



Endangered Indigenous Languages

Subjects Social Studies

Grades 4-7

Brief Description

Listen to the video of Ixchel, a Mayan woman speaking in *Mam*, her native language. Students will analyze the sounds and other clues to imagine what she is talking about, and then learn about endangered indigenous languages. They may do further research on an endangered indigenous language in their community or province.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Develop an appreciation for linguistic diversity
- Recognize there are many ways to communicate
- Think about language acquisition and the value of heritage language preservation
- Research an endangered indigenous language in their community or province

Keywords

Mam, endangered languages, Maya, Guatemala

Materials Needed

- access to the *¡Hola Canada! The Latin-American Collections at the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* web site
- speakers on the computer
- access to the Internet for further research on endangered languages

Lesson

Have the students listen to the video of “Ixchel: A Guatemalan Weaver Speaks in Mam”. Ixchel introduces herself and describes her immigration to Canada in *Mam*, her native language. Ixchel is a Mayan woman who grew up in Guatemala before she moved to Canada. Mam is her first language, Spanish her second language, and now she is speaking English, her third language. You can hear her speaking English in the video “Ixchel: A Guatemalan Weaver”. Learning another language is a way to learn another perspective on the world. The more languages people speak, the more options they have in how they view the world and the more versatile their responses to new circumstances may be.

Ask the students to free-associate words that come to their minds as they hear the Mam language spoken. Ask them to analyze the sounds and other clues. Can they tell what Ixchel is talking about just from her tone and body language? Are there any words they recognize? Are there any sounds she uses that are not found in English?

Advanced students may want to try to write out the sounds they hear in Mam. They could try writing a sentence using IPA, the International Phonetic Alphabet. IPA is a standardized system on phonetic notation used by linguists and others to accurately represent spoken sounds. It has over one hundred base symbols and 55 modifiers. They can find a simplified version of IPA and directions on how to insert IPA symbols using their computers at <http://www.yourdictionary.com/library/ipa.html>.

Mam is spoken by about 150,000 people. Is that a lot of people compared to French, English or Spanish? Would you expect to find television programming or movies produced in Mam? If mass media are not produced in Mam, or other small languages, do you think the language has a chance at survival in today's world? If Mam died out as a language, what would be missing from our world?

Like endangered animals, languages need to be conserved and preserved. What activities do you think are most effective in passing on heritage languages? How can we encourage children to learn the languages of their grandparents?

What languages are spoken at the homes of the students in the class? Are any of these languages endangered?

Optional activity

Search the web site database for images of Mayan language inscriptions. Try to trace or draw them yourself on paper. What images are easy to understand? Which are more difficult? Can you guess what they might mean? Mesoamerican myths and traditions contain a rich diversity of complex characters and stories. Some of the images in the database refer to these stories.

Evaluation

Students are graded on their participation in the discussion and the accuracy of their use of database search software and an atlas. Have they understood that cultural differences are expressed in language?

Background information on Mayan languages

Several groups of Mayan languages are spoken today in Guatemala, Mexico and Belize. Their common ancestor language, Proto-Mayan, was spoken over 5000 years ago, and is still spoken today. Unlike many North and South American indigenous languages, Mayan languages were written as well as oral. The beautiful inscriptions on Mayan buildings and texts have provided a key to scholars, enabling them to decipher the ancient Mayan languages.

You probably know at least one word in a Mayan language. The Classic Mayan deity of storms is Jun Raqan. As the word was borrowed by Spanish, then English-speaking people, this name came to be 'hurricane'.

Mam is spoken by about 150,000 people in the departments of Cuchumatanes and San Marcos.