One Voice, Many Voices — Recreating Indigenous Language Communities

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One Voice, Many Voices — Recreating Indigenous Language Communities

Contents

Dedication iii

Foreword ix
David Beaulieu and Denis Viri

Editors' Introduction xv
Recreating Indigenous Language Communities—
Possibilities for a New Century
Teresa L. McCarty and Ofelia Zepeda

1999 SILC Keynote Address 1
The "Goodness" of Bilingual Education for
Native American Children
Wayne Holm

Part I: Language Program Planning: A World of Ideas and Approaches 47

1 Using Oneida Language: Conscious Speaking
Tracy Maria Kahûtokt Williams 49

2 Creating a Language Learning Environment:
Salt River Elementary School, Mr. Harris's
1998-1999 Fifth Grade Class, and Salt River
Pima-Maricopa Indian Community
O'odham-Piipaash Language Program
Gary Owens, Jr. and Jeff P. Shepherd 59

3 Wananga Reo—Māori Language Camps for Adults
Jeanette King 73

4 Community-Based Immersion Programming:
Establishing a Dakota Language Preschool at
Pezihutazizi
Angela Wilson and Bill Johnston 87

5 Revitalizing Indigenous Languages: Program
Development
Anne Goodfellow 113

6 Language Skills Curriculum Design: Community Program Planning for Endangered Language Populations?
Jule Gómez de García 123

7 Indigenous Literacy Teaching in Public Primary Schools: A Case of Bilingual Maintenance Education in Mexico
Rainer Enrique Hamel 149

8 Language and Culture: Implications and Applications for the Classroom
Tracy Hirata-Edds 177

9 Language and Cultural Revitalization in Mexico: The Case of the Balsas Nahuas
José Antonio Flores Farfán 189

Part II: Language Documentation 203

10 The Dakota-English Dictionary Project: A Minnesota Collaborative Effort
Chris Mato Nunpa 205

11 Preservation Strategies: A Translation Paradigm
Susan Penfield and Amelia Flores 219

12 New Technologies for Talking — Lifeline or Noose?
Nicholas Ostler 235

Part III: Research Foundations for Language Planning and Programs 249

13 Indigenous Language Education and Second Language Acquisition (SLAT): Are They Compatible?
Lawrence N. Berlin 251

14 What Motivates Indigenous Language Learners?
Ruth S. Bennett 275

15 Dene Language Revitalization in Northern Canada: A Case Study of Black Lake, Saskatchewan
Heather A. Blair and Lynda Holland 311

16 Interpretations and Reflections on Dene Elder Cohorts
Ann Alphonse 345

Part IV: Assessing and Credentialing Native-Speaking Professionals 367

17 Assessment of Candidates for Aboriginal Language/English Bilingual Jobs
Barbara Burnaby 369

18 The Denaqenage Career Ladder Program: The University of Alaska's Role in Language Revitalization
Patrick E. Marlow 395

Part V: Indigenous Language Planning Contexts and Issues: Constraints and Possibilities in Cross-Cultural Perspective 407

19 Revitalization of Kumiyaay in Tecate, Baja, California: Four Scenarios
Paula L. Meyer 409

20 Fieldnotes from the Edge
Melissa Axelrod and Jule Gómez de García 431

21 Land Security and Maintenance in the Central American Garifuna Nation
Geneva Langworthy 455

22 Historical Maintenance (and Fragility) of Basque as an Indigenous Language and the Pressures of the Spanish-Speaking World (1863-1936)
Xabier Erize 473

23 Strengthening Strategies for Funding Opportunities
Richard LaFortune 495

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7

Indigenous Literacy Teaching in Public Primary Schools: A Case of Bilingual Maintenance Education in Mexico

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When Ignacio, Xóchitl, and Eréndira, three P'urhepecha second graders walk into their school in San Isidro every morning, their daily lives suffer little "mismatch" as happens in most other Indigenous bilingual schools in Mexico. These children carry their language and culture with them from home to school, where P'urhepecha works as the legitimate language of classroom activities and school organization. Literacy, mathematics, and most other content matters are taught in the Indigenous language, and students act freely, in a relaxed *ambiente* (environment) of respect and pedagogical care that are characteristic of the P'urhepecha culture. And Spanish, the national language, is

introduced step by step in a curriculum that attempts to reduce the traumatic effects of language submersion, where children from a subordinate ethnic group are exposed to a dominant language and culture they hardly understand.

Why this case is so exceptional in Mexican Indigenous education, how the new curriculum came about and how it works - all this shall be explained in this chapter. I will first sketch the history and present state of Native education in Mexico in order to give a context for the San Isidro school curriculum, which I will describe next. Then I will analyze some classroom practices to show how this kind of bilingual program helps to stabilize the Indigenous language. Finally, the San Isidro curriculum will be discussed in the context of the debate about bilingual intercultural education in Mexico and elsewhere.

The History of Language Policy and Indigenous Education in Mexico

Two basic strategies of ethnic and language policies have developed in Mexico since the beginning of Spanish colonization almost 500 years ago. They gained further shape after Independence in the early 19th century. The first and generally dominant strategy considered the assimilation (i.e. dissolution) of Indian peoples and the suppression of their languages as a prerequisite for the building of a unified nation state. A second strategy favored the preservation of Indian languages and cultures in this process, without giving up the ultimate goal of uniting nation and state. As a result a gradual process of language loss took place which accelerated during the 20th century as an outcome of the social dynamics following the Mexican Revolution. Out of approximately 130 Indigenous languages spoken at the time of the Conquest, some 62 vernaculars have survived to date. Although the

Indigenous population—roughly 10 percent of the total Mexican population—is growing in absolute numbers, most Indigenous peoples are undergoing a process of assimilation and language shift (Hamel, 1994, 1998; Maurais, 1992, 1999; Suárez, 1983).

The two strategies materialized in Indigenous education and Spanish teaching—the main pillars of cultural policies for Native peoples in Mexico—through two basic approaches which differed considerably in their cultural and educational philosophy and methods, their view on socio-cultural integration, and, above all, in their procedure of using and teaching Spanish as the national language. The first strategy pursued the goal of linguistic and cultural assimilation through direct Hispanicization. Education in Spanish should actively contribute to language shift and cultural change. The national language was to be the only target and medium of instruction; teaching materials, content, and methods were the exclusive preserve of the dominant society (called *submersion programs*, in modern terms).

Transitional programs reflected the second strategy; they applied diverse bilingual methods where the Native language played a subordinate, instrumental role as language of instruction and for initial literacy teaching. This alternative emerged in the 1930s and 1940s as experimental programs because of the absolute sociopolitical and educational failure of the submersion programs. The Indigenous languages were no longer considered to be an obstacle to the acquisition of Spanish, but a useful tool for cultural integration. The principle that any child learns better in her or his mother tongue as reflected in the UNESCO resolution of 1953 was becoming more and more accepted at that time.

No clear maintenance programs materialized during that period. Nevertheless, some of the most progressive

pilot projects led by anthropologists contained elements of maintenance programs, mainly through first language (L1) literacy and a series of contextual ethnic activities. However, given their limited pedagogical resources, and—in the long run—political support, they were given up or turned eventually into transitional programs.

Contrary to what many authors sustained about Indigenous education (Amadio, 1987; Hernández, Moreno & Guzmán G., 1982; Modiano, 1988; Varese, 1983, 1987), systematic alphabetization in vernacular languages was not a real, generalized practice in public Indian education. Although official policy has maintained since the 1980s that Indigenous education should be carried out through the medium of the mother tongue, this new policy has had little impact given the general assimilationist orientation of compulsory primary education until our present days.

Indigenous Education Today

At present some 50,000 Indigenous teachers attend to approximately 1.2 million primary school students (50 percent of the total) who speak one of the 62 Indigenous languages of the country.[1] About half of the primary schools in Indigenous areas outside the cities belong to the Department of Indigenous Education, set up in 1978 as a subsystem of elementary education at the federal level. It consists of two preschool years and six grades, the same as the general primary system in the country. In 1992 the administration of elementary education, including the Indigenous systems, was handed over from the federal government to the state governments.

[1]The 2000 national census counts 7.2 million Native (= speakers of a Native language) of all age groups, whereas a 1995 census elaborated by the National Indigenist Institute establishes a total of 10 million members of Indigenous peoples for that year, including speakers and non-speakers of Indigenous languages

Public elementary education in Mexico is based on a common curriculum for all students in the country. Therefore, the Indigenous schools are supposed to cover the same curriculum as the ordinary monolingual system.

The federal Department of Education produces common compulsory primers for each grade and subject matter, which are distributed freely to all school children, some 28 million copies each year in recent times. These textbooks are oriented toward monolingual Spanish-speaking children, primarily in an urban cultural context. Therefore, although they may serve as an appropriate tool for L1 literacy teaching, they are not adequate for bilingual education and the teaching of Spanish as a second language. Over the past 15 years the Department of Indigenous Education (Dirección General de Educación Indígena, DGEI) has produced primers in most Indigenous languages. In 2003, for example, over 2.7 million free primers in Indian languages were distributed, probably more than in the rest of the Americas all together.

A range of pedagogical practices is in use in the Indigenous educational system. The most widespread modality teaches literacy and the other content matters in Spanish; it uses the official Spanish primer for elementary education as the basic and only textbook, and employs the Indigenous language as the initial medium of instruction (cf. Hamel, 1984, 1988, 2000). The primers in Indigenous languages have had little impact in changing the curriculum and teaching procedures. At best, they are used alongside the Spanish teaching materials during the one or two hours of Native language teaching established by the official curriculum.

The most significant component which distinguishes this system from general elementary schools is the fact that almost all teachers are bilingual Native people who speak their Native language. Most importantly, the state has been

able to create a cohort of Indigenous teachers who have been educated in the monolingual teacher training colleges as part of the huge army of Mexican primary school teachers. They share, by and large, the nationalist values of a common nation state that promises upward mobility through a school system of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Indigenous school teachers, who depend not on their community but on the state for their appointment and salary, have accumulated considerable power over the past 20 or 30 years. In communities they have replaced traditional community leaders, since the teachers' capacity as cultural and political brokers is considered more useful than the skills of traditional leaders for the Indigenous communities. Even those Indigenous teachers organizations that are critical of the state party and its regime have generally prioritized their status and union interests as tenured state employees over and above community, ethnic, or Indigenous language issues. Over the years they have forged a powerful structure, within a powerful national teachers' union, that acts objectively as a language movement favoring Spanish and linguistic assimilation.

In sum,

- Schools have to apply the general curriculum, which is compulsory for public primary education as to its objectives and content in the four main subject areas.
- The national primers and textbooks are used as the main pedagogical tool.
- Although many students have little or no knowledge of Spanish at entrance level, there is no specific place in the curriculum for the Indigenous language and culture, and for content teaching in their language; no systematic teaching of Spanish as L2 is provided.
- The Indigenous language serves a subordinate function as a language of instruction as long as necessary. Depending on the general language distribution patterns and specific proficiency in Spanish, instruction in L1 may cease by grade 4 or 5.

- Indigenous teachers use the Native languages, but actively promote transition to Spanish and the national culture.

However, along with the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas since 1994, we observe a growing Indigenous mobilization which expresses the Native people's historical claims for land, political autonomy, and cultural preservation, including an educational system of their own. A renewed debate on the role and place of Indigenous peoples within a truly pluricultural nation state to be attained in Mexico's transition to democracy has again raised the issue of the political objectives and pedagogical procedures of Indigenous education.

The San Isidro Program of Language Maintenance

It is against this background of a strong, centralized, and countrywide assimilationist curriculum that the educational program in San Isidro, a P'urhepecha village, marks a sharp contrast. The teachers in P'urhepecha developed their own curriculum as a program of strong language maintenance and cultural development.[2] Their language maintenance program rationale combines both a sociolinguistic perspective promoting language stabilization, and arguments from the national and international scientific and pedagogical debate that supports L1 teaching to achieve academic proficiency in bilingual education.

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[2]The following findings are based on fieldwork carried out between 1999 and 2001; it included a general ethnography of the community, classroom observation with audio and video taping, extensive interviews and seminars carried out with the teachers, as well as the development and application of a battery of tests on language skills that was applied in 2000, 2004, and 2005. In 2001 our team included the neighbor village Uringuitiro in the research. Since 2003 a new research and action program has been set up between the school teachers and Native and non-Native researchers to improve the general curriculum (Hamel et al., 2004).

The Community

The community of San Isidro, located in the Meseta Tarasca in the state of Michocán of west central Mexico, is the home of some 1,500 P'urhepechas or Tarascans.[3] According to the local census elaborated by the teachers, all inhabitants are Native P'urhepechas; some 65 percent are considered Native-language monolinguals; the rest are bilinguals. The local economy is based on timber exploitation and subsistence agriculture. National statistics locate most of the villagers among the population living in extreme poverty. Public institutions include a preschool (kindergarten), a primary and a secondary school (grades 7 to 9) that employs a televised curriculum, and a health center. Emigration figures are growing since 2000, and the Native culture and language show most common signs of vitality such as intergenerational transmission (Fishman 1991), and almost exclusive use in most intra-community domains and activities, including political, social, and cultural organization. Both in private and public, in small and large communicative events, P'urhepecha is the normal, general, and unmarked language. Only the doctor and the priest who comes in for Catholic church services interact in Spanish. A system of loudspeakers spreads local news and announcements in P'urhepecha almost day and night, but commercial announcements can also be heard in Spanish.

Perhaps because of general language vitality and high rates of monolingualism which presuppose illiteracy, educational expectations have traditionally been oriented toward a real or supposed upward mobility through formal education and Spanish. Until 1995 the San Isidro elementary school taught the same assimilationist

[3]P'urhepecha is a language isolate among the 13 Mesoamerican language families (Suárez, 1983). It belongs to an ancient high culture that resisted Spanish colonization. The 2000 national census counts 143,000 speakers among all age groups.

curriculum as most other Indigenous schools in the area. In 1989, however, three teachers, natives of the community, returned to the village after having served in other schools for several years. They found their hometown school in a state of advanced physical deterioration and pedagogical abandonment. Teachers used to come in and teach only a few days a week and students exhibited among the lowest achievement levels in the region.

The three teachers, who belong to influential families in the village, decided to reconstruct the school from scratch. Community members organized "faenas" (traditional community work usually carried out on Sunday or Monday) to rebuild the school and the necessary furniture, and the returning teachers managed to motivate the remaining colleagues to raise educational quality and commitment. The following year there was an increase in registration from 240 to 385 students. In previous years many parents had not sent their children to school given the extremely low prestige of the institution. Since the teachers continued to teach literacy and all other content matters in Spanish to the monolingual children, achievement levels remained extremely low. It was at this point that the school leadership started to develop a curriculum that was radically different from traditional assimilationist education, inspired by recent debates on bilingual education they knew as students of the regional Pedagogical University. First, they organized meetings with parents and community leaders to convince them that instruction based on their own language would yield better outcomes for their children in the long run. Their proposal ran counter to the deeply rooted belief that identified schooling with the exclusive use of Spanish.

According to the teachers' own testimony, trust was essential for this enterprise. The new team had gained the community's confidence based on the visible improvement

of school organization and attendance. No doubt the influential position of their families played a significant role. Thus they were able to convince the community leadership (elders and authorities) and a significant portion of the parents to accept and support a new school program.

The New Curriculum: Language Maintenance, Ethnic Identity, and Confidence

In the 1999-2000 school year, the primary school hosted 345 students distributed in three classes each for grades 1 to 4 and two each for fifth and sixth grades. The 17 teachers, including the headmaster, were all native speakers of P'urhepecha except one. Four were San Isidro citizens; the others lived in the surrounding villages and reached the school every day by car or bus.

Table 1.
Traditional and New Curriculum in Indigenous Education
(IL = Indigenous Language)

TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM	SAN ISIDRO CURRICULUM
Teaching based on the curriculum of the official primers in Spanish (elaborated for Spanish monolingual students). • Teaching literacy and all (most) other content matters from the Spanish primer in Spanish. • Use of the IL for the purpose of instruction as long as necessary (subordinate, instrumental and transitional function of the IL). • IL class and use of IL primers during 1-2 periods a week (time permitting).	Teaching based on a combination of the official Spanish, the official IL and their own curriculum. • Teaching literacy and all other content in IL based on: a) the content of official primers translated into IL; b) rich material in IL elaborated by the teachers; and c) the official primer in IL • Use of the IL as the language of instruction throughout primary education (in 4th - 6th alongside Spanish) (unmarked, legitimate language of the classroom and teacher-student identity). • Introduction of Spanish as L2 from 2nd/3rd grade onward, using transfer strategies for literacy (L1 ®L2).

The three teachers had begun their new project in 1995 based on some fundamental ideas about the curriculum: Literacy, mathematics, and other content matters should be taught entirely in the Indigenous language, at least throughout the first few years. Spanish should be introduced step by step, based on a contrastive principle for the acquisition of grammar, and on transfer capacities from P'urhepecha to Spanish for reading and writing (see Table 1).

Because the educational system maintains a fairly rigid control over content—all content matters contained in the national program and the primers have to be taught in an established order—the teachers decided to translate and partially recreate in P'urhepecha the content of the four main subject matters chapter by chapter. Given the fact that there was almost no teaching material available in the language—the first P'urhepecha primer only appeared during the second year of their program—they had to develop all kinds of teaching materials by themselves. If we consider that most Indigenous teachers had acquired literacy in Spanish and possessed no writing skills in their mother tongue prior to the new curriculum, this endeavor can hardly be overestimated.

The team had the choice between five existing writing conventions for their literacy program in P'urhepecha. They finally composed a "pedagogical" alphabet somewhere in between a minimal, strictly phonological proposal, and a maximal solution, allowing for some allophones to be represented by different letters.[4] At the beginning they were assisted by a senior teacher and Native linguist who proposed to introduce the P'urhepecha alphabet through a

[4]Through their teaching experience they discovered, however, that their Native students were quite capable of distinguishing between voiced and voiceless allophones represented by the same letter. Thus, they realized that there was no need to use the letters "b, d, g" for the voiceless plosive, since their students quickly managed to read them as allophones of the voiceless plosives "p, r, k" in a given context.

corpus of 100 words and a progression based on frequency rates during the first two years.

The three promoters of the Native curriculum decided to take on the three first-grade classes when the new program started in 1995, and to carry them through to 6th grade. The other teachers who chose the subsequent courses all committed themselves to follow the new curriculum. By the end of 1999 the school faculty could look back on over fours years of experience, having started the fifth-grade courses in September of that year. They had produced a wealth of teaching materials of their own in the Native language, finding creative solutions that very often highlighted significant differences between Mexican Spanish and P'urhepecha cultural typologies.

In sum, the new curriculum established as an overall objective to form balanced bilinguals by the end of sixth grade, who should acquire basic proficiency in the four language skills in both languages, as well as in mathematics and the other subject matter corresponding to elementary school exit levels. By and large, after more than four years the school had managed to develop basic literacy skills in the native language, and to carry out the teaching of the official content matter for each grade.

Classroom Ethnography and the Bilingual Curriculum

Our team carried out extensive classroom observation to identify teaching and learning strategies and language uses and functions, focusing particularly on the development of oral language and literacy skills in both languages. From these observations the specific curriculum of each teacher emerged.

Curriculum Structure

Most teachers develop a specific style and structure for

their lessons. The primers play a central role for all classroom activities.[5] Teachers in San Isidro base their preparation on the Spanish textbooks. Very often they translate and reframe in P'urhepecha the content, objectives, topics, and key concepts from the Spanish primer (e.g., in Spanish, history, or geography lessons) and produce large posters which they pin on the wall or blackboard. The P'urhepecha primers are used as complementary material. A typical unit would have more or less the structure indicated in Table 2; it could last between 20 and 50 minutes.

The analysis of a number of observed and taped classroom units helped us to detect the underlying pedagogical and linguistic models and the teaching strategies. The sequence of activities corresponds by and large to the proposed order in the teacher's handbook, which is based on a communicative approach to language and content teaching. The new topics or lessons are contextualized at first; then teachers and students analyze and work through the text step by step. In contrast to most other Indigenous classrooms in Mexico, however, where literacy and content are taught in Spanish (see Hamel, 1988 for a detailed analysis), there is no mismatch between the children's and the school's language. Therefore, students participate in classroom and academic activities much more actively since they develop a contextualized comprehension of decontextualized, cognitively demanding skills such as literacy, mathematics, or history.

Classroom Interaction

On the micro level of interactional construction of order,

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[5]First and second grades use an integrated textbook for all subject matter. Grades 3 to 6 have one book for each, i.e. Spanish mathematics, history, and geography. Integrated primers exist in P'urhepecha for grades 1 to 4.

Table 2.
Lesson Structure

Unit	Materials	Teacher activities	T-Lg	St-Lg	Student activities	Comment
1.Intro-duction	Sheet with drawings and text.	Initiates and contextualizes unit with a story or background information.	P	P	Listen to teacher's exposure with body language, comments.	Normally focused attention.
2. Text explanation	Same.	Explains text on sheet with examples, questions, short dialogues with St.	P	P	Answers, questions, short dialogues with T.	Mostly intense but relaxed atmosphere.
3. Reading	Same.	Instructs "Read aloud!" Selects St for reading.	P	P	All read aloud text on the sheet; individual reading.	Mostly vivid participation.
4. Concept explanation	Same.	Explains and discusses key concepts with St.	P	P	Answer and pose questions, discuss with T and among themselves.	Same.
5. Copying	Same, copy books.	Instructs St to copy the text to their excercise books; supervises copying.	P	P	Copy text; discuss in small groups and engage in other activities when ready.	Non T-focused activities, very relaxed, St move around freely.
6. Revision	Same.	Revises copied texts and signs copy books.	P	P	When ready walk up to the teacher and show their copied text.	Same.
7. Reading	Spanish primer.	Instructs St to open their textbooks and to read the lesson (same or similar as previous text in P).	P	S	All read aloud text on the sheet; individual reading.	Normally focused attention again.

Table 2, Continued

Unit	Materials	Teacher activities	T-Lg	St-Lg	Student activities	Comment
8. Text explanation	Same.	Explains Spanish text with examples, questions, short dialogues with St; translates key concepts	P (!)	P (!)	Answers, questions, short dialogues with T, among themselves.	Same.
9. Homework	Same.	Gives homework for next day, usually some exercise from the book in P or S. Closes unit or lesson.	P	P	Write down homework.	Same.

(T=Teacher; St=Student[s]; P=P'urhepecha; S=Spanish)

teacher-student interaction follows a fairly traditional pattern of "frontal" instruction: most of the time the teachers are the focus of attention and direct the classroom activities. They control the turn-taking system. Students tend to interact mostly with the teacher, either in chorus or individually, producing the typical interactional triads (prompt-reply-evaluation) identified in Flander's (1970) two-thirds rule—the teacher absorbs two-thirds of classroom interaction. Ethnographically relevant elements of teacher-student coordination reveal the routine character of many interactional patterns such as chorus answers or reading. Most of the time the teachers manage to maintain focused attention, even through longer explanatory monologues. Although it may have its flaws due to the asymmetric participant structure, this kind of intensive

teacher intervention entails some advantages. The extensive academic expository discourse utilized by the teachers within a familiar cultural context allows schoolchildren, who have almost no contact with Spanish, the opportunity to listen, understand, and appreciate such a discourse type.

At the same time the Indigenous classroom dynamics reveal a great deal of freedom that is allowed by the children to participate as they wish, and to communicate and learn with teachers and among themselves in many spontaneous ways: Students shout out their answers in class, they talk to each other and move freely in the classroom. At first sight, an ethnocentric view might see this type of class behavior and identify disorder and chaos; a more lengthy and detailed and enduring observation, however, reveals a great deal of underlying order, mutual respect, and attention between all participants in the classroom.

Language Distribution

Most teachers who follow the new program use P'urhepecha throughout as the language of instruction (see Table 3). Some repeat instructions and certain explanations in Spanish or translate back and forth, especially in the more advanced grades, as is used in other Indigenous areas.

Spanish appears in reading exercises after a text or topic has been introduced and dealt with in P'urhepecha. And there are writing practices when students copy texts in Spanish or do exercises from the book including the composition of small text according to grade level. There seems to be no clearly defined role of Spanish as a language of instruction.

Table 3.
Functional Language Choice in Classroom Interaction

Teachers P'urhepecha	• Introduction and development of subject matter. • Explanation and translation of new lexemes, expressions, phrases, grammatical problems in Spanish and P'urhepecha. • In part, classroom organization: Introduction and change of activities, complex instructions, group dynamics.
Students P'urhepecha	• Almost all focused classroom activities. • Negotiation of classroom activities and subject matter. • Almost all verbal activities not controlled by the teacher (peer interaction, etc.).
Teachers Spanish	• Introduction and pronunciation of lexemes, expressions, certain subject matter. • Repetition of instructions or explanations given in P'urhepecha first (rarely). • Certain patterns of formal classroom organization (calling the roll, composing the date). • A number of stereotyped instructions.
Students Spanish	• Repetitions and insertions in pattern drill exercises (verbalization is minimal in Spanish). • Reading and some writing exercises.

Literacy and Grammar

Literacy is basically taught in the Indigenous language. As stated before, the school team began with a specific alphabet using one letter for allophones such as b - p, but two different letters in other cases. Roughly from grades 2 and 3 onward, they apply a contrastive method, introducing the letters of the Spanish alphabet not present in the P'urhepecha spelling. The decision to begin literacy in P'urhepecha with an alphabet that does not contain all the Spanish letters implies an important ideological rupture with dominant beliefs and practices which place the Spanish language and its alphabet at the center of the curriculum and explain Native language spelling conventions (e. g., "ï" in P'urhepecha or nasalized "o̲" in

Hñähñú) as "deviant" from the Spanish spelling. Here, the P'urhepecha language and its autonomous spelling conventions constitute the unmarked case, at least for the children in their process of literacy acquisition, whereas Spanish enters the scene as a second language for which only specific spelling conventions have to be learned. Basic literacy skills are acquired in the mother tongue and can be transferred to the second language. This is the critical departure with traditional Spanish literacy programs, both in terms of psycholinguistic development and of language ideology.

Instead of teaching separate classes for P'urhepecha and Spanish, the teachers decided to introduce language classes in which specific grammatical topics (the pronoun system, conjugations, etc.) are dealt with in both languages, based on a contrastive approach. Thus, students can develop an acute metalinguistic awareness right from the beginning, and a witty sense of how different languages solve specific grammatical and functional tasks in different ways. As we shall see, however, there is too little language exercise within each language in its own right.

Spanish as L2

Our observation of classroom interaction reveals a model of teaching Spanish as a second language. Spanish enters the classroom in different ways. On the one hand, Spanish is progressively introduced through stretches of teachers' expository discourse, the use of the Spanish primers for literacy skills, and some limited oral practices. On the other, the teachers apply a contrastive method when they introduce grammatical paradigms in a fairly isolated way, such as the pronominal system in both languages. Although they exploit transfer capacities from L1 to L2 and vice versa, the bridge between the languages is not built in

to the realm of comprehension and effective communication, but in formal constructs of grammar and sometime spelling, a procedure that reminds us of very traditional second-language teaching.

As we can see in Table 2 (activities 7 and 8), the Spanish text is well contextualized in P'urhepecha (both orally and in writing) before the students open the book and begin reading. Such a procedure would normally operate as an efficient preparation for successful reading. Since the Native language is kept as the language of instruction and of constant translation, however, the effort of understanding the second language in its own terms is partially spoiled. And the students hardly ever get an opportunity to use Spanish orally, except for isolated words and phrases in chorus or individual answers to teacher questions such as in a math class: "Teacher: How much is one half plus two halves? Students: Three halves!"

Spanish reading exercises play a significant role in this context. From our observation as well as pilot reading comprehension tests, we learned out that many students read fluently in Spanish but do not understand the text. Extended pattern drills of individual and chorus reading, with hardly any feedback for comprehension, express the relevance of reading fluency as a social value of its own. The attempt to teach Spanish *through literacy,* i.e. through the written text (see Table 2), without sufficient oral training, is reminiscent of the typical submersion programs practiced in so many other Indigenous schools in Mexico.

In sum, the introduction of Spanish as a second language is sustained, on the one hand, by the transfer of literacy and other skills from previous alphabetization in P'urhepecha to the new language. On the other hand, traditional grammar-based teaching methods, along with a lack of systematic and intensive practice of Spanish in its proper space, reduce the effects and potentials of the

second language teaching process as a whole.

The San Isidro Curriculum and the Perspectives of Intercultural Bilingual Education

No doubt the San Isidro project, given its exceptional approach and procedure in Mexico, has a number of significant implications for the debate on Indigenous language and cultural maintenance education. Since the project is still at an early stage of development, conclusions can only be tentative at present.

The history of the project is in itself significant. Before 1995, the San Isidro Indigenous primary school could be considered a very representative example of massive school failure and dropout rates due to an inappropriate submersion curriculum paired with pedagogical and physical abandonment (see a critique of such programs in Baker, 1996; Conoz and Genesee, 1998; Cummins, 1994; Hamel, 1988; and Hamel et al., 2004).

How did the Indigenous teachers who returned to their village reverse this negative tendency and initiate a curriculum so radically different from mainstream practice and opposed to traditional educational beliefs and perspectives? No doubt the development of trust and community involvement played a central role (see also McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998).

In contrast to the U.S. where local communities often establish their school curriculum and hire the personnel they choose, in Mexico, public school teachers are tenured state employees, and the federal government establishes the curriculum, subject matter, teaching materials, and objectives. Therefore, there is little room for community involvement and decision-making in relevant educational issues. In this context, the returning teachers in San Isidro had little space to maneuver. They had no choice but to

keep the official curriculum, but they decided to achieve the objectives and standards for each grade in P'urhepecha instead of Spanish.

Because traditional educational expectations in Indigenous communities usually identify schooling with upward social mobility through Spanish, community involvement was crucial to create the necessary consensus to support the new curriculum, both inside the village and vis-a-vis the educational system. It was probably the confidence the teachers had gained when they virtually "rebuilt" the school that made their project politically viable. They also had to convince their colleagues and incorporate them into the new project. Several teachers in San Isidro admitted they were convinced at the beginning, but began changing their minds when they realized how the new curriculum really worked and when they saw how the children participated more actively and freely than in other systems.

With their new curriculum the teachers defied and overcame a series of ideological and political barriers that prevent a truly bilingual, intercultural, maintenance-oriented education in most cases. Let us briefly consider the main assets and weaknesses after more than seven years of implementation.

From a psycholinguistic and educational perspective, no doubt the main accomplishment of the program lies in a curriculum organized entirely around the teaching of literacy and subject matter in the Native language. The teachers concentrated their efforts on the development of this program step by step, which meant that they had to elaborate a considerable amount of teaching materials. They also had to create their own methodology of instruction in the native language, a procedure for which they had little precedent from their own training and teaching experience.

The primary sociolinguistic achievement is no doubt the fact that the teachers managed to root P'urhepecha as the legitimate, unmarked language of school in a more thorough way than I have observed in any other Indigenous school in Mexico. All actors use it freely and naturally in most communicative events at school, both inside and outside the classroom, and reading and writing in the Native language seems to be the most obvious thing to do. Written P'urhepecha is present everywhere, since written materials, grammatical units, alphabets and drawings relating to the own culture abound in the classrooms and schools as a visible testimony and context for Native-language literacy. The fact that P'urhepecha occupies such a prominent and prestigious space at school contributes to reversing the traditional role of education as a key element of Native language stigmatization and shift. On the contrary, the new P'urhepecha school is visibly fostering the stature and status of the Native language and culture.

The same applies to sociocultural relations in the school community and within the native community. A new atmosphere of *confianza*, mutual trust and respect for the Native culture, can be felt in teacher-student relations, and in the communication between the school and the parent community. This new ambiente certainly does not imply that natural contradictions and divergent views have ceased to exist, for example between fervent promoters and doubtful opponents of the new curriculum, or between student groups. But it is evident that the school again forms part of a larger native community.

The design and implementation of the new curriculum has not only demonstrated the feasibility of Native language instruction, it has at the same time revealed a series of difficulties and shortcomings that call for remedy. Let us mention the ones that we have been able to identify

during years of intensive research and interaction, and upon which we agree with teachers and community leaders.[6]

Pedagogy and *teaching methodology* follow old models of the traditional assimilationist school. Frontal teaching, pattern drill exercises, chorus reading and responding do not foster creative learning; these practices conflict with the objectives of the new curriculum, and teachers agree that new teaching methods will have to be adopted by and by.

Spanish as a second language still needs a specific program, objectives, and methodology. Because the only model present in the teachers' experience is traditional submersion or fast transitional "castellanización," the San Isidro teachers have virtually no points of reference for viable alternatives. So far, Spanish teaching appears only as reading and some writing exercises within P'urhepecha language classes, and as contrastive grammar teaching. Apparently, the teachers build on the potential of transfer from L1 to L2 skills, but they do not realize that successful transfer requires a certain threshold level in the second language. There is little or no actual second-language teaching or content teaching through the L2; and, because the language of instruction is almost exclusively P'urhepecha, students simply do not get enough language practice to reach the necessary second language proficiency. The new curriculum, which established coordinate, biliterate bilingualism as its main objective by the end of primary school, cannot underestimate the strategic relevance to achieve Spanish language proficiency. The political viability of a Native maintenance education project such as the San Isidro curriculum depends to a large

[6]These problems were attacked by our collaborative work between 2003 and 2005, which includes a specific design of Spanish L2 teaching and teacher training (Hamel et al., 2004).
[7]Such a strategic relevance of national language, which may seem evident to any U.S. reader, is sometimes questioned in certain Latin American contexts where specific Indigenous groups may not be under great pressure for academic achievement in mainstream terms as they are in Mexico (e.g., Guatemala; cf. Tovar Gómez, 1999).

extent on its positive results in Spanish literacy, as well as mathematics.[7]

Finally, the perspective of a truly intercultural curriculum should be discussed.[8] Given the constraints of the official curriculum and pressures from school district authorities, the teachers have so far tried to cover its content by translating it into P'urhepecha. Although this procedure has stimulated many creative adaptations, it has left little space to develop a more autonomous curriculum based on the P'urhepechas' own cultural models, history and customs. Such a new curriculum could certainly emerge only in a long-term perspective, and it probably goes beyond the capacity of one single school to develop it. Considering the wealth and vitality of the P'urhepecha culture, this perspective should not be left aside.

In sum, the San Isidro school has engaged in an educational project which is extremely exceptional and original in the Mexican context. Starting with a critique of the previous submersion curriculum which produced low levels of achievement and contributed to cultural stigmatization and, ultimately, language shift, the core team of teachers took the initiative to develop a radically different approach. The present curriculum certainly needs improvement and will have to solve its inherent problems. But it has taken the decisive step to reorient the entire educational program, rooting it in the Native language and culture in order to achieve an integrated aim: to promote the Indigenous community's appropriation of the school in order to make education contribute to the strengthening of the Indigenous culture, and to offer a much more adequate

[8]The term "intercultural" is used here as it has developed in the Latin American debate on Indigenous education over the past 20 years (cf. Gigante, 1995; Hamel, 1998; Hornberger, 2000; Monsonyi & Rengifo, 1983): An intercultural curriculum should strengthen the Native culture first, and, on the basis of the children's own culture, it should teach about the second or national culture afterward. In the debate the term "bicultural" was criticized as too static, and the possibility for a person to be bicultural (to belong equally to two cultures) in the same way one could be bilingual was drawn into question.

program than the previous one in order to reach higher levels of achievement and the development of balanced bilingualism and biliteracy.

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Note

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