
Bilingual Education for Indigenous Peoples in Mexico

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Abstract

This chapter summarizes Mexican indigenous education from the perspective of bilingual education including Spanish and one out of 68 indigenous languages. After a historical overview of its development in colonial times, it will concentrate on the development since the 1970s when indigenous education was formally installed as a special department of the Federal Ministry of Education. From bilingual bicultural to intercultural bilingual education (IBE), different approaches were established to reconcile the integration of indigenous peoples into the nation-state via education with their claim to maintain and develop their ethnic identity and their languages. The chapter focuses on the psycho- and sociolinguistic difficulties as well as the existing political and ideological barriers against the organization and implementation of a curriculum that fosters mother tongue and maintenance education and the incorporation of the indigenous

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knowledge systems into the teaching programs. It explains why in practice and beyond the official IBE curriculum, Hispanicization (*castellanización*) prevails in most indigenous schools, i.e., submersion or fast transitional programs which impose Spanish in a subtractive manner and assign no relevant curricular function to the indigenous languages. Mayor research contributions are revised and future directions and research needs are outlined. Finally a few independent school projects are referred to which attempt to create intercultural and bilingual programs from the bottom up.

Keywords

Diglossic ideologies • Enrichment bilingualism • Mother tongue education

Introduction

In Mexico as in the rest of Latin America, the discussion about indigenous bilingual education centers around two fundamental questions. The first relates to the macro-political, sociolinguistic, and anthropological dimension: Will it be possible to build a plurilingual and pluricultural nation-state able and willing to reconcile the forging of national identity and unity with the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity? The second, of a rather micro nature in the field of psycholinguistics and pedagogy, refers to the modalities of bilingual education, more precisely to the relation between language use, pedagogy, and academic achievement in education, in the context of an asymmetric relationship between Spanish as the dominant and the indigenous as the subordinate languages (Hamel 2013).

The sociopolitical dimension emerges in the debates about the policies that the dominant mestizo society and the state they control design for the nation's autochthonous peoples: Should their members be assimilated and forced to give up their ethnic identity and languages in order to become accepted citizens of the nation? Conversely, could they integrate and acquire full membership while at the same time preserve and foster their own identity and diversity? Ever since the beginning of colonization through Spain in 1519, and even earlier in the Aztec Empire, the state has assigned a central role to education in this process (Heath 1972). And the policy approach has always been top-down.

The pedagogical and psycholinguistic dimension comes into sight when the question arises of how the global sociopolitical goals could best be accomplished through education. What role should the languages involved play in the learning processes? Are the languages of indigenous peoples considered to be obstacles or fundamental tools to acquire literacy, other second-order discourses, and content matters? Should monolingualism in the state language or enrichment bilingualism in both the state language and the indigenous languages be the envisaged aim of indigenous education? How do the linguistic and cultural ideologies of those in power differ from the orientations of indigenous citizens and their organizations?

Since colonial times, two basic strategies of ethnic and language policies developed in Mexico which gained shape after independence in the early nineteenth

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. As a result, a fastening process of language loss started in the nineteenth century (Cifuentes 2002) which accelerated even more during the twentieth century as an outcome of the social dynamics following the Mexican Revolution (1910). Out of approximately 130 indigenous languages (henceforth ILs, e.g., Nahuatl, Mayan, or Zapotec) spoken at the time of the conquest in what is today Mexico, some 68 vernaculars have survived. Although the indigenous population is growing in absolute numbers, most indigenous peoples are undergoing a process of assimilation and language loss.

The two strategies mentioned above materialized in education and Spanish teaching through two basic approaches which differed considerably in their cultural and educational philosophy and methods, their views on sociocultural 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 (*castellanización*), i.e., submersion or fast transitional programs. Education in Spanish should actively contribute to language shift and cultural change. Apart from a few exceptional maintenance efforts, slow transitional bilingual education programs reflected the second strategy that was hardly ever committed to a genuine preservation of the ILs; they applied diverse bilingual methods where the Indian languages played a subordinate, instrumental role as languages of instruction and for initial alphabetization. Given the size of the native population and the significant historical commitment to public services, the Mexican state developed by far the largest public school system for the indigenous population in the Americas.

From colonial times until our days, Mexican governments have always subordinated the questions of pedagogical appropriateness and the quality of learning to the political questions of control and integration of the indigenous population. Today, the two dimensions should converge in favor of the stabilization of indigenous peoples as fundamental components for the construction of a new, pluricultural and plurilingual state; and enrichment bilingual education based on instruction and literacy development through the medium of the mother tongue, although still an exceptional model in practice, has shown its superiority over submersion and transitional syllabuses in terms of quality education and the development of academic proficiency in both languages (Modiano 1972; Hamel 2009; Hamel and Francis 2006).

In this chapter, I will briefly refer to education in colonial times. I will then concentrate on indigenous education, its approaches, problems, and results, since its consolidation as an educational system of its own in the 1970s, and review the main contributions, work in progress and perspectives. The emphasis will be on the role of languages in bilingual education, the curriculum, and the learning processes and on the rare cases where there is real mother tongue education. The macro questions of language policy in Mexico cannot be dealt with here (see Hamel 2013).

Early Developments

Although assimilationist education predominated throughout the colonial regime in Mexico (1519–1810), the sixteenth century witnessed some of the most exciting experiments of indigenous language-based education that have occurred in Latin America until our days. Along with other religious congregations, the Franciscans developed an educational philosophy and practice of their own. According to Aguirre Beltrán (1983) and his sources, Franciscan education was based on empathy with indigenous cultures and worldviews, mother tongue instruction, communication, and, above all, Christianization; the Franciscans were the first to practice syncretism in education; they adapted many of the native instructional practices. Their strategy also implied the use of young Indians as cultural brokers and assistant teachers. In the renowned Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, founded in 1536, advanced education included the development of literacy in Nahuatl, the study of Latin grammar as a path to theology and philosophy, with the ultimate goal to ordain the graduates as priests (Aguirre Beltrán 1983; Heath 1972). Given that the Nahuas (Aztecs) had their own pictographic and ideographic writing systems and used paper (*amatl*) and ink (*tlilli*), they could quickly adopt the European alphabetic writing system for their own language (Lockhart 1992). Since they had already received formal instruction and acquired second-order discourse competence in their own culture, they obtained alphabetic literacy in their language and were able to transfer their knowledge successfully to the literate culture of Spanish and Latin. In the course of the sixteenth century, the alphabetic writing system rapidly displaced preconquest writing, and the development of native language literacy as a social practice spread swiftly through the Spanish colonies, although always limited to a small elite. In Mexico, this early experience of successful L1 literacy acquisition and social use was never achieved again until our present days.

Only in the 1930s would a new turn toward mother tongue education emerge in Mexico. Under the leadership of the US linguist Maurice Swadesh, the well-known Tarascan Project was born (Aguirre Beltrán 1983; Castillo 1945). In the P'urhepecha (Tarascan) region of Michoacán in Central Mexico, a team of Mexican and US anthropologists and linguists developed an integrated program of bilingual education. They elaborated an appropriate alphabet of P'urhepecha based on linguistic and sociolinguistic studies; they trained indigenous teachers in basic indigenous grammar and the alphabet based on the most advanced literacy approaches of the time. The program offered a more adequate pedagogical model for the acquisition of literacy and at the same time fostered the indigenous languages and their maintenance by moving them into the prestige domain of literacy. The abundant anthropological and linguistic research surrounding the education project as well as the proposal of L1 literacy teaching had a long-lasting effect on the national and international debate on bilingual education. Thus, the Mexican delegation played a significant role at the 1953 UNESCO conference on vernacular languages education in Paris, and a Mexican contribution (Barrera-Vázquez 1953) entered the final publication.

Major Contributions: Indigenous Education Today

In 1978, previous modalities of indigenous education found their definite place as a Department in the Federal Ministry of Education under the name of Dirección General de Educación Indígena (DGEI, General Department of Indigenous Education), a subsystem of elementary education. Since the 1970s, its official program was labeled “bilingual and bicultural.” Today it consists of three preschool years plus six grades, the same as the general primary system in the country. Given persistent centralization and an overreaching ideology of a homogeneous nation-state, public primary education in Mexico is based on a common curriculum and common compulsory primers for all students in the country. Therefore, the indigenous schools are supposed to cover the same curriculum as the general monolingual system. The textbooks are oriented toward monolingual Spanish-speaking children, mainly in urban contexts. Therefore, although they serve as an appropriate tool for Spanish L1 literacy teaching, they are not adequate for bilingual education and the teaching of Spanish as L2.

In 2011 some 55,000 indigenous teachers instructed over 1.25 million preschool and primary school students (50 % of the total), speakers of one of the 68 indigenous languages.

At the beginning of each school year, DGEI distributes over 2.5 million primers written in native languages to the indigenous schools, certainly more than in any other American country. Unfortunately, for reasons outlined below, most of them are rarely used; and most observers would agree that the indigenous school system does not on the whole contribute to maintaining and fostering indigenous languages.

Little detailed research exists about indigenous education under the bilingual and bicultural program. Nancy Modiano’s (1972) study is the first to demonstrate, in the case of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians in Chiapas, that L1 or even bilingual literacy instruction yields better results for Spanish L2 literacy skills than the common Spanish alphabetization practiced at that time. More than in Mexico, her book had a significant impact in the USA as a study of advocacy for mother tongue instruction within the emerging debate on bilingualism and bilingual education for immigrant children.

In an extensive study, Bravo Ahuja (1977) analyzed indigenous education focusing on the castilianization process, i.e., the transitional and subtractive teaching of Spanish as a second language (L2). She developed the first systematic proposal, and her team elaborated an official primer. A new debate arose in view of the overt contradictions between the official program that should foster bilingual and bicultural maintenance education and Castilianization practice (Ros Romero 1981), a conflict that continues until the present time. Scanlon and Lezama Morfin’s (1982) collection of papers discussing these issues becomes a central reference for the 1980s.

Most of the relevant components that relate the general sociolinguistic context to indigenous teachers’ orientations, curriculum design, the functions of the languages involved, and classroom interaction are analyzed in an extensive study of the Hñähñũs (Otomi) in the Mezquital Valley reported in Hamel (1988). In general

terms, sociolinguistic analysis identifies for Mexico, as well as the rest of Latin America, that a diglossic language conflict between Spanish as the dominant language and the ILs as the subordinate ones contributes to generalized language shift and loss, in spite of some language maintenance and revitalization processes.

Problems and Difficulties

The indigenous schools reproduce this general tendency, mainly through the diglossic ideologies of the indigenous school teachers who value Spanish and Spanish literacy as their most precious cultural capital, whereas their own native languages are not considered suitable for academic activities. 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. Consequently, they attempt to teach literacy in Spanish from first grade onto students who are at best incipient bilinguals, instead of developing cognitively demanding higher-order discourses such as literacy in their mother tongue (Hamel and Francis 2006; Francis 2012). Both languages are used orally for instruction, with frequent repetitions and translations that foster neither literacy nor the acquisition of Spanish as L2. The growth of literacy in the mother tongue is neglected throughout elementary education, since it is neither used as an object of study nor as a systematic language of instruction. Thus, the curriculum and teaching practices do not profit from a central and widely acknowledged feature of any bilingual program: the learners' capacity to transfer cognitively demanding skills from one language to the other, a process which could bring about significant academic growth in and through both languages (Cummins 2000). In sum, the predominant classroom practices exhibit a curriculum with chiefly negative effects on the development of academic language proficiency. And the decision not to develop any academic skills in the L1 impedes the advantage of the cumulative effects of cognitive growth and transfer capacities to Spanish. At the same time, the subordinate role of the mother tongue as a transitional language of instruction reproduces the diglossic conflict between the languages and fosters language loss.

Generally speaking, most publications between 1970 and 2010 arrive at similar conclusions, namely, that the general diglossic orientations shared by the dominant society and most indigenous teachers and parents generate a kind of education that contributes to language shift and does not produce the expected educational skills. Summaries of that period can be found in Hidalgo (1994).

At present, a range of pedagogical practices are in use in the indigenous educational system. The most widespread modality teaches literacy in Spanish, uses the official Spanish primer for elementary education as the basic textbook, and employs the indigenous language as the initial medium of instruction. An increasing number of teaching materials in indigenous languages is being used alongside with Spanish primers. And, since the 1990s, a number of pilot projects within the public system develop literacy skills in L1, either as the point of departure of schooling or as a supplementary activity to L2 literacy teaching. On the whole, given extended

poverty in indigenous regions and poor conditions of education along with transitional and submersion programs, the indigenous educational system exhibits the poorest results in general proficiency among the different subsystems.

Work in Progress

Until the last decade of the twentieth century, the federal government sustained through DGEI a bilingual and bicultural model as the target of indigenous education. School children were expected to develop coordinate bilingualism, i.e., to become fluent in the four basic skills in both languages and to know where and when to use each of them. Similarly, both cultures were to be present through appropriate content matters. During the 1990s, the label “bicultural” was replaced by the new concept of “intercultural bilingual education” on the grounds that the term “bicultural” implied a dichotomous worldview that separated cultures inappropriately. The new intercultural bilingual perspective in turn would propel the recognition, knowledge, and integration of both cultures in a pluralistic enrichment perspective (Muñoz Cruz 2006). Both languages should now be the medium and object of instruction (DGEI 2010).

The federal government created new institutions. CGEIB, the General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education (2001) within the Ministry of Education (SEP), was to provide indigenous education with appropriate materials and strategies, as well as course designs on all levels. The main thrust of CGEIB was to develop strategies for intercultural education for mainstream education which was to be intercultural for the country as a whole, meaning that all students in basic education (K-9) ought to be educated in understanding pluricultural enrichment knowledge, as well as developing tolerance and positive attitudes toward indigenous cultures and languages. This approach has been the official policy since 2003; it materialized in an integrated reform of basic education in 2008, including the production of new official textbooks (SEP 2010).

INALI, the National Institute of Indigenous Languages, was created in 2003 sustained by a General Law of Linguistic Rights for Indigenous Peoples promulgated the same year. Its purpose is to reinforce, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages inside and outside education. During the same period, the federal government founded ten new intercultural universities in indigenous areas to grant access to tertiary education for indigenous students, with new course programs relevant to indigenous communities: sustainable indigenous agriculture, legal anthropology, traditional medicine, and language and culture. All the new policies and institutions were created as top-down initiatives, with hardly any consultation or participation of the targeted indigenous communities.

A new area of study was motivated by the massive migration of indigenous families to the cities and to the USA. Tinajero and Englander (2016) and Rebolledo (2008), among others, studied how indigenous children were faring in urban contexts, as well as in the USA.

The federal government maintained the dogma of a unified curriculum for all school children. This was supported by a neoliberal discourse of educational

modernization, quality, productivity, and competition. As of 2010, the ILs were to be introduced in the curriculum of all indigenous schools as a specific content matter under the label of “curriculum parameters.” But these are kept separate from other subject matter which continues to be taught in Spanish in most schools. Thus, the advantages of a “content and language integrated learning” approach (CLIL), a trademark of many modern bilingual programs, are not mobilized, and the ILs are not propelled as languages of instruction and thus of functional prestige. The ILs are labeled “additional languages,” parallel to the introduction of English under the same name as a new compulsory subject starting in preprimary grade 3 in the general curriculum. Since an IL is to be taught in the indigenous schools, whereas mainstream students receive English as a subject, the perverse effect of such a language policy is that the ILs have to compete with English in the same curriculum slot across systems. Given massive indigenous migration to the USA, it is hard to believe that native communities will accept this policy arrangement which excludes them from learning English. Recently, the conceptualization of the ILs as “additional languages” has been given up. The policy dilemma, however, persists.

Future Directions

Since the turn of the century, discourses of ethnicity, interculturalism, and decolonization in education have moved into the center of academic and educational debate in Latin America (see Bertely Busquets and González Apodaca 2003; López 2009). Interculturalism as a normative principle is understood as the respectful communication and negotiation, including mutual understanding, between different ethno-linguistic groups that coexist in a given society (Schmelkes 2006); it is supposed to counteract existing asymmetries and goes beyond the liberal concept of multiculturalism as the recognition of diversity. Intercultural bilingual education (IBE) should teach and reinforce the indigenous students’ cultures and languages first and gradually introduce components of the national culture and language as a second step (Monsonyi and Rengifo 1983). In its more radical variety, IBE implies the struggle against discrimination and inequality and questions the very nature of the nation-state. Decolonization in turn refers to an increasing questioning of the universal character of the Occidental knowledge system imposed by colonization (Quijano 2007) and to the right of indigenous peoples to (re)construct their own epistemologies, to have them respected, and to use them in education and society. In this process of reconstruction, the core value of ILs, both for identity formation and the development of knowledge systems, should be evident. However, although in its origins languages and cultures in Latin America were considered to be closely linked and dependent on each other, the ideological discourses of interculturalism and later decolonization are driving the debate away from bilingualism and the language question.

This distancing from bilingualism occurs for reasons that need urgent research. So far, two interrelated motives have emerged which represent, at least in part, covert policies. Throughout history, language has constituted the single most important core value of indigenous identity in Mexico, both in its endo- and its exo-adscription,

even more so than in other Latin American countries. Indigenous education was established for the sole reason that most indigenous children did not speak Spanish. And an indigenous people or individuals who lost their language were no longer considered “Indian.” Until 2000, the national census counted as indigenous-only speakers of indigenous languages. In 2010, however, it included, for the first time in history, a new question about self-identification. 6.7 million citizens (6.6 % of the Mexican population) declared themselves to be speakers of an indigenous language, but a much larger total of 15.7 million (14.9 % of the Mexican population) identified themselves as indigenous which created a new majority of nine million Indians who do not speak any native language. This tendency can be observed all over Latin America where a surge in self-identification doubled the number of indigenous citizens from one census to the next in countries like Brazil or Chile where the indigenous population has previously been counted through self-identification.

Sociolinguistics has traditionally identified minority language shift as part and parcel of a reorientation of ethnic identity, away from the ethnic minority and moving toward mainstream society. This relation no longer holds in Mexico in the same way it did before, due to increasing ethnic consciousness and indigenous movements but also to the creation of social, economic, and legal programs that provide advantages for those who are recognized as members of a tribe, as occurs in the USA and Canada. This new and growing community is being constituted and made visible as a collective subject that demands recognition and attention. Intercultural education, putting bilingualism in a second place, appears to be the appropriate offer, which coincides with a new power structure in academia and politics based on the control of the label “intercultural.”

The second reason for the distancing from bilingualism is that the design and implementation of successful bilingual programs turned out to be much more difficult and complex than some optimistic perspectives projected a few decades ago. This, of course, is not only the case in Mexico or in indigenous education but applies to bilingual education globally. In Mexican indigenous education, the challenge to design and put to practice a general model and teaching materials, where Spanish and the ILs function as both languages of study and of instruction, with flexible applications according to a variety of sociolinguistic contexts, has not yet been met appropriately. To achieve the benefits of bilingual education would require a level of teacher training, teaching quality, and commitment which the Mexican educational system is far from being able to offer. Instead, it seems to be much easier to concentrate on the intercultural component of indigenous education because it does not require such a rigorous design as the bilingual part, and as a matter of fact, any inclusion of content from both cultures involved is labeled today as “intercultural.”

In sum, despite advances in the promulgation of educational and linguistic rights, little significant progress has been achieved until 2016 in terms of the design and implementation of appropriate bilingual education. At the same time, indigenous language loss advances at an accelerated pace via transitional bilingualism, mainly among the new generations (Embriz Osorio and Zamora Alarcón 2012). Whereas some 40 years ago a majority of indigenous children in Mexico entered primary school as IL monolinguals or incipient bilinguals, since the end of the twentieth

century, this relation has been inversed. Thus, the central questions of indigenous education as *bilingual* education remain largely unsolved in Mexico.

Notwithstanding general stalemate or slow advances on the national level, there are an increasing number of initiatives at the local and regional levels to improve indigenous education and forge new relations between academic achievement and bilingual language use (e.g., Meyer and Maldonado 2004; Coronado-Malagón and Mena-Ledesma 2010; Vargas Garduño 2014; see Podestá Siri and Martínez Buenabad 2003 for more summaries). Mostly opposed to mainstream practice, the new experimental projects are based on a pluricultural conception of the state and the full respect for Indian peoples and their ethnic rights. They claim as their target the maintenance or revitalization of Indian cultures and languages. Most of them remain within the public school system and try to render the rigid official curriculum more flexible. A few experiences such as the Unión de Maestros de la Nueva Educación para México (UNEM) in Chiapas operate as independent schools that develop radically different programs (Sartorello 2009) with no official recognition and finance.

There are local initiatives of indigenous teachers to develop mother tongue education. One example is carried out among the P'urhepecha of Michoacán. In 1995 the P'urhepecha teachers of two bilingual elementary schools in the central highlands of Mexico introduced significant changes to the previous transitional curriculum. Since then, they have been teaching all subject matter including literacy and mathematics in P'urhepecha, the children's first language. The most difficult part was to develop their own writing skills and the necessary academic discourse for all subject matters in their language. Classroom observation and test findings have shown very clearly that students who had acquired literacy in their L1 achieved significantly higher scores in both languages than those who were taught reading and writing only in Spanish (see Hamel 2009 for a general description of the school project). Different from most indigenous schools in Mexico, P'urhepecha had become the legitimate, unmarked language of all interaction at school, a sociolinguistic achievement still quite exceptional in indigenous education. In several years of cooperation with a research team, the schools developed their own validated curriculum based on L1 literacy, content teaching of most subject matters in L1, and a specially designed syllabus for Spanish as L2 (Hamel and Francis 2006). This enrichment curriculum serves now as a model for intercultural bilingual education for other communities and schools. The collaborative work demonstrates the validity of the "common underlying proficiency" hypothesis (Cummins 2000), since success in Spanish L2 literacy is best explained through the previous development of core proficiencies and academic discourse abilities in L1, which could then be accessed much more easily in L2.

The recent developments outlined above and in the previous section require urgent checks and underpinnings from solid empirical research. Studies in the field of indigenous education over the past decade have centered on an array of topics that cluster around indigenous education such as teacher training, teachers' attitudes and ideologies (González Apodaca 2009), and discourses about intercultural education (Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2011). There is, however, a critical shortage of data-driven investigation about central topics such as the bilingual classroom and learning processes, and there are virtually no broad research projects that evaluate bilingual

literacy development and its relation to academic achievement in culturally more appropriate ways for indigenous education than traditional testing.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Indigenous Bilingual Education in Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Indigenous Bilingual and Revitalization-Immersion Education in Canada and the USA](#)
- ▶ [Teaching for Transfer in Multilingual School Contexts](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- I. Sichra: [Language Diversity and Indigenous Literacy in the Andes](#). In Volume: Literacies and Language Education
- L. de León: [Indigenous Language Policy and Education in Mexico](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
- T. Nikula: [CLIL: A European Approach to Bilingual Education](#). In Volume: Second and Foreign Language Education

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