

LESSON PLAN

The Importance of Indigenous Language Revitalization

Summary

Grade Level

6-8

Companion Film

[Marie's Dictionary](#) by Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee

Film Length

10 minutes

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 does language impact one's identity and culture?
- How is language an essential element in keeping a culture alive?

- Why is Indigenous language revitalization 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 activities to explore the cultural element of language and to consider the impacts of language loss and language revitalization efforts on Native communities.

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:

- Illustrate how language is an integral element of culture.
- Understand the importance of Indigenous language revitalization.
- Recognize people in society whose language and cultural heritage are at risk.

Materials

- Online access to the film [Marie's Dictionary](#)
- Equipment for showing the film
- [Google Earth](#) or map
- Poster paper
- [Note-taking sheet](#)

Standards & Frameworks

- SEL Competencies
- NCSS Themes
- CCSS ELA Standards

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

Engage students with this exercise before introducing the story.

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

- What language(s) do you speak?
- What language(s) do your parents and grandparents speak?
- How does the language(s) you speak allow you to express who you are?
- Share the following quote from Polina Shulbaeva. How might the language(s) you speak connect you with 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.

Explain to students that there are about 7,000 known languages spoken around the world and that this number decreases each year. Indigenous peoples speak three-quarters of these languages.

1. Ask students: What does the word *culture* mean? Write responses on the board.
2. Have students discuss their own cultures and begin naming different aspects of those cultures including food, arts, crafts, stories, songs, dances, and languages.
3. Ask students: How would you rank the aspects of culture in order of importance to keep a culture alive? Have students complete the ranking in groups.
4. As a whole group, discuss what students ranked as most important and why. Explain to students that without language, many of the other important aspects of culture and traditions have the potential to lose meaning and might go dormant, or become inactive, altogether.

Engaging with the Story

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

1. 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.

Marie lives in Visalia, California, located in the Central Valley. Use [Google Earth](#) or a map to show students this location. As they watch the film, direct students to note that for seven years, Marie created a Wukchumni dictionary. 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. Explain to students that they will need to read those as well as listen. 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?

Delving Deeper: Learning Activities

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the story.

1. Give students a note-taking sheet and ask them to write down their thoughts and questions while watching the film. One alternative to regular note-taking is to have students think of one word or a short phrase which depicts what they are thinking and feeling as they view the film.
2. Before viewing the film, ask students: What do you think it means to be a fluent speaker of a language?
3. Watch the film [Marie's Dictionary](#) (10 minutes).
4. After viewing the film, ask students the following questions:
 - How do you think Marie feels about her language? Why do you think the dictionary is important to her?
 - How are Marie's daughter Jennifer and her great-grandson Donovan helping to preserve the Wukchumni language?
 - 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?
 - "Stories are for people what water is for plants," said Chicasaw writer and poet Linda Hogan. In what ways are stories meaningful? Why do you think Marie's story is meaningful?
 - How would you feel about being the last known speaker of your language? Would you feel a sense of responsibility to preserve your language? Why or why not?
5. Put four pieces of poster paper around the room. Write the following themes at the top of the poster papers: Empathy, Preservation, Language, and Culture. Ask students to write their notes (or one-word descriptions and/or phrases) about the film on each poster, pairing words and phrases that are relevant to each theme. Discuss the notes students took.

6. 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 & 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?
 - Share responses as a class.
2. Ask students to choose an aspect of their own language(s) for further exploration. How does their family use language to document parts of their culture? Is there a traditional recipe, craft, family story or phrase that they could share? Students can ask family members at home and bring back ideas to class. Some examples might include one of grandma’s well-loved recipes, a family song, or a story that wasn’t written down. Ask students: What actions can you take to help preserve your own family traditions? (1-2 paragraphs)

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 UN Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 4 - Quality Education

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. Ask students: Do you know the Indigenous territory that 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 in which 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.

[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:

- *I Am Not a Number* by Dr. Jenny Kay Dupuis and Kathy Kacer

- *Indian No More* by Charlene Willing McManis with Traci Sorrell
- *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese

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).
- Edited by Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas and Gillian Wigglesworth. *The World of Indigenous Languages: Politics, Pedagogies and Prospects for Language Reclamation*. (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).
- Leanne Hinton, Ph.D. *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families*. (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013).
- "[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 and 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 State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4-8.4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1-8.1.** Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1.A-8.1A.** Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.

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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