Lesson 1: Aboriginal Communities and Language Groups

Generalization
There are similarities and differences in the way people in Canadian communities meet their linguistic needs.

Rationale
Students will be introduced to the Aboriginal languages spoken throughout Canada and within Alberta. It is important that students realize that many other languages are spoken and that language is an important aspect of community.

Objectives

Knowledge
• Recognize where the 11 Aboriginal language groups are located in Canada
• Understand how language is important to a community and to individuals
• Understand how language is an important element of communication

Skills
• Enhance map reading, comprehension, and reproductions skills
• Note key concepts in regards to language and community
• Practice individual listening skills

Attitude
• Appreciate the differences and similarities amongst Aboriginal groups across Canada
• Show respect and understanding of the importance of languages that differ from the student’s own

Teacher Information
(adapted from Laura Okemaw’s Bush Land People Teacher’s Guide)

The exact number of Aboriginal languages spoken at the time of European contact is unknown. This is for a number of reasons. Aboriginal People did not communicate at this time using letters or numbers, and early European traders often kept biased accounts of interactions with Aboriginal People. It is unlikely that they would have been able to record language dialects at that point in history. Many Aboriginal languages exist in a wide range of similar dialects, making classification a confusing and subjective task. However, at present time it is widely accepted that
approximately 53 distinct Aboriginal languages survive in Canada today. Many of these are related and are subsequently grouped into 11 language families.

The Algoquian language family is reportedly the largest. It consists of language groups such as Cree, Blackfoot, Algonquin and Micmac. Each individual language group can have separate dialects, as is the case with Cree, a language containing five dialects. The Algonquian language family geographically covers a large portion of Southern Alberta with the exception of the Micmac language group. It is important to note that only Cree, Ojibwa and Inuktitut are considered to be flourishing.

Métis people have their own language known as Michif, a combination of Cree and French.

*Introductory Activity*
Using an overhead reproduction of the Language Families Map from the Student Zone Section begin a discussion about Aboriginal languages. Make sure to reiterate some of the information presented in the Teacher Information section.

*Main Lesson*
On a blank map of Canada, have students use the overhead as a guide to fill in and label their own maps with the different language groups in Canada.

On a blank map of Alberta, have students label (draw and designate) all of the languages spoken throughout the province.

On separate pieces of paper write the following facts about language and distribute them to the students. Ask each student to read their specific fact aloud (some may require teacher assistance).

- In the early days, Aboriginal People did not have a written form of their language. History was passed down orally through stories and legends
- Western Canada contains the most diversity of Aboriginal languages
- Language is an important part of individual and group identity
- The Cree language is considered to be one of the few Aboriginal languages that is flourishing
- The Algonquian language family is the largest in Canada
- The Cree language contains five dialects
- There are 11 major language families
• Of all the provinces, Saskatchewan boasts the highest number of people speaking an Aboriginal language

• British Columbia has the largest number of different Aboriginal languages spoken

• Michif is a language spoken by Métis people

• Michif is a mix of Cree and French

• Inuktitut is the language spoken by Inuit people in northern communities of Canada

• Alberta contains four major Aboriginal language families

• Six of the 11 language families are found only in British Columbia

What new facts did the students learn about Aboriginal languages? What other languages do the students in the classroom speak? Do any of their family members speak another language? Do students think it is important to speak another language? Why does speaking the same language make a people feel they are part of a community? Do the students want to learn another language someday?

Supplementary Lesson
Invite an Aboriginal person into the classroom that speaks an Aboriginal language. Ask them to discuss the language and why it is important to them and their community.