and provides additional activities.)
3. Explain to students that the intention of this online platform, created and

maintained by Natives, is to “plant a seed of consciousness in users that will cause them to think more critically and comprehensively about Indigenous history, especially where they live...”

4. Ask students to type in their location to learn the territory they live on. Explore the website further to discover more about the Indigenous territory, language, and culture. Ask students to share their responses with the class.
5. Share the following quote from Polina Shulbaeva. How might the language(s) you speak connect you to your culture, your lands, and your family?

“A language tells who you are. It is connected with your culture, with your lands, with your family.”

Polina Shulbaeva, Selkup, Narym Dialect, Tomsk Oblast, Russia.

Engaging with the Story

Before watching the film, introduce students to the story and provide specific tasks of observation.

1. Introduce the film by telling students they will watch a story about Marie Wilcox, a Native American woman who is the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni, her Native language. She created a dictionary to keep her language alive. Direct students to note as they watch the film that Marie has devoted seven years to writing the Wukchumni dictionary—a 156-page document. As a child, Marie spoke Wukchumni with her grandmother, and much later, recorded words from memory to create the dictionary.
2. Let students know that there are subtitles at the bottom of the screen in some parts of the film. As students watch the film, ask them to observe how important it is for Marie to preserve the Wukchumni language. What do you think it would be like to be Marie, the last speaker of her language?
3. Watch the film *Marie’s Dictionary*. (10 minutes)

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

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.)

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

- Why do you think the dictionary is important to Marie? Do you think archiving or preserving a Native language is important? Why or why not?
- How are Marie’s daughter Jennifer and her great-grandson Donovan helping to preserve Wukchumni?
- What role does technology play in the film? Do you think it might affect the future of the Wukchumni language? If so, how?
- If you were Donovan what would you do to make sure that Wukchumni survives past the present century?
- Oral storytelling has been a part of the human experience for thousands of years, providing a way for language to be remembered without documentation. “How We Got Our Hands” is an oral story told by Marie in the film. Which cultural values and traditions are reflected in oral storytelling?
- “The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. Just as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems,” wrote Indigenous language revitalization advocate and linguist Leanne Hinton. What kind of human knowledge do you think she is referring to? How do you think Marie would respond to this question?
- Cultural historian Larry Swalley from the Lakota tribe said, “The language, the whole culture of the Lakota, comes from the song of our heartbeat. It’s not something that can quickly be put into words. It’s a feeling, it’s a prayer, it’s a thought, it’s an emotion—all of these things are in the language.” Many Indigenous phrases and songs do not directly translate into English or other languages. How might language revitalization and preservation efforts contribute to the story of humanity?

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the story’s wider implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.

1. Joy Harjo, member of the Mvskoke Nation, is the first Native American United States Poet Laureate from 2019-2020. In her memoir *Crazy Brave*, she wrote, “I am one of the oldest living relatives of our family line. My generation is now the door to memory. That is why I am remembering.” What do you think this quote means? In 1-2 paragraphs, describe the importance and significance of memory. Using evidence from the film, describe Marie Wilcox’s experience with memory and “remembering.” In what ways is the role of memory powerful for the past, present, and future? Describe an example from your own life.

2. Explore the Indigenous languages of the world through Google Earth’s Voyager Story, “[Celebrating Indigenous Languages](#).” Click “explore” to discover Indigenous language speakers sharing their favorite phrases, greetings, and songs. Describe how the natural world is important to the Indigenous speakers represented in the Google Earth tour. [Wikuki Kingi](#) of New Zealand said, “Speaking te reo Māori connects me to my relatives, to the land, river and ocean, and it can take me to another time and place.” How might seeing the land, river, and ocean as your relative be an important perspective?
3. Ricky Nelson, also known as N8V ACE, is a Diné (Navajo) musician originally from Red Mesa, Arizona. He calls his music “cultural rap.” His song, “[Native Rap](#)” features him rapping in Diné. In an interview, he describes that his music “could be used as a tool to inspire the youth to use our Diné language.” [Watch the video](#). In what ways do you think music can function to support Indigenous language preservation, revitalization, and activism?

What’s Happening Now

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

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 Jennifer is regularly teaching Wukchumni classes to members of the community. After watching the film, ask students to write a paragraph in response to the following questions:
 - What has changed since Marie created the Wukchumni dictionary?
 - How has the revitalization and preservation of Wukchumni become a collective effort across multiple generations?
2. Divide students into groups. Assign each group (or have students choose) one of the following films to watch: *Karuk* (21 minutes), *Tolowa Dee-ni’* (17 minutes), or *Recording Kawaiisu* (16 minutes). Each story, like *Marie’s Dictionary*, documents Native families and communities in California and their efforts to revitalize their languages. Ask students to discuss the following questions in their groups and prepare to share their responses with the class:
 - Describe the language revitalization efforts in each film. How is each community or family revitalizing their language? Make a list of the similarities and differences between the revitalization efforts documented in *Marie’s Dictionary* and the selected film—*Karuk*, *Tolowa Dee-ni’*, or *Recording Kawaiisu*.



Take Action

with the 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. Visit (or revisit) the web resource [Native Land](#). According to Native Land's teaching resource, [The Land You Live On](#), "Looking at the land from an Indigenous perspective means understanding the land is a living being; this understanding both gives us insight into and increases our awareness of how we treat and interact with the land."
2. Learn the name of the Indigenous territory on which you live. What is the Native language spoken in this territory?
3. Research to discover two words in the Native language.
4. Share the information you learned with three people—at home, school, or in your community—to better inform others about the Indigenous peoples and territory on which you live. Share your experience with the class.

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

Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using Marie's Dictionary in their classrooms.

- *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese
- "Unexpected Pursuits: Embracing My Indigeneity and Creativity," essay by Christine Day in *Our Stories, Our Voices: 21 YA Authors Get Real About Injustice, Empowerment, and Growing Up Female in America Unexpected Pursuits: Embracing My Indigeneity and Creativity* edited by Amy Reed
- *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native American Women's Writings of North America*, edited Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird

Resources

- [Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival](#). (Organization)
- ["One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages Story Map."](#) Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.
- Peter K. Austin, ed. *One Thousand Languages: Living, Endangered and Lost* (California: University of California Press, 2008). [Terralingua: An Introduction to Biocultural Diversity](#). (PDF)
- [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages](#). (Website)
- ["Celebrating Indigenous Languages."](#) (Google Earth Voyager Story)
- [Native Land Digital](#). (Website)
- Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale, eds., *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001).
- ["2019 | International Year of Indigenous Languages."](#) UN. (Website)
- ["Exploring Indigenous Language Vitality."](#) Global Oneness Project. (Lesson Plan)
- N8V ACE. ["Native Rap."](#) YouTube video, 3:28. July 5, 2016. (Youtube)

Connections to National Curriculum Standards & Frameworks

SEL Competencies Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (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.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- **C3.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.
- **C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12.** Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

Common Core English Language Arts

- **CCSS.ELA-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.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

Next Generation Science Standards.

- **NGSS.HS-LS2-8.** Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior and individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

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?

info@globalonenessproject.org

globalonenessproject.org

[twitter/@goproject](https://twitter.com/goproject)

global oneness project

Stories and lessons for growing minds. Free films, photo essays, and curricula using stories as a pedagogical tool.

2020 Global Oneness Project LLC