

Activity Idea

NATIVE LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

Recommended for Adults

Languages are linked with cultural identity. The descriptions, sentence structures, and rules that allow a group of people to communicate reflect the important values of its society. Like all cultural aspects, language can be influenced by outside forces. New words can be adopted, and at times a language may become obsolete for various reasons like genocide, living with a dominant group with a different language, and lack of use.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, American and Canadian governments were in favor of assimilating Native and First Nation peoples to mainstream culture. From the 1860s to the 1960s, Native children in the United States were removed from their families and taken to boarding schools. They were forbidden to speak their languages or to participate in their cultural practices. If they did, they were so severely punished that some children died (National American Boarding School Healing Coalition, <https://tinyurl.com/ueoqmu4>). Many Native peoples and historians identify boarding schools as one of the main reasons for multigenerational trauma and for loss of language.

There are over 6,900 living languages today but it is estimated that 80% of these may vanish in the next century. There were hundreds of Native languages in North America, however today only 194 Native languages still spoken, with more than half of these languages being endangered or likely to be extinct (Linguistic Society of America, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4wrtjyo>). Native peoples in the United States and other Indigenous groups around the world are trying to reclaim their languages through language preservation techniques. These techniques include community language classes, talking dictionaries, special programs, and technology. A few of these resources are accessible online. Learn and explore more about Native languages in the United States with the resources below.

Native Languages:

Cherokee (Mango)

<https://tinyurl.com/yavcqqcb>

Potawatomi (Mango)

<https://tinyurl.com/ybe223r5>

**Books:**

L.A.S.: A Practical Conversation Course, Vol. 1 (Lakota) (Hoopla)

<https://tinyurl.com/y92a524w>

Pimsleur Ojibwe Level 1 (Hoopla)

<https://tinyurl.com/y97qkqcs>

Code Talkers: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII (OverDrive)

<https://tinyurl.com/ycgh9bhe>

Native American Boarding Schools (OverDrive)

<https://tinyurl.com/yalhn15v>

Films:

Marie's Dictionary (Kanopy)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9af8mez>

Language Healers (Kanopy)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9uupqhn>

First Speakers: Restoring the Ojibwe Language (PBS)

<https://tinyurl.com/y7w92glv>

Our Spirits Don't Speak English – Indian Boarding Schools (Kanopy)

This documentary includes sensitive content such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

<https://tinyurl.com/yc8o72lm>

Articles:

How Many Languages Are There in the World? (Linguistic Society of America website)

<https://tinyurl.com/mkb8l5d>

Endangered Languages (Linguistic Society of America website)

<https://tinyurl.com/odjxr6r>

American Indian boarding schools: What went wrong? What is going right? (Journal of American Indian Education)

<https://tinyurl.com/yc7ugwal>

Other Resources:

Our Mother Tongues

Language revitalization project of Native languages in the United States. Includes audiovisual.

<https://tinyurl.com/ydd8m9r4>



Talking Dictionary for Siletz Dee-Ni, a language spoken by Siletz tribes whose ancestral lands are in northern California and Washington.

<https://tinyurl.com/ybnduysy>

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition

<https://tinyurl.com/ueoqmu4>

Spark an Idea!

Create an account with Mango, free with LA County Library (<https://tinyurl.com/ybe223r5>), and learn a greeting in Cherokee or Potawatomi.