

Tribal Talk: Creating Language to Understand Communication

Subjects: U.S. History, Psychology, Communication / Speech, ELA

Grade Levels: 7–12 (easily adjustable)

Time: 45–70 minutes

Group Size: 4–5 students per group

Materials: Paper, pens/markers, optional index cards; timer; (optional) “phrase sheet” handouts

Teacher Instructions

Lesson Overview

Students work in small “tribes” to invent an original language with **made-up words only** (no English, no Spanish, no “gibberish English”). After building a small shared vocabulary, tribes circulate to attempt communication with other tribes. The debrief focuses on how communication works, why misunderstandings happen, and how language shapes culture and thought.

Learning Targets

Students will be able to:

- Explain why communication is difficult without shared symbols and meanings
- Demonstrate how vocabulary and shared rules enable cooperation
- Reflect on how language can influence thinking, culture, and what a group notices or values
- Practice collaboration, negotiation, and nonverbal communication strategies

Standards-Friendly Skills (broad)

- Collaboration and group problem-solving
 - Speaking and listening / interpersonal communication
 - Analyzing how language shapes meaning and culture
 - Reflection and evidence-based discussion
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Safety & Success Notes (Read Before Starting)

- No mocking, offensive sounds, or stereotypes of real cultures/languages.
 - All words must be **invented**.
 - Groups may use gestures to support meaning, but **they must still create spoken phrases**.
 - The goal is not to “win”—it’s to experience how meaning is built.
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Setup (2–3 minutes)

1. Put students in groups of **4–5**.
 2. Assign each group a “Tribe Name” (or have them create one).
 3. Explain:
They will create a language with rules and key phrases, then use it to communicate with other tribes.
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Part 1: Create Your Tribe Language (15–20 minutes)

Rules for Language Creation

- **No real words from any known language.**
- Words must be completely made up.
- Decide pronunciation and consistency (everyone in the group must say it the same way).
- Create at least **two nonverbal gestures** that help meaning (optional but recommended).

Required Phrases & Words

Each tribe must create:

A. Greetings & Introductions

1. Greeting (“Hello / Welcome”)
2. “My name is ____.”
3. “What is your name?”

B. Identity & Intent

4. “Who are you?”
5. “What are you doing?”
6. “What do you want?”

C. Emotion / Conflict

7. A phrase indicating frustration/anger (example meaning: “Stop!” / “I’m angry!” / “This is not working!”)

D. Basic Needs

8. Word/phrase for hungry
9. Word/phrase for sleep/tired

E. Power / Leadership

10. “Take me to your leader.”

Optional Add-On Vocabulary (if time)

- friend / enemy
 - trade / share
 - yes / no
 - help / danger
 - food / water
 - tomorrow / later
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Student Group Language Sheet (Copy/Paste Handout)

TRIBE NAME: _____

Language Rule: (Example: nouns always end in “-ka,” questions rise in tone, etc.)

1) Greeting: _____

2) My name is ____: _____

3) What is your name?: _____

4) Who are you?: _____

5) What are you doing?: _____

6) What do you want?: _____

7) Frustrated/Angry phrase: _____

(What it means) _____

8) Hungry: _____

9) Sleep/Tired: _____

10) Take me to your leader: _____

Optional words:

Yes _____ No _____ Friend _____ Help _____ Trade/Share _____

Gestures (optional):

Gesture 1: _____ meaning _____

Gesture 2: _____ meaning _____

Part 2: Tribal Communication Challenge (15–25 minutes)

How It Works

1. Half the groups stay at their tables as the “home tribe.”
2. The other half sends **2 ambassadors** to visit another tribe for **3 minutes**.
3. Ambassadors must try to communicate using their tribe language and gestures.
4. Rotate. Repeat 2–3 rounds so tribes interact with multiple groups.

Optional Challenge Goals (pick 1)

- Trade for a resource (paperclip, token, or “food card”)

- Find a “friend tribe” (agree on a sign of friendship)
 - Request help or directions
 - Identify the other tribe’s leader
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Debrief Discussion (10–15 minutes)

Core Debrief Questions

1. What was the hardest part of communicating with other tribes?
2. What helped the most (gestures, tone, repetition, drawing, trial and error)?
3. What misunderstandings happened—and how did you solve them?
4. How did it feel when you couldn’t make yourself understood?

Big Idea: Why Communication Matters

5. What does this show about how important shared language is in everyday life?
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Psychology / Culture Extension (5–10 minutes)

The “Words Shape Thinking” Idea (teacher prompt)

In psychology and communication, there’s a concept that language can shape what people notice, remember, and value. If a culture **doesn’t have a word** for a thing or idea, it may be less likely to focus on it or treat it as important.

Extension Questions

1. What concepts were missing from your tribe’s language at first?
2. What did you add quickly—and why?
3. If your tribe had no word for “leader,” what might that say about your culture?
4. If your tribe created 10 words for “food” but none for “art,” what might that suggest?

(Teacher note: This connects to ideas often discussed alongside linguistic relativity—keep it as an exploration rather than an absolute claim.)

Optional Reflection Assignment (Choose One)

Option A: Short Reflection (1 paragraph)

Describe one moment when communication broke down between tribes. What caused it, what did you do, and what does it teach about real-world communication?

Option B: Psychology Connection (1–2 pages)

Explain how vocabulary shapes a group's culture or knowledge. Use examples from your tribe language and at least one interaction with another tribe.

Option C: History / Global Connection

Give an example from history where language barriers affected trade, diplomacy, exploration, or conflict. Connect it to what you experienced in Tribal Talk.

Teacher “Answer Key” (What to Look For)

Since this is experiential, the “answers” are observable outcomes. Strong student responses typically include:

- Recognition that meaning requires shared symbols and agreement
- Understanding that gestures help but aren't universal
- Awareness that frustration increases miscommunication
- Insight that words reflect what a group values (needs, structure, priorities)
- Connection to real life: school, relationships, workplaces, diplomacy, history