

# Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Volume 1

## LANGUAGE POLICY AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION

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## INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION IN MEXICO

### INTRODUCTION

The policies which nation-states, and their societal majorities, apply to their ethnic and linguistic minorities have become a touchstone to evaluate the quality of democracy, pluricultural commitment and the construction of modern states in almost any part of the world. Therefore, educational and language policies for the minorities can no longer be dismissed as marginal components of state policy that may be dealt with outside the domains of mainstream power relations and the state. Mexico is a paradigmatic case in point. At least in America it represents the probably most-centralized, all-embracing and vertical case of nation-state building. It did not, however, achieve its historical goals of creating a homogeneous nation (cf. May, *Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship*, Volume 1) and fully assimilating the indigenous peoples in the 500 years since the beginning of Spanish colonization. On the contrary, the Mexican indigenous population is the largest in the continent, although language shift advances in many language groups. During the twentieth century the indigenous population, measured as speakers of the 62 surviving languages by the Mexican national census, has grown steadily in absolute numbers, but declined as a percentage of the total population from 2.2 million in 1930 (=16%) to 7.2 million (=7.2%) in 2000 (INEGI, 2000).

To understand the apparent paradox in Mexico between present overt policies that support diversity and indigenous language maintenance on the one hand, and covert pressure for assimilation on the other, we have to revise historical and present-day ideological orientations in language policy. In the following section, I briefly outline the history of language policy for indigenous peoples from colonial times to the present day in Mexico. Next, I consider the central problems of general language and culture orientations and the use of the languages in indigenous education. I then refer to recent changes in legislation and discuss to what extent a linguistic rights perspective developed over time. In this chapter, the focus is on general language policy and linguistic rights issues, which relate to indigenous education in Mexico. I deal with concrete programmes of bilingual education and their outcomes

in the corresponding chapter on 'Bilingual Education for Indigenous Communities in Mexico' in Volume 5.

#### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS: LANGUAGE POLICY FROM COLONIZATION TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Education and language as instruments of state building and control have played a major role ever since complex states emerged on Mexican territory. The Aztecs developed their own educational system, an Academy of Science and a selective language policy to govern their vast empire (Heath, 1972). Throughout nearly three centuries of Colonial Empire (1519–1810) the Spanish Vice Kingdom attempted to build a hierarchical society modelled on Spain with the King, the Church and the Spanish language at the top. After independence in 1810, the new Mexican-born bourgeoisie pursued the construction of a unified, homogeneous nation-state as the main overall objective of state policy (cf. May, *Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship*, Volume 1) up until the present (Cifuentes, 1999, 2002; del Valle and Gabriel-Stheeman, 2002; Hidalgo, 1994).

In which language(s) should public administration, exploitation and the saving of souls be accomplished? Two basic strategies of language policy for indigenous peoples established continuity between the two regimes (Hamel, 1994; the classical work is Heath, 1972; see also Nahmad Sitton, 1982). The first and generally dominant strategy considered the assimilation, that is dissolution, of indigenous peoples in Mexico and the suppression of their languages to be a prerequisite for building the new polity (see also McCarty, *Language Education Planning and Policies by and for Indigenous Peoples*, Volume 1). A second position favoured the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures in this process, without giving up the ultimate aim of uniting nation and state. The first strategy imposed direct Hispanicization (*castellanización*) through submersion programmes: the national language was considered to be the only target and medium of instruction. Transitional programmes reflecting the second strategy applied diverse bilingual methods where the indigenous languages played a subordinate, instrumental role as the languages of instruction and initial alphabetization. The complex process of implementing political, spiritual and cultural domination developed full of contradictions and advanced at different speeds in different phases of history (Hamel, 2006).

The century from independence in 1810 to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) meant a time of devastating destruction of indigenous organization and communities, a severe reduction of its population and the period when Spanish became the majority language in the country (83% by 1895, Cifuentes, 2002). Different from most other

Latin American countries, however, the turn into the twentieth century saw a national bourgeoisie that explicitly constructed a new national identity based on the Mestizo as the new prototypical citizen, the symbiosis of the two high cultures, the European and the Aztec-Mayan that Mexico inherited. The new national ideology was significantly reinforced after the Mexican Revolution. It allowed Mexico to create distance and at the same time weave multiple alliances along a triple cultural and linguistic borderline to foster its own nationalism:

1. Mexico encompassed the mystical indigenous identity founded in the high pre-Colombian indigenous civilizations, which distinguished the new nation from Spain, the USA and most other Latin American countries;
2. As part of the New World, Mexico forged a unity of American countries and contrasted them to Europe, especially to Spain;
3. At the same time, as inheritor of the Spanish colonial tradition, Mexico established bonds of solidarity with the other Spanish speaking countries and built a barrier against US cultural and linguistic hegemony.

Throughout the twentieth century, a paradoxical process developed: on the one hand, indigenous language loss accelerated dramatically, as in many other parts of the world; on the other, a contradictory state discourse emerged to preserve the indigenous languages. At first, homogenizing policies prevailed. The Mexican Revolution consolidated the Mestizo ideology as the racial, ideological and linguistic basis of the post-revolutionary society. Assimilationist education using direct methods of Spanish teaching dominated in indigenous areas (Garza Cuarón, 1997). The establishment of the new Federal Ministry of Education in 1921, an institution that by 1990 would employ some 1.5 million teachers and bureaucrats, propelled an education that aimed to 'overcome the evolutionary distance which separates the Indians from the present era, transforming their mentality, orientations and customs, to incorporate them into civilized modern life ...'. (SEP, 1927, p. 35; all translations are mine)

By the mid-1930s, Franz Boas' cultural relativism hypothesis gained ground through his teaching and research on Indian languages and cultures in Mexico. It helped to counterbalance evolutionary theories of the previous period with their linguistic and cultural hierarchies. The concept of *Indigenismo* emerged, which, similar to *Orientalism* in the British and French tradition, could be sketched as 'the whole set of ideas about Indians in the heads of non-Indians' (Villoro, 1950). Given the failure of assimilationist policies and Spanish-only programmes of education, a new recognition of the role of vernacular languages emerged. New pilot projects of mother tongue education were launched, among which was the well-known *Proyecto Tarasco* in

central Mexico (Aguirre Beltrán, 1983; Barrera-Vázquez, 1953; see Hamel, *Bilingual Education for Indigenous Communities in Mexico*, Volume 5).

#### MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS: LANGUAGE POLICY AND INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

In 1978, the Federal Ministry of Education in Mexico concentrated previously scattered programmes for K to grade 6 indigenous primary education in a new subsystem, the General Department of Indigenous Education (DGEI). The indigenous schools had to follow the same federal syllabus and to use the compulsory textbooks as the Spanish primary schools in the country. The main difference between the latter and the indigenous schools consisted in the important fact that all teachers in the bilingual programmes were indigenous and spoke a native language as their mother tongue. Since many, if not most, pupils entered primary school with little or no knowledge of Spanish, the teachers used the vernacular language as a means of communication and instruction as long as necessary, together with the primers in Spanish. Teachers improvised their work and used both languages in a non-systematic way. Literacy and most relevant content matters were in fact developed in Spanish. This *de facto* curriculum could be framed as a mixture of a submersion and a non-systematic transitional bilingual syllabus (Hamel, 1994).

In the 1980s, the official programme was labelled 'bilingual and bicultural'. Given very poor achievement and ongoing language shift among indigenous students, the department designed a new approach based on L1 medium instruction and the teaching of Spanish as L2 (see May, *Bilingual/Immersion Education: What the Research Tells Us*, Volume 5). However, these programmes were never put to work beyond pilot projects, given political opposition in many communities, within the bureaucracy and the teachers' trade union. The most significant activity of the department consisted in the development of primers in the 40 most widely spoken indigenous languages of the country. Again, implementation lagged behind, and these teaching materials were rarely used in the classrooms.

A decade later, the label 'bicultural' was substituted by a new one, 'intercultural'. The argument, which was imported from South America without any debate or development of its own in Mexico, maintained 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 (for a critique, see Muñoz Cruz, 2002). Both languages should now be the medium and

object of instruction (DGEI, 1999). In 2001, a newly elected conservative government created a new Coordination in Intercultural Bilingual Education (CGEIB) within the Federal Ministry of Education, which developed a great number of projects, studies and proposals. The main thrust was put on the development of an intercultural orientation of knowledge and respect of indigenous cultures in mainstream education. Implementation, again, did not occur with the same intensity and speed. By the end of the administration in 2006, practically none of the proposals or even the new debates had reached the classrooms.

Contrary to what many authors (e.g. Modiano, 1988) had argued about indigenous education in Mexico in the past, systematic alphabetization in vernacular languages is not a real, general practice in public Indian education, although official policy established since the 1980s asserts that indigenous education should be carried out through the medium of L1. At present, a range of pedagogical practices are in use in the indigenous educational system in Mexico. The most widespread practical model propels transition to Spanish:

1. Indigenous schools have to apply the general primary school curriculum designed for monolingual Spanish speaking pupils; indigenous teachers and schools are expected to make minor adjustments to fit the needs and conditions of their pupils.
2. The national compulsory primers and textbooks are used as the main pedagogical tool; they are designed to teach the subject matter and literacy in Spanish as L1; in no way are they appropriate to learn Spanish as L2. The existing official materials in indigenous languages are rarely used alongside the Spanish textbooks.
3. Although most pupils have little knowledge of Spanish at entrance level, there is no specific place in the curriculum for Indian language and culture. Moreover, no systematic teaching of Spanish as L2 is provided.
4. The indigenous language serves a subordinate function as a language of instruction, and only as long as necessary. Depending on the general language distribution patterns and levels of proficiency in Spanish, instruction in L1 may cease by grade 4 or 5.
5. No culture and language domain separation is practiced or envisaged. Thus, the dominant culture in its material, social, linguistic and cognitive dimensions invades the domains of the indigenous culture and contributes to general culture and language shift among indigenous students.

Generally speaking, low levels of proficiency and achievement obtain for indigenous students in Mexico, as elsewhere (Bertely Busquets, 1998; Citarella, 1990; see also McCarty, *Language Education Planning and Policies by and for Indigenous Peoples*, Volume 1). A systematic mismatch can also be observed between the sociocultural, linguistic

and educational needs of the indigenous student population on the one hand, and the curriculum, materials and language use at school on the other. From the point of view of both the individual and the community, these modalities of schooling tend to reproduce subordination, very often accompanied by traumatic effects for the psychological and cultural development of the pupils. As a matter of fact, the inappropriateness of the school system as such severely violates the indigenous students' educational and linguistic rights (Hamel, 1997).

Three important innovations characterize present-day linguistic dynamics in Mexico that have important consequences for indigenous education: First, the process of democratization over the past 20 years and the expansion of indigenous movements and demands, particularly since the Zapatista upsurge in 1994, have broken down the previous hegemony of multicultural and assimilationist positions within an authoritarian state. Second, Mexico's indigenous peoples are leaving behind their status as a relatively passive population, as targets of governmental programmes to combat poverty and educational backwardness. They have increasingly placed themselves as actors on the political and educational scenes. Third, the 'Indian question' could no longer be considered a marginal problem for the state that could be kept confined to indigenous rural areas. On the contrary, the most prominent claims put forward by the indigenous movement concern fundamental questions of constitutional law, of collective rights and the very essence of a pluralistic nation-state (see also May, Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship, Volume 1).

#### WORK IN PROGRESS: LANGUAGE POLICY AND LINGUISTIC RIGHTS

In contrast to indigenist and language *policies*, legislation on languages has been much less explicit in Mexican history. Linguistic rights, usually conceptualized as linguistic human rights, have only become a concern since the late 1980s. They have to be considered in the intersection of language policies and general indigenous policies. In Mexico, linguistic human rights (LHR) have always been discussed in the larger context of indigenous rights (see also McCarty, Language Education Planning and Policies by and for Indigenous Peoples, Volume 1; Skutnabb-Kangas, Human Rights and Language Policy in Education, Volume 1).

Let us consider the development of the corresponding Mexican legislation for indigenous education and languages over the period since the early 1990s, until the general Amendment on Indigenous Rights in 2001 and the 2003 General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As we shall see, legislation moved from a fairly

weak tolerance orientation to a more specific and overt promotion orientation regarding the role of indigenous language (Hidalgo, 2006; Nahmad Sitton, 2001; Pellicer, 1998; cf. May, *Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship*, Volume 1). Experiences in many parts of the world show that laws and other legal dispositions need to contain very clear and specific definitions to protect minority rights effectively. Otherwise they can be easily perverted or simply not be applied, given the prevailing asymmetric power relations (see Skutnabb-Kangas, *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education*, Volume 1).

Nowhere in the colonial, republican, or post-revolutionary constitutions did the Mexican constitution recognize the existence of Indian peoples until 1991, when an amendment to Article 4 of the Constitution was passed in Congress:

The Mexican nation has a pluricultural composition which is based originally on its Indian peoples. The law will protect and promote the development of their languages, cultures, usages, customs, resources, and specific forms of social organization. . . .

This amendment was severely criticized as too limited to indigenous *cultural* rights in isolation, without granting at the same time their economic, social, political and territorial rights. After the outbreak of the indigenous Zapatista Army's (EZLN) rebellion in southeast Mexico in 1994, followed by extended peace negotiations with the government (Díaz-Polanco, 1997), a proposal for the constitutional recognition of indigenous cultural rights was finally sent to Congress in 2001. However, the amendment of Article 2 that was passed contained considerable changes in relation to the peace agreements; it left unsatisfied the Mexican indigenous movement far beyond the Zapatista Army and most partisan sectors of civil society. The legal text centres on the autonomic competence to regulate their internal social, political, economic and cultural life. Language and education are dealt with in passing. The indigenous peoples are granted the right to:

A. IV Preserve and enrich their languages, knowledge and all the elements that constitute their culture and identity.

The state in turn will

B. II Grant and increment the levels of education, favouring bilingual and intercultural education, literacy, completion of basic education, vocational training, secondary and tertiary education. Establish a system of grants for indigenous students at all levels. . . . Stimulate the respect and knowledge of the diverse cultures that exist in the nation.

On the whole, indigenous peoples in Mexico are granted the right to preserve and enrich their ancestral knowledge, languages and cultures. Within the state programmes, bilingual intercultural education is

mentioned but not made obligatory; it ranges among a series of other non-indigenous types of education with an assimilationist perspective.

In 2003, the Mexican Congress approved a new General Law of the Linguistic Rights for the Indigenous Peoples. It contains four chapters, including general provisions, the rights of the speakers of indigenous languages, the obligations and competencies of public institutions in this matter, and the foundation of a National Institute of Indigenous Languages, which started activities in 2005. The most significant dispositions and definitions are the following:

The object of the law is

... to regulate the recognition and protection of the indigenous peoples' and communities' individual and collective linguistic rights, as well as the promotion of the use and development of the indigenous languages. (Article 1)

The indigenous languages (IL), along with Spanish, are defined as ... national languages due to their historical origin, and have the same validity in their territories, locations and the contexts where they are spoken. (Article 4)

The IL are declared valid to carry out any public business and to access public services in them (Article 7), and the speakers are granted the right to communicate in them in private and public spheres (Article 9). Furthermore, the state grants the indigenous peoples and communities the right to access the state jurisdiction in their languages, that their customs and culture be taken into account (Article 10), and that, if necessary, they will be provided with a translator.

In Article 11, access to bilingual and intercultural education is granted, and in secondary and tertiary (university) education, interculturalism, multilingualism and the respect for diversity and linguistic rights will be promoted.

#### PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

In their political fight, the Zapatistas developed strategies that integrated specific claims (territory, resources, justice, education and language) into the overarching target of local and regional autonomy as the specific modality to exercise the right of self-determination as indigenous peoples and nations. From this perspective, language related policies and legal regulations are most likely to succeed if they are incorporated into an attempt to create the necessary conditions, including resources for language maintenance and bilingual education.

Three issues that integrate language policy, linguistic rights and curriculum should be discussed. They relate to the legal basis of the

indigenous languages, to the intercultural and bilingual (IB) curriculum, and the control over indigenous education. All these topics will have to be confronted with current implementation and its future perspectives.

As we can see, legislation of linguistic rights and indigenous education in Mexico went through significant changes in the time span of little more than a decade, from a first reference to the existence of indigenous people in the 1991 revision of the constitution to a specific body of linguistic rights and the creation of a National Institute of Indigenous Languages in 2005. The status of indigenous languages has no doubt improved. Although their definition as 'national languages' assigns no specific legal status to them, as would have been the status as 'official languages', the law established the speakers' right to use indigenous languages in public institutions and the obligation of the state to create the conditions for their successful use. In spite of significant improvement, the legal foundations of indigenous language status and, above all, of bilingual education still lack more specific definitions to protect and promote indigenous languages and enrichment bilingual education efficiently. Since intercultural bilingual education is nowhere defined in the law, the indigenous children's right to receive education, including the acquisition of literacy and other content matters in their mother tongue, remains unprotected (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education*, Volume 1). Such L1 instruction is considered a fundamental component of any enrichment bilingual curriculum for subordinated minority children.

The next question refers to the nature of the curriculum and control over indigenous education in Mexico. During recent years, a number of local innovations and creative initiatives have emerged to find new ways to develop alternative models of indigenous education, although their margins are narrow (Bertely Busquets, 1998; Bertely Busquets and González Apodaca, 2003). The most radical alternative experiments occur in the areas under Zapatista control.

In general terms, however, submersion and transitional programmes based on multicultural, assimilationist perspectives still prevail in Mexico. From the perspective of recent debates about autonomy and intercultural education, the question arises as to what extent the government is prepared to grant relative autonomy to the system of indigenous education in terms of alternative curricula and indigenous control over administration. Since the end of the 1980s, we observe an increasing disposition to grant the teaching of literacy and other content matters in the native languages where appropriate and wanted; but *content* as such has to be kept more or less homogeneous and must follow the national compulsory curriculum for Spanish-speaking children.

In other words, different from previous periods, bilingualism is now accepted and even encouraged to a certain extent; yet pluriculturalism, i.e. real diversity based on an enrichment perspective, is not. Nowhere within the public school system are the school communities entitled to propose and put into practice a syllabus that diverges significantly from the official curriculum.

In spite of its vagueness in key issues (i.e. mother tongue education) and a narrow margin for structural change, the new legal framework in Mexico has moved from prohibition to tolerance and to an albeit weak promotion of indigenous languages and cultures. It opens up new spaces and opportunities for new experiences and innovations. Unfortunately, resistance against changes remains strong within mainstream society and the indigenous communities themselves. Five hundred years of domination has left profound traces in the subordinated peoples' culture, organization and worldview. Most indigenous schoolteachers have settled for some kind of transitional bilingual programme. They themselves have interiorized a diglossic ideology, which leaves no room for their languages as the vehicle for the development of academic skills such as literacy or, in a broader context, for the development of their communities. As in many other contexts of ethnolinguistic minorities in the world, resistance to mother tongue education stems not so much from legal or curriculum constraints, but is due to interiorized barriers and social pressure from inside and outside the indigenous communities themselves. In principle, the legal framework would allow for much greater indigenous language use and related enrichment bilingual education programmes than that currently practiced by the system and its indigenous actors. Given this contradictory situation, the growing numbers of successful initiatives that show alternative ways of education (Podestá Siri and Martínez Buenabad, 2003; see examples in Hamel, *Bilingual Education for Indigenous Communities in Mexico*, Volume 5) can play a significant role in the attempt to bring about more fundamental changes on a broader basis.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The future perspectives of indigenous bilingual and intercultural education in Mexico are difficult to foresee. Neo-liberal economics and North American integration through the NAFTA Trade Agreement have to a large extent eroded the agricultural subsistence in Mexico as the territorial base for indigenous survival. 3.4 million of peasants, many of them indigenous, were forced to migrate to other areas of Mexico or to the USA during the past administration. Although many migrants maintain close connections with their home communities,

the territorial base, the density of the ancestral habitat and other fundamental components for cultural and linguistic reproduction are at risk. Given ongoing asymmetric conflict relations between Spanish (and English in the USA) and the indigenous languages (IL), the rapid reduction of monolingual IL speakers, and the severe weakening of intergenerational mother tongue transmission may all serve as indicators that rising bilingualism may only be transitional in the ongoing process of language shift.

Maintenance perspectives will rely on the growing number of indigenous organizations and grassroots initiatives, on a more profound acceptance of pluriculturalism by the dominant society, and significant changes in the economic model to re-establish social and economic sustainability in the indigenous territories.

In terms of research and academically guided development and implementation, individual ethnographic case studies abound (see an overview in Bertely Busquets, 2003). More research based on scientific approaches that permit national and international comparison is needed, however (cf. May, *Bilingual/Immersion Education: What the Research Tells Us*, Volume 5). In the last resort, changes will depend on the political forces and movements within both subordinated and mainstream society that are able and willing to incorporate major innovations in the construction of a new pluricultural and plurilingual Mexican nation-state.

*See Also:* Teresa L. McCarty: *Language Education Planning and Policies by and for Indigenous Peoples (Volume 1)*; Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education (Volume 1)*; Juan Carlos Godenzi: *Language Policy and Education in the Andes (Volume 1)*; Inge Sichra: *Language Diversity and Indigenous Literacy in the Andes (Volume 2)*; Judy Kalman: *Literacies in Latin America (Volume 2)*; Stephen May: *Bilingual/Immersion Education: What the Research Tells Us (Volume 5)*; Rainer Enrique Hamel: *Bilingual Education for Indigenous Communities in Mexico (Volume 5)*; Anne-Marie de Mejia: *Enrichment Bilingual Education in South America (Volume 5)*; Luis Enrique López and Inge Sichra: *Intercultural Bilingual Education Among Indigenous Peoples in Latin America (Volume 5)*; Stephen May: *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education (Volume 1)*

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