Inuit Voices: Katajjaq, Elders' knowledge and new platforms

NBE3U, Unit 4: Living Words, Lesson 8. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Inuit oral traditions include katajjaq, a vocal game usually performed by two women face to face, and a vast body of knowledge held by Elders. In 2014, Quebec gave katajjaq heritage status. Today, Inuit performers carry these traditions to millions of listeners online, on their own terms.

What students do: Students learn about katajjaq as a game and a performance, the recording of Elders' knowledge in Igloolik, and avoidance names for the woman of the sea; listen to and interpret a teacher-chosen performance or interview by Inuit performers; and analyse how social, economic and technological forces disrupt or continue Inuit oral traditions.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
B1.1	identify various text forms associated with the oral traditions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures; explain their purpose and symbolic meaning; and describe various customs governing their use
B1.3	explain, with increasing insight, the influence of a range of social, economic, and/or political forces on the disruption or continuation of oral traditions in contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities
B2.5	develop and explain interpretations of oral texts from and/or related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, using evidence from the text, including oral and visual cues, to support their interpretations effectively

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning about Inuit oral traditions and how they continue today. • We are learning to interpret oral and visual cues in a performance or interview.	• I can describe katajjaq and its purposes. • I can explain how Elders' knowledge has been recorded and protected. • I can interpret a performance or interview using oral and visual cues. • I can explain how new platforms help traditions continue.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Inuit Voices deck.

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- **Handouts:** Inuit Oral Traditions (page 1), Listening Analysis (page 2).
- **Media:** A teacher-chosen public performance or interview by Inuit throat singers (for example, Caroline and Shina Novalinga, or Tanya Tagaq), from the artists' own channels or a trusted broadcaster. Preview fully.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	A game of breath.	Predict.	
8–25	**Katajjaq**	Form and purpose.	Note.	Form described.
25–35	**Elders' knowledge**	Recording and protecting.	Note.	
35–58	**Listen**	Performance or interview.	Analyse.	Interpretation supported.
58–75	**Forces**	Disruption and continuation.	Discuss.	Forces explained.

Differentiation

- **Support:** Analysis frame with sentence starters.
- **ELL:** Glossary: katajjaq, Inuktut, Elder, platform, heritage.
- **Challenge:** Compare a traditional katajjaq performance with Tanya Tagaq's contemporary work.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Listening Analysis	Oral text forms (B1.1), social forces (B1.3) and interpretation (B2.5)

Inuit voices: key points

- **Katajjaq:** A vocal game, usually two women face to face; the first to run out of breath, lose the rhythm or laugh loses. Entertainment while waiting for hunters.
- **Heritage:** Quebec designated throat singing cultural heritage in January 2014, the first intangible practice so recognized in Canada.
- **Elders' knowledge:** The Inullariit Elders Society in Igloolik recorded Elders' knowledge, honoured in 1998.
- **Interpreting:** Use oral cues (rhythm, breath, laughter, Inuktut) and visual cues (facing each other, setting, clothing).
- **Forces:** Disruption: missions, schools, relocation, loss of language. Continuation: Elders' projects, heritage status, Inuit artists online reaching new audiences on their own terms.

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Teacher notes

- This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Katajjaq (Global News, January 29, 2014): two women, usually standing face to face, sing rhythmic patterns; the first to run out of breath, lose the rhythm or laugh loses. It began as entertainment while waiting for hunters to return. In January 2014, Quebec designated Inuit throat singing as cultural heritage, the first time an intangible practice received such status in Canada.
- Shina Novalinga, born 1998 in Puvirnituq, Nunavik, learned throat singing from her mother, Caroline Novalinga, and became widely known on TikTok in 2020; with her mother she released Mother and Daughter Throatsinging (2021). Tanya Tagaq (Inuk) won the Polaris Music Prize in 2014 for Animism.
- Igloolik: the Inullariit Elders Society recorded a large collection of interviews with Elders, documenting Inuit knowledge; it received a Northern Science Award (Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit category) in 1998 (Government of Canada).
- The woman of the sea has many regional names (Sanna, Nuliajuk, Takannaaluk); many are avoidance names (see Lesson 5).
- Students listen and analyse. They do not attempt throat singing, which is a practice Inuit women teach within their communities. Students learn about ceremonies, protocols and oral traditions; they do not imitate or perform them, and they do not retell community stories. Leave sacred knowledge to the people who hold it.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 9, Reading a Speech.

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