

# Lesson: Building Respect for Indigenous Languages

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## Summary:

This lesson can be completed after reading the message from Elder Harry Bone and Elder Florence Paynter (page 4) and “Why our Languages and Traditions Matter More Than Ever” by Richard Van Camp (page 10) in the publication *Truth Before Reconciliation: Listening to Survivors*.

This lesson guides students towards learning a few words or phrases of a local Indigenous language(s) as recommended by the Elders and Van Camp. Students will discuss language revitalization and explore diverse ways that language conveys meaning. Then they will learn to speak a few words in the language of the Indigenous territory where they live, or where their school is located.

In this lesson students will:

- build their understanding of language diversity among Indigenous Peoples in Canada
- develop an appreciation for Indigenous languages
- learn about the importance of revitalizing language

## Background information:

When attending Residential Schools, Indigenous children were forbidden to speak their traditional languages. These languages existed for thousands of years and were connected to their local lands. The lands we now call Canada held the languages of the Inuit (who have five dialects), the Métis (Michif), and a large diversity of First Nations languages. People in one First Nation territory can speak the same language but have varying dialects depending on where they live or the group they belong to. Some First Nations groups developed a sign language so they could communicate with other Nations for trading.

Learning to speak a local language (and dialect) can involve some research. It is important to work with the local Indigenous community or communities whenever possible. In some cases, permission may be needed to speak the language or to guide when and where you may speak it, if you are not a member of that community or Nation. As Indigenous cultures tend to be holistic in nature, all things are connected. Language is interconnected with the land and with the People and their culture.

Cultural appropriation is the use of a people's belongings (culture) without permission, so it is important to do things in a good way. If the teaching of the local language is shared online, then it should be all right to speak it within the school setting.

Also, keep in mind the cultural safety of Indigenous students within classes. Do not call on (local) Indigenous students to help with speaking the language. Many are not able to or may feel uncomfortable sharing. Allow them to come forward if they so choose. If there are other students who know how to speak an Indigenous language from outside the local territory and are willing to share, you may encourage them to do so. Remember, the main objective is for Indigenous Peoples to revitalize their languages, so you and your students should lend support to whatever Indigenous languages are within the classroom or school spaces.

It is important to know there are some English and French words that do not have a direct translation into Indigenous languages. For instance, some First Nations languages do not have a word for "sorry," as it was the expectation for the person to demonstrate they were sorry rather than to merely say they were sorry. In some First Nations languages, there can be many words for an English or French word. To say "hello" could be a different word depending on who you are greeting or whether you are greeting more than one person.

### **Lesson:**

1. Discuss with students the importance of language and some of the ways that language conveys meaning. You may explore some of the points below:
  - **Information.** This can include instructions or explanations on how to do something such as build, operate or repair an item; directions for where to go or be, such as to get to a destination or to attend an event; ethical values and cultural protocols (manners, behaviors); other knowledges that are believed to be true (in Western ways of being this is referred to as facts).
  - **Feelings.** Language can communicate an emotional state or reaction, either directly or indirectly. For example, "I don't want to ride the roller coaster" could indicate a feeling of anxiety or fear.
  - **Knowledge.** Ways of knowing, and coming to know, can be shared through written or oral accounts.
  - **Culture.** Identity, beliefs, and worldviews can be expressed through songs, stories and names (including names of places).

- **Relationships.** Language reveals how we relate to and connect with the world around us. We may use different words to describe things based on our perspective. For example, in English or French, there may be a place named after a person such as the city of Vancouver, but in an Indigenous language, the place may be known by a story or an event.
2. Ask students if they, or their families, speak more than one language. Write the names of all the languages spoken on the board. Invite students to reflect on their experience of translating between languages. Ask: *"Why is it difficult to directly translate something from one language to another?"* (Languages often do not have the same words or ideas making it hard to translate. The original meaning of words or sentences can be changed through the act of translation, hence the phrase "lost in translation." Share some examples like *joie de vivre*, *zeitgeist* and *sobremesa*).
  3. Explain to your class that First Nations, Métis and Inuit children who attended Residential Schools or Day Schools were forbidden from speaking their traditional language. This meant that they often didn't learn their language, or the knowledge and meaning it contained, from their parents and grandparents. According to the 2016 census, there are more than seventy Indigenous languages spoken in Canada today, although many languages have very few speakers and are in danger of being forgotten. There are many efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages, including courses, policies, and cultural products such as books and music.
  4. Tell students that traditional Indigenous languages in what is now Canada were very different from European languages. For example, some languages had very few nouns, as they tended to place less emphasis on things and more on relationships, thus using more verbs.

Ask students: *"Can you imagine speaking English or French without using any nouns?"* Have them try to speak to a partner without using nouns. You can give them a topic such as describing their favourite subject in school, favourite sport, or a good movie.

Today many Indigenous languages in what is now Canada have changed to suit English or French language construction, as well as contemporary cultural, social, economic, or political ideas. Therefore, these languages may contain more nouns than they did 500 years ago.

5. Ask students:

*"Why is language revitalization important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples?"* Some conversation points are noted below and can be scaffolded depending on the age of your students.

- Language revitalization helps Indigenous Peoples heal from the trauma of having their languages taken from them as a result of Residential Schools.
  - Language revitalization is a collective responsibility for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action.
  - Indigenous languages inherently transmit culture, so Indigenous people gain cultural knowledge and connections, and become more deeply rooted in their worldview.
  - Language connects Indigenous people to their Ancestors and their histories; all Canadians can gain a fuller understanding of the past and our interactions and relationships with each other.
  - Traditional Indigenous knowledge passed on through language, particularly with respect to the land and environment, can provide solutions to today's problems.
  - Indigenous Peoples can gain greater autonomy and self-determination.
6. Have students research their local territory and the Indigenous languages that are spoken where they live or go to school. You may use the following resources:
- Native-land.ca <https://native-land.ca/>
  - First Voices <https://www.firstvoices.com/>
  - Honouring Indigenous Languages <http://copahabitat.ca/sites/default/files/language-tool.pdf>
  - Indigenous Languages - Learning and Teaching Resources <https://www.noslangues-ourlanguages.gc.ca/en/ressources-resources/autochtones-aboriginals/apprentissage-learning-eng>

Have students research other resources for learning a local Indigenous language, as well as any preservation and revitalization efforts. They may consult websites, news stories, YouTube, local libraries, universities, and especially the Indigenous Nations' government, friendship centre or other community resources. Compile all the resources and initiatives into a digital or physical scrapbook.

7. If possible, invite an Elder or community member to the classroom to speak about language preservation and revitalization efforts. Have students learn a few words or phrases in the speaker's language that they can share, such as "hello" or "welcome." In addition to a traditional offering in accordance with the local culture, have students create a thank-you card using the local community's word for "thank you."

## **Extensions:**

- Have the class choose seven to thirteen words that are used regularly (examples: goodbye, sorry, yes, no, sit, stand, walk, mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather, children/child, the sun, moon, and stars, numbers to five or ten, common animals). Create posters for the classroom and school illustrating the words and their meanings.
- The class could inquire into learning more about Indigenous languages in Canada: How many Indigenous languages are in Canada? What are language families and where can they be found? Where are the language and Nation connections into the U.S.? (For example, the Dene Peoples live in Northern Canada but also in southern Alberta and the southern United States.)
- Observe National Indigenous Languages Day on March 31 with a special celebration, presentation or film screening.
- The United Nations declared 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Have students research what this means and how Canada has committed to advance the Decade's objectives. Have students develop and deliver presentations to other classrooms about the history and importance of language revitalization and the ways that students as individuals can support the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

## **Conclusion**

This lesson can be expanded for students to explore other words or phrases. Students and staff should be encouraged to use the words on a regular basis so they become natural to them, especially if there are students and staff who are from the local territory. This can help these individuals to begin or continue to revitalize their language, making this process a part of reconciliation.