

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE LANGUAGE THAT WHISTLES

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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Reading they'll actually do.

THE LANGUAGE THAT WHISTLES

High in the rugged mountains of La Gomera, one of Spain's Canary Islands, people communicate using a language made entirely of whistles. Silbo Gomero is a fully functional whistled version of Spanish that can carry complex messages across deep valleys and steep ravines where shouting would be completely useless. A skilled whistler can send and receive messages from up to three miles away.

Silbo developed centuries ago when shepherds needed to communicate across La Gomera's dramatically steep terrain. The island is essentially a volcanic cone with deep ravines cutting through it like slices in a pie. Walking from one ridge to another might take hours, but sound—especially high-pitched whistled sound—can travel directly across the gaps. The terrain's natural acoustics actually amplify the whistles, making long-distance communication possible without any technology.

The language works by converting Spanish syllables into specific whistled tones. There are four distinct vowel sounds and four consonant sounds, each distinguished by its pitch, duration, and pattern. Despite having only eight basic sounds, skilled speakers can express thousands of words and communicate complex sentences, complete with questions, commands, and emotional nuances.

Silbo nearly died out during the twentieth century as modern communication technology arrived on the island. Telephones and later cell phones made long-distance whistling unnecessary for practical purposes. Young people stopped learning the ancient skill, and by the 1990s, fewer than a thousand people could whistle the language fluently. An irreplaceable piece of human cultural heritage was slipping away.

The Canary Islands government decided to intervene before it was too late. In 1999, they made Silbo Gomero a required subject in all of La Gomera's schools. Today, every child on the island learns to whistle complete conversations as part of their regular education. The language has experienced a remarkable revival.

UNESCO declared Silbo Gomero a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2009, recognizing its unique value to human culture. Tourists now visit La Gomera specifically to hear demonstrations of the whistled language, and performances have become popular attractions at restaurants and cultural centers throughout the island.

Word Count: 340 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: BBC

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How far can Silbo messages travel?

- A) A few hundred feet
- B) Half a mile
- C) Up to three miles
- D) Ten miles

2 How many basic sounds does Silbo use?

- A) Two
- B) Eight
- C) Twenty-six
- D) Hundreds

3 Why did Silbo nearly disappear?

- A) People moved away
- B) Telephones made it unnecessary
- C) Government banned it
- D) People forgot

4 How was Silbo saved?

- A) UNESCO bought it
- B) It became a required school subject
- C) Tourists demanded it
- D) Scientists invented it

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What does Silbo's revival suggest about endangered languages?

- A) They can't be saved
- B) Deliberate intervention can revive languages facing extinction
- C) Only whistled languages matter
- D) Technology kills all languages

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Why might Silbo be considered irreplaceable?

- A) It's easy to learn
- B) It represents unique human adaptation to geography and carries cultural knowledge
- C) Everyone should whistle
- D) Spanish is the same

ANSWER KEY

The Language That Whistles

- 1. C) Up to three miles**

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 2. B) Eight**

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 3. B) Telephones made it unnecessary**

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 4. B) It became a required school subject**

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 5. B) Deliberate intervention can revive languages facing extinction**

DOK 3 — Analysis.

- 6. B) It represents unique human adaptation to geography and carries cultural knowledge**

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Language That Whistles

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If your language faced extinction, what would you want done to save it?
- Technology made Silbo 'unnecessary.' Is something lost when practicality trumps tradition?
- Should endangered languages be required subjects in schools?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Try creating your own simple whistled code for basic messages.
- Research other unusual communication methods (drum languages, sign languages, etc.).
- Map the world's endangered languages and their current speaker populations.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- BBC / The Guardian