Purpose: Students will discover the important use of First Nations languages in the First and Second World Wars after debating the importance of preserving Aboriginal languages.

Instructional method(s): Class debate, reflective journaling.

Estimated time: 75 minutes

Activity:

1. Begin the class by dividing the class into two groups. Have the groups sit on opposite sides of the classroom. Ask each group to have a conversation about languages based on the following questions, which should be written on the front board for students to reference.
   a. What is language?
   b. Why is language important?
   c. What is the significance of different languages?
   d. What does language say about the culture or society that uses it?
   e. Should there only be one universal language? Why or why not?
   f. Should we work to preserve languages that are at risk of being lost? Why or why not?

2. After students have had 10 to 15 minutes to discuss, tell them that they will be participating in a debate. Assign one half of the class the position that language is only important because it allows us to communicate, and for that reason, one universal language should be adopted by everyone. The other side will argue that language is part of our cultural diversity and must be preserved. Allow students 10 to 15 more minutes to prepare the following:
   a. An opening argument
   b. 2 to 3 speaking points
   c. 3 to 5 rebuttal points (by anticipating and predicting what the opponent will argue)
   d. A closing argument

3. Moderate the debate. Have the class collectively declare the winner based on the quality of arguments presented.

4. Explain the importance of language by using an American example. Tell students that during the First and Second World Wars the use of a few Native American languages became the key to successful communication.

Communication during wartime is extremely important. It enables vital information to be passed between troops or from key decision makers to those who follow through on an order. The quality or effectiveness of an army’s communication can determine not only the winning or losing of individual battles, but ultimately, winning or losing of the war itself. For that reason, the enemy is always trying to listen.

The risk of the enemy overhearing information from the other side has led to the creation of many coding and encryption systems for both verbal and written communications. Even on the home front, civilians were instructed to keep any information the enemy may be able to use out of letters and out of conversation.

During World War One, the Germans successfully tapped telephone communication lines, deciphered codes and captured runners who were delivering messages. The Allied troops needed to find a better way at communicating, which they achieved when a captain in the American 142nd Infantry Regiment came across two Choctaw soldiers conversing in their native tongue.

The captain recognized the potential in utilizing their unique language. Conveniently, there were other Choctaw speaking soldiers at company headquarters that allowed them to communicate over their field telephone. Messages were sent in Choctaw and quickly translated into English by the soldiers sending and receiving the messages.

There were extensive benefits of using Native American languages, which were largely unknown since only the Native American tribes spoke them, and populations of these groups were usually less than 20,000. Additionally, most Native American languages were not written down, and in the rare instance that they were, writings were not distributed beyond the local area of the tribe. The translation was also nearly instantaneous since those relaying the messages spoke both the native dialect and English.

Within hours of the discovery Choctaw speakers were dispatched to strategic positions. Over the two World Wars dozens of Native American soldiers, including the well-known Navajo Code Talkers, were able to use their language in a unique and significant way during World War II. It is believed that none of the Native American languages used as code were ever broken by the enemy.
5. Tell students that language is a crucial part of any culture. It goes beyond just the ability to communicate—it shows the values of a culture. For example, it is often said that the Inuit People have one hundred words to describe snow. While this has been largely contested by linguists since anthropologist Franz Boas made the claim, after studying the people of Baffin Island more than one hundred years ago, there is truth to it.

Snow and ice have a great impact on the day-to-day life of the Inuit who live in Canada’s far north. Although many of the words are not unique terms, they use many derivatives and descriptions to explain the subtle differences and distinctions between the many types of snow and ice. For example, “Siku” is the general word used to say “ice” but a book entitled Siku: Knowing Our Ice details no less than 93 variations of ice including:

a. Quatsaulittuq: ice that breaks after its strength has been tested with a harpoon 

b. Kiviniq: a depression in shore ice caused by the weight of the water that passed over and accumulated on its surface during the tide 

c. Iniruvik: ice that cracked because of tide changes and that cold weather refroze

6. Now that students have considered the purpose, meaning and value of language, tell students that many of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit languages and dialects are at risk. The 2011 National Household Survey, conducted by the Government of Canada, found that only one in six Aboriginal people can conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. The highest number of Aboriginal language speakers were Inuit, with Inuktitut being the most common language spoken among them.

7. Ask students to think about their experiences with language at school, in their homes, in the community and, if they have had the chance to travel, around the world. Students should also reflect on all of the aspects of language they have examined over the course of the lesson. Have students write a reflective journal entry or a few paragraphs on how they use language and what it means to them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the lesson plans, share these resources with your students:

- BBC News Magazine “World War One: The original code talkers” by Denise Winterman. 18 May 2014

- History in the Headlines “World War 1’s Native American Code Talkers” by Jesse Greenspan. 29 May 2014
  www.history.com/news/world-war-is-native-american-code-talkers

- “Code Talkers—heroes of both World Wars” by Maranda Flynn. 20 November 2012
  www.army.mil/article/91583/Code_Talkers__heroes_of_both_World_Wars/

- The Canadian Encyclopedia “Inuit Words for Snow and Ice.”