Indigenous Languages:

Nahuatl, Quechua, & Maya

A Study of Multilingual Immigrant Students & Their Families

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Introduction

This study investigated how immigrants from Latin America who speak indigenous languages perceive and respond to social, racial, linguistic, and cultural factors in the United States. Understanding the experiences of immigrants who speak an indigenous language may prove beneficial for teachers, students, policymakers, and others who want to understand the dynamics of the immigration of indigenous persons to the United States and the impact they have on American communities, especially the Latino community in the United States.

According to Fernando Peñalosa's (1986) *Trilingualism in the Barrio: Mayan Indians in Los Angeles,* there has been an interest in the transitional nature of bilingualism, but much less attention has been focused on populations in which more than two languages are in daily use, and whether the differences between bilingualism and trilingualism are a matter of degree or of kind. This study is partly based on the research of Peñalosa (1986) who found that language may serve as a vehicle for social mobility.

In general, the research indicates indigenous immigrants from Latin America perceive Spanish as a language of prestige, a means for social mobility, and as a buffer against discrimination, especially when viewed as a minority within a minority by the larger Latino community. Peñalosa (1986) found that the designation of indigenous identity is not based on racial genetics, but instead based on speaking an indigenous language. For example, when a speaker of Maya acquires the Spanish language, he or she may then have the option of participating in the larger Latino society. Once an indigenous person can communicate in Spanish, he or she may be considered Latino.

Although Maya may not be classified as an endangered language, in Southern California some Mayan immigrants are experiencing a loss of their native language. In some indigenous households, the native language has been endangered or has been placed at the bottom of the list of preferred languages. When a language is lost, some language expressions cannot be translated, reflections of unique aspects of a culture may be absent, and a family's oral history may never be retold with the same emphasis (Kwik, 1998). As a result, in the United States the use of English is reducing or completely displacing the use of minority languages (Kwik, 1998).

According to the work of Gladwin (2004), Light (1995), and Peñalosa (1986), immigrants who speak an indigenous language, and who do not transmit it to their children, view learning Spanish as beneficial and prestigious. In addition, persons less sure of their status and identity may be reluctant to admit they speak an indigenous language. They do this for self-preservation, to shield themselves from discrimination, for social mobility, and for assimilation in the United States (Gladwin, 2004; Light, 1995; Peñalosa, 1986).

Although there are known dialects of the major indigenous languages of Latin America, this study uses the term "indigenous language" whether the participants speak an official indigenous language or dialect. Also, in this study, the terms "indigenous language," "native language," and "minority language" are used interchangeably.

Methodology

This study examined the multicultural and multilingual experiences of six participants, five of whom speak an indigenous language. There were three interviews conducted with three married couples with children. All of the couples indicated they were dealing with the transmission of the indigenous language and culture to their children. All of the participant couples were married in their home country before immigrating to the United States. The three participant families try to preserve the languages of three major pre-Colombian empires—Nahuatl from the Aztecs, Quechua from the Incas, and Maya from the Mayan people.

The study included interviewing the couples, transcribing the interviews, and categorizing the responses into various language use categories. The general categories include: use of indigenous language in small towns or villages; perceptions and

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practices regarding language use; parents' transmission of language and culture to children; acquisition and use of indigenous language; and learning and using of Spanish at school.

Nahuatl, Quechua, and Maya are the indigenous languages spoken by the participants of this study. The participants also speak Spanish and are in the process of acquiring English. The three husbands, Gregorio, Cristobal, and Lorenzo, are more fluent in Spanish and know more English than the wives, Beatriz, Mary, and Juanita, respectively. Mary is the only one that does not speak an indigenous language.

Beatriz and Gregorio have three children, Mary and Cristobal have two children, and Juanita and Lorenzo have a child. Beatriz and Gregorio have been in the United States for approximately ten years, Mary and Cristobal for approximately four years, and Juanita and Lorenzo for approximately seven years. Beatriz and Gregorio speak Nahuatl; Cristobal speaks Quechua; Juanita and Lorenzo speak Maya.

Interview Questions

Table 1 provides information regarding the interview questions. There were 22 questions posed to the participants.

Design and Procedure

The interviews sought to elicit information about the participants' educational experiences and personal history, especially issues of language acquisition and language development. The participants described their life experiences as well as their values, expectations, and perceptions during the interviews. Although the participants were given options where they could be interviewed, the three participant couples preferred to be interviewed in their homes.

Each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. As a follow up procedure, the participant couples were contacted via telephone to clarify interview responses that were unclear. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and recorded on audio tapes and subsequently transcribed into English. This study is similar to the research conducted by Gladwin (2004) who sought to determine how immigrant families who speak indigenous languages transmit their language and culture to their children.

Findings

Use of Indigenous Language in Small Towns or Villages

The participants used indigenous languages more so in small towns as opposed to large cities in their native countries. For example, Cristobal who is from Peru, stated, "In my village everyone spoke, speaks, Quechua and even if people know how to speak Spanish, everyone speaks in Quechua." Also, Beatriz whose family is from a small town in central Mexico said, "I learned Nahuatl. We only spoke Nahuatl at home with my parents and brothers and sisters and grandparents." Furthermore, Juanita and Lorenzo, who are also from small villages in Yucatán, Mexico indicated that they "speak Maya because it is our language."

The participants indicated that in large cities in their native countries there are fewer speakers of indigenous languages, and when speakers of indigenous languages arrive in a city, they reserve the use of an indigenous language to familial interaction. Peñalosa (1986) also found similar behavior in his research.

The participants' use of the indigenous language was perceived as a means of communication in immediate relationships, yet Spanish was used primarily outside the village community, which corroborates the work of Peñalosa (1986) who found indigenous language speakers did not use the minority language in public discourse. Additional research (Bixar, Pimentel, & Juarez, 2008; Helmberger, 2006) indicates the implementation of Spanish in everyday transactions and interactions began when indigenous language speakers migrated to a major city in their homeland and increased when they immigrated to an urban center in the United States. Ultimately, the Spanish language became a rite of passage for immigrants who speak an indigenous language (England, 2003).

All the participants who speak an indigenous language spoke only the indigenous language in the home while growing up in their home country. Also, in their home country, they had few, if any, formal opportunities to develop indigenous language literacy because indigenous languages were not taught in the schools they attended.

Home life in small towns and villages contributed to women being less schooled than the men, although they used the indigenous language more than the men (Peñalosa, 1986). Even after years of attending adult education courses, the women were less literate and less proficient in Spanish and English than the men.

Perceptions and Practices Regarding Language Learning

The members of the three households reported learning and using the indigenous language in the home with both immediate and extended family. For example, Gregorio claimed, "We always spoke Nahuatl in the family and many people in the town spoke in Nahuatl. At home we spoke in Nahuatl and with most of my friends we spoke in Nahuatl and Spanish." In recalling her family's language practices during her childhood, Juanita remembered, "I, we, spoke Maya, only Maya" and Lorenzo

Table 1

Personal history questions dealt with:	Language questions related to:	Questions involving culture included:
The participants' birthplace	Teaching the native culture and indigenous language to children	The number of people that are addressed in Spanish, English, and an indigenous language
Childhood and adolescence	The children's perception of indigenous language and culture	Language and culture
The language they learned	Maintaining indigenous language and culture	Children's perceptions dealing with multiculturalism and multilingualism
Early language instruction	When and where indigenous language is used	Differences and similarities between the indigenous language and culture to that of the national language and culture of their home country How living in the United States has affected their children's learning of the home language, culture, and values Perceptions of the United States' culture Children's loss of native culture and language

recalled, "I learned Maya with my family and I remember we only spoke in Maya when I was a boy . . . . We talked only Maya in the house."

Juanita shared her views of language use with family members and with non-family members:

> Like I said, my husband and I speak only in Maya with each other and with our son, but sometimes we don't tell people we don't know that we speak a dialect, unless it is necessary to mention it. With other people I try to talk with them in Spanish, with my little Spanish, the best that I can.

Moreover, Cristobal commented, "I learned Quechua first as a child . . . I learned Quechua from my family, my parents, and family members . . . at home we mostly spoke in Quechua." In addition, an association to home and family was directly based on the use of the indigenous language because it was the first language learned. For example, Cristobal indicated, "The first language I learned as a child was Quechua so it has a connection to home and family to me." Gregorio recalled with a similar experience, "When I feel the most comfortable talking about my ideas it is in Nahuatl . . . . Plus, it is part of my memory of family and an important part of my childhood, my life, my person."

Parents' Transmission of Language and Culture to Children

A finding dealing with parents' transmission of language and culture to their children revealed there are various degrees or levels of transmitting indigenous language and culture to the children. For example, at home Cristobal speaks an indigenous language, Quechua, but he is not teaching it to his children. Since Mary speaks Spanish only, family conversations are in Spanish despite Cristobal's desire of his children learning the indigenous language. This finding suggests an increased probability of indigenous language loss in the home if the mother does not speak the indigenous language (Gladwin, 2004; Peñalosa, 1986). In other words, the children would be inclined to learn and use the indigenous language only if the mother also speaks the language.

The transmission of culture goes beyond an appreciation of art artifacts to include the transfer of values, traditions, norms, ethics, and appropriate behavior (Gladwin, 2004; Light, 1995; Peñalosa, 1986). For example, when the participants referred to culture they did not mean a display of artifacts in a museum. For the participants, transmitting culture included children honoring parents and grandparents, greeting elders, helping with chores, and appreciating traditional music. In other words, this finding revealed a strong association between indigenous language and cultural norms.

Beatriz and Gregorio are from central Mexico. They attempt to transmit culture and their native language similar to how Juanita and Lorenzo transmit culture and language to their children. For example, Beatriz suggested, "We try to talk to them as much as possible in Nahuatl and we make it a requirement for them to talk to us in Nahuatl unless they cannot find the correct word in Nahuatl, then they use a word in Spanish." Gregorio said, "Yes, we attempt to give them our customs and traditions because these are the only values we have to give them, to teach them . . ." When Beatriz was asked how her sons view the Nahuatl language and culture she answered, "They appear to be fine with the Nahuatl language and customs because I talk to them mostly in Nahuatl . . . . We listen to typical, traditional music in Nahuatl . . ."

Acquisition and Use of Indigenous Language

The participants were aware that English is at the top of the linguistic hierarchy in the United States, and Spanish is the most used language in the local Latino community. In regard to their children, the participants considered the indigenous language as the language of communication with immediate and extended family. Conversely, Spanish is viewed as the language of interaction in employment settings and for economic survival, and English as the language for university studies, white-collar professions, and social mobility.

Although Spanish and English serve as a means of communication with the larger society and the world, maintaining the indigenous language sustains a collective cultural bond among its speakers. However, minority language may serve to unite those who speak it, but also to seclude those who opt not to speak it or transmit it to their children (Giles & Powesland, 1975; Tajfel, 1974).

This study found the participants primarily used the home as the locale for acquiring and maintaining the indigenous language. The participants felt the use of indigenous language was not highly regarded in the larger society, but they knew the use of the native language was instrumental for effective communication among family members, close family friends, and fellow villagers. The realization that the indigenous language is not valued by their countrymen is similar to Spanish not being highly regarded in the United States, which relegates the indigenous language to a third tier status (Lipski, 2005).

Learning and Use of Spanish at School

All of the participants who learned an indigenous language as a first language and Spanish as a second language learned Spanish at school. Also, the level of Spanish fluency varied according to the individual's number of years of formal education. Additionally, professional careers could not be achieved in an indigenous language because there were no schools, technical institutes, or universities that offered programs of study in an indigenous language.

For example, Cristobal stated,

> It was in Lima (capital of Peru) where we used Spanish .... In school, I learned to read and write in Spanish ....

Lorenzo talked about his experiences in school,

> I learned Spanish in school .... The teachers taught us different subjects in Spanish only .... I don't think the teachers knew Maya because we [the students] always talked to the teachers in Spanish in school.

On the contrary, Juanita did not learn Spanish because

> I never went to school. In my village there were no schools at that time, so I never went to school. This is why I did not learn to read or write.

Beatriz attended school until the third grade and she affirmed, "That's why I did not learn how to read and write very well." She elaborated further when she clarified, "I meant to say that I did learn how to read and write Spanish in school, but not very well, but I never learned how to read or write in Nahuatl."

None of the participants of this study who spoke an indigenous language could read or write their native language. For example, Juanita did not learn to read or write any language, since she did not attend school as a child. Gladwin (2004) also found that speakers of indigenous languages generally are unable to read and write their indigenous language. One of the participants, Mary, although she knows how to read and write Spanish, she does not speak an indigenous language and, therefore, her comments were not included in this study.

The five participants who speak an indigenous language learned it in the home, but none learned to read it or write it. None of the participants learned or

studied any subject matter in an indigenous language. Therefore, from an early age the students who spoke an indigenous language internally linked it to private, familial conversation, while Spanish was used for public, societal communication.

Discussion

This study revealed significant concepts and issues that have relevance for teachers, administrators, school staff, public servants, and researchers who desire to better serve indigenous individuals and communities. According to Gladwin (2004), it is instrumental for educators to appreciate indigenous culture and language in the United States as it may facilitate academic success among immigrant students who speak indigenous languages. To avoid possible negative academic and cognitive consequences, in addition to familial alienation due to diminished levels of loyalty to traditions and language, developing a positive indigenous identity may foster academic success (Riegelhaupt, Carrasco, & Brandt, 2003).

The ability to foster academic success can be enhanced by an educator's awareness of the needs and challenges of persons who speak indigenous languages, such as the desire to transmit the indigenous language and culture to their children. The implications for the field of education depend on the ability of educators, administrators, school board members, community activists, social workers, and researchers to foster solidarity and equality for students who speak indigenous languages.

According to Peñalosa (1986), immigrants who speak an indigenous language desire to learn English and are conscious of English being the language most often used in international communication. Nevertheless, they recognize it is not practical to not learn and use Spanish in Southern California. For example, Juanita describes the use of Spanish to survive in the Latino community:

> When my husband and I got this apartment where we are living now, all of the talks were in Spanish. The representative of the apartment community spoke Spanish and almost all of our neighbors speak Spanish. Even in the English class here in the community, all the students speak Spanish to each other, and we can talk to the teacher in Spanish. Another example is my husband works in construction and all of his coworkers and his managers speak Spanish. We would be very isolated if we did not speak Spanish.

The research of Gladwin (2004), the work of Light (1995), and the research of Peñalosa (1986) include significant findings that serve as the basis of recommendations, suggestions, and advice for teachers, administrators, school staff, and researchers who are in positions to improve educational programs for indigenous immigrant students.

For example, while considering implementation of an English-only program, it is vital to understand that for many indigenous people, speaking Spanish is viewed as an immediate asset whereas speaking English may not be. When a teacher is monolingual, he or she should consider the transitional stages indigenous students experience while becoming trilingual and tricultural, which are complicated by the learning of new values, norms, and expectations. For example, the Maya perceive speaking Spanish as a means of shielding themselves from discrimination within the Latino community, but also as a means to interact with their countrymen who are also their neighbors, coworkers, and classmates. Again, according to Juanita, "We would be very isolated if we did not speak Spanish."

Adult literacy teachers should develop and implement lessons that are collaborative and interactive instead of relying primarily on a top-bottom lecture approach. Adult learners not only develop English skills in the classroom, but also listening and speaking skills while conversing with others (Knowles, 1989; Wang, 2003). For example, while speaking about her husband, Juanita indicated, "He can communicate with people in English, even though he never went to English classes, even if it is not very good English, but he can defend himself."

Adult literacy educators may benefit from being aware that Mayan immigrant men may be more apt to acquire English proficiency than women, who are historically less schooled than the men. In addition, Mayan immigrant women use the native language more then men and are less literate and less proficient in Spanish and English than men and children, although they may have attended adult education courses.

It behooves adult literacy educators to be patient with indigenous female students and understand that progress with females may take longer than with males. Patience is paramount for all teachers, particularly for adult literary educators who need compassion and empathy for adult learners who did not have the opportunity to acquire literacy in any language. For example, Juanita stated:

> when I was young there was no school in my village, so we never went to school, not even a single day. This is why I cannot read or write.

The needs, abilities, and attitudes of adult learners are constantly changing. The adult educator may stimulate growth in English literacy, but also cultivate appreciation for the students' native cultures. It is possible that adult learners' changes in environment and aging may prevent adults from accepting new or different concepts from what they already have in their mindset (Wang, 2003). Therefore, an important role of adult educators is to understand challenges and potential rewards through fostering a collaborative learning environment in which all students may reinforce their English language development while nurturing their ethnic identities.

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Elementary and secondary teachers' efforts to help indigenous students develop English proficiency would be welcomed by indigenous children who aspire to adopt English. On the contrary, Mayan children resist learning and speaking their indigenous language and are more incentivized to practice Spanish and English. According to Peñalosa (1986), Mayan children commonly experience transitional stages of developmental trilingualism to more stable Spanish-English bilingualism (Peñalosa, 1986).

Teachers, administrators, and school staff may facilitate connections with immigrant students through appreciating, respecting, and celebrating diversity while welcoming their indigenous heritage. Ultimately, teachers' kindness, love, and caring for their students are essential, especially for those who are minorities within minority groups.

Pre-K through twelfth grade teachers and adult literacy educators, while being in the vanguard of language policy and

curriculum implementation, could profit from assuming a respectful approach to language minority groups' interests, recognizing diversity within minority groups, valuing their students' daily life experiences, and delivering equitable education (Corson, 2001).

Teachers should be aware that students want to learn English. Spanish-speaking school children most likely will learn English, but they may also be members of an indigenous language speaking community. In the classroom, indigenous languages should not be perceived as inferior by the teacher or students. It is still pivotal for teachers to be respectful of all of their students, and willing to celebrate their heritage.

Lastly, the implications to educational policy ultimately rest upon school teachers, administrators, policy makers, community members, and researchers and their efforts to identify strategies that will promote academic success among language minority students. Indeed, it is beneficial for teachers to be aware that language minority students may be dealing with more than one minority language, and that the loss of the language with the least prestige may lead to academic challenges (Gladwin, 2004).

Chavajay and Rogoff (2002) found that formal schooling contributes to the reshaping of traditional collaborative social organization among indigenous students. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing the cultural and linguistic perspectives, preferences, and practices of immigrants who speak an indigenous language may foster academic success among such student population.

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