

Archives on the Arctic: Connecting to Global Issues with Primary Sources

Lesson Plan: Inuktitut: Learning about Inuit Language

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Description:

The focus of this lesson for secondary students is the Inuit language, Inuktitut. It is intended to be used as an introduction to larger unit about the people of Canada's Arctic and/or to explore the history of Inuktitut and Inuit educational policies in greater depth. In either approach students will consider the importance of language to a culture, discover the unique features of Inuktitut, and understand the political strategies that are being used in Canada's Inuit communities to preserve their native language while successfully functioning in the larger context of an English and French-speaking nation.

Grade Level(s):

This lesson is designed for students in Grades 11 and 12 but may also be adapted for classrooms with younger students. This lesson is also useful as a model for teacher candidates learning about language and literacy.

Subject(s):

History/Social Science, English Language Arts

Duration:

This lesson could be completed in a 90 min. block or, as a mini-unit, in 3-5 periods—depending on how many of the resources are selected for use and whether or not the extension activities discussed on Page 4 are included.

Goals:

Since language binds people of any culture, one goal of this lesson is for students to appreciate that the Inuit have traditionally relied on an oral culture and only recently developed written versions of their language. Two distinct approaches have been developed: one uses the Roman alphabet (abc) and the other uses Pitman shorthand syllabics (ᐅᐅᐅᐅ) in which symbols represent the sounds. Another goal is for students to recognize how changes to the traditional way of Inuit life have posed serious threats to the survival of their language and culture. Efforts to restore Inuktitut to its central place in Inuit life are central to the educational, social and public policies being pursued by contemporary Inuit leaders. A third goal is for students to be introduced to resources and methods for historical inquiry and analysis using primary source documents.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Examine a historic photograph from the Library of Congress depicting an Inuit man reading an English publication (1913)
- Examine two current maps from the Library of Congress to locate the circumpolar Arctic and Nunavut, Canada.
- Listen to an Inuit speaker teach several common words and phrases in Inuktitut to a visitor to Nunavut who wants to be able to use and compare the two forms of writing the language.
- Study a chart of Inuit syllabics to discover patterns in the way the symbols are used to represent sounds.
- Consider challenges to the preservation of Inuktitut and research strategies that are being used to support the continued use of the language and the education of young people in the language.

Standards:

This lesson addresses the following Common Core Literacy standards:

1. Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6–12:
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (Grades 11-12) - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., quantitative data, video, multimedia) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
2. Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6–12:
Research to Build and Present Knowledge (Grades 11-12) - Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
3. Speaking and Listening Standards 6–12:
Comprehension and Collaboration (Grades 11-12) - Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

Background Information:

The following information provides a quick general overview (excerpted from: <http://www.nunavuttourism.com>).

Nunavut means our land in Inuktitut. Welcome to our land! It is big, ancient, beautiful and new.

Welcome to the youngest territory of Canada, settled over four thousand years ago, recognized as distinctly Canadian in 1999.

Geography

The first impression many visitors have of Nunavut is that of its vast expanses of pristine wilderness. Comprising most of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, about one fifth of the total landmass of the nation, Nunavut is the size of Western Europe. It is the largest yet least populated of all the provinces and territories in Canada, with a total area of 2,093,190 square kilometers (808,190 square miles) and a population of approximately 33,330 people — 84 percent Inuit. With one person for every 65 square kilometers (25 square miles) of arctic wonderland, the feeling of gigantic natural space is absolutely true! Nunavut can only be accessed by air and sea. You cannot get here by car and Nunavut communities are not linked together by highway. Travelling between Nunavut communities is usually done by aircraft or cruise ship, but in some cases it is possible to reach another community by snowmobile, dogsled expedition or powerboat. Nunavut is home to the northernmost permanently inhabited place in the world, Alert, a military installation which is only 817 kilometers (508 miles) from the North Pole.

Mother Tongue

There are four official languages in Nunavut — Inuktitut, English, French and Inuinnaqtun, which is a variant of the Inuit language spoken in the westernmost communities of the territory. Inuktitut is the mother tongue of 70 percent of the people living in Nunavut, English is the first language of 27 percent of the population, French and Inuinnaqtun about one and a half percent each.

Inuit Culture

The Inuktitut word '*Inuit*' means 'human beings' or 'the people.' This name refers to the indigenous people of Nunavut, as well as those living in the Northwest Territories, Greenland and Alaska.

The traditional lifestyle of the Inuit is remarkably adapted to extreme arctic conditions. Their essential skills for survival have always been hunting, fishing and trapping. Agriculture was never possible in the enormous tundra landscapes and icy coasts stretching across the top of the world from Siberia to Greenland. (The ancient Norse of Greenland tried agriculture and failed.) Hunting is at the core of Inuit culture. Some Europeans and Americans still refer to the Inuit as Eskimos, but the Inuit people consider that term to be pejorative. European colonists and explorers adopted this old Algonquin name for the Inuit, but the correct Inuktitut term is 'Inuit' — the name they call themselves, the plural word for all the Inuit people. The proper singular Inuktitut term for an individual Inuit person is 'Inuk.'

For additional background information, it is recommended that teachers read the following 7-page article and possibly also assigning it as homework for students:

Inuktitut the Inuit Language - <http://www.k12studycanada.org/files/Inuktitut.pdf>

Written by Nadine Fabbi, Assistant Director, Canadian Studies Center, Pacific Northwest NRC on Canada
Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington
Last Updated: March 2003

Primary Source Documents/Resources:

1. Photo – This historical image entitled “Eskimo reading Saturday Evening Post in the arctic region” is intended for use as an opener or “hook” to capture students’ attention and focuses the lesson on language and literacy in Canada’s Arctic <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004666467/resource>
2. Map of Arctic - This current map of the circumpolar north will help students understand the geographic area referred to as the Arctic. <http://www.loc.gov/item/2002620323>
3. Map of Canada - This current map of Canada will help students locate Nunavut as well other Canadian provinces and territories with Arctic regions <http://www.loc.gov/item/99463846>
4. Streaming Video - This 2-minute CBC video gives a nice overview of the state of Inuktitut education <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Embedded-Only/News/Canada/North/ID/2006942834>
5. Streaming Video - This 2-minute video produced by Nunavut Tourism allows students to both hear words spoken and see the sounds represented in both the Roman alphabet and syllabic written forms. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qzRFAE90Ys&list=PL-t75yVyZiYmPf94Olnk8Rd1zzptXeP5o>

Materials:

- Depending upon available technology and printing resources, teachers may want to provide hard copies of the photographs and maps used in this lesson or project images on a screen using a document camera or an LCD projector.
- Each student should be given a hard copy document displaying the symbols of the Inuktitut alphabet. See <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~inuit/syllabics.htm>.
- Teachers may want to use the primary source analysis tool offered by the Library of Congress for examining photographs: http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photos_and_Prints.pdf
- The guiding questions provided by the Library of Congress in their primary source analysis tool for examining maps will be particularly helpful for leading a discussion, especially since a map of the circumpolar North may be unfamiliar to students. http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Maps.pdf

Procedures:

1. Without sharing the title or any identifying details about the image project the item from the Library of Congress referred to as “Eskimo reading the Saturday Evening Post Arctic Region” (Document/Resource 1).
 - Have students consider the image for a moment and then ask them to write down 3 questions that they would like to ask about the photograph.
 - Then have them share these questions with a partner or in small group.
 - Next each pairing or group can share with the whole class one of their top questions – ask each subsequent group not to duplicate previous questions.
 - Once a representative sampling of questions has been shared tell students the source information available about the photograph.
2. Next ask students to examine the map of the Arctic (Document/Resource 2) and encourage students generate questions along the lines of who lives in these areas? What is their lifestyle like?
3. Then use the map of Canada (Document/Resource 3) to help focus and orient students to Canada’s Arctic noting the territory of Nunavut and making the connection with the lesson’s focus on Inuit language.
4. As an introduction to the video about the challenges facing the preservation of Inuktitut as a living language, ask students to reflect on and share their own experiences with languages (Document/Resource 4). It is not uncommon for language use to differ from one generation to the next – especially if the family has immigrated to another country where a different language is spoken. Connecting students to the experience of how languages can get “lost” will help students focus on core issues in the video. Sample questions to use include:

- How many of you speak more than one language?
- Did you learn this language at home or in school?
- Do you read and write in that language as well?
- Do you have relatives or community members who speak a language that you do not?
- Is it hard for you to learn or use the language of these family members?
- What challenges have you faced or your elders faced in trying to learn or preserve the use of a language other than English in your family/community?
- What might be lost when the use of a language is discontinued? (universal culminating question)

Now, show the 2-minute CBC video and ask students to note the challenges the people of Nunavut are facing in their efforts to preserve the use of Inuktitut.

5. After the video, make a list of the challenges they noted. Compare and contrast this information with the ideas shared about students' own family language use. What is different and similar?
6. Show the Nunavut Tourism video (Document/Resource 5) and instruct students to listen to the sounds of the Inuktitut language and notice the two different writing systems used to represent them. Students may react to the unfamiliarity of the language by noting that it is hard. Remind them that they sounds of the language are probably familiar to Inuit youth. Discuss what challenges might having two writing system pose?

Evaluation/Assessment:

Working in small groups, students can complete one of three tasks to demonstrate their understanding of the lesson and their ability to use knowledge they learned in today's the lesson.

1. Create a Venn diagram about the challenges facing an immigrant trying to preserve a family language while learning English in school and those facing an Inuit child who is learning Inuktitut at home and school. Note that it should be made clear that the Inuit are not immigrants but, in fact, indigenous peoples living in their homeland.
2. Prepare a brief presentation that would introduce the Inuktitut language and the people who speak it.
3. Research materials available for learning Inuktitut – for example online courses, books written in Inuktitut, etc.- OR research other native North American languages that are in danger of being lost.

Wrap Up:

As a class, revisit the photograph that opened this lesson “Eskimo reading Saturday Evening Post in the arctic region.” What new questions do students have about this photograph? What new understandings about Inuit culture? Are their reactions to this picture different now? How might students explain what they have learned to a friend who saw this picture for the first time?

Possible Extensions:

1. Teachers may wish to “flip” their classroom by having students watch an excellent 25-minute video at home about the challenges facing the Inuit in Canada as they seek to educate the young in their own language. Greenland is used as an example of how another Inuit cultures have responded to similar challenges.

Inuit Education: To save a language. What is the mother tongue of a child raised by English television and Inuktitut-speaking grandparents? <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Digital+Archives/Society/Education/ID/1790741707/>

2. The challenges of operating library in a remote area as well developing the habit of reading books in a culture that is traditionally an oral is explored in this interesting article:

Nunavut Talk about Remote! Leonard Kniffel

Source: American Libraries, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Mar., 2004), pp. 32-35 Stable URL: www.jstor.org/stable/25649098

3. Another fascinating video is a 13-minute seminar on learning Inuktitut for adults that demonstrates the dynamics of the language: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EeWDFDRSD4&list=PL-t75yVyZYmPf94Olnk8Rd1zzptXeP5o>