

Mexico

The Challenge of Literacy and Multilingualism

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Mexico's literacy development and school language policy is of interest to educators for a number of reasons. The challenges of literacy learning in a multilingual and multicultural society such as Mexico's are similar to those found in many countries. Attention to linguistic diversity in literacy teaching, however, is a rather recent focus in both research and practice. In this regard, the UNESCO (1953) declaration on the use of vernacular languages in literacy represents the modern-day turning point in educators' awareness of the complex issues involved when more than one language must be considered in teaching.

Historical Antecedents

Following the Spanish conquest in the first half of the 16th century, Mexico became a center for contact between European and indigenous languages; in effect, it was one of the first known widespread experiments in bilingual literacy in the Western hemisphere. The lessons of this experience continue to influence present-day discussions on school language policy and language teaching.

The first schools and institutes of higher learning established soon after the fall of the Aztec capital in 1521 were attended, in large part, by students who had been enrolled in the *calmécac* ("upper-track" schools) and other learning institutions of Aztec civilization. Thus, it is important to note that formal education was not *introduced* by the Spanish. The new colonial schools received a student population that was transferring, so to speak, from one system to another. The former had been destroyed by the conquest, and the latter was built on the European model. During the pre-colonial period, Náhuatl was the primary language spoken by the Aztecs and other peoples of Central Mexico. As such, it was the language of learning, art, and ceremony.

The colonial missionary-run schools, transmitters of the new culture and religion, included among their faculty members some of the leading humanist scholars of the day, such as Bernardino de Sahagún and Alonso de Molina. Particularly on the questions of language teaching and educational language policy in general, the pedagogical models they put into practice were far ahead of their time. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to

point out that in the area of bilingual literacy, present-day practice has yet to rise to the same level as that achieved by the humanist educators during the first decades of Spanish colonial rule. Since language and literacy instruction were driven by the need to achieve content objectives (primarily tied to evangelization), and not by a policy of imposing the Spanish language over and above all other considerations, literacy in Náhuatl flourished for an extended period (until the first half of the 1600s). The subsequent Spanish-only policy, promoted by the colonial administration and initially resisted by most friars, eventually prevailed, and still holds sway, despite official endorsement of dual language literacy teaching. By the late 1500s, literacy in indigenous languages (ILs) began to be undermined, never to recover from the subsequent shift to Spanish as the virtually exclusive language of reading and writing.

Nevertheless, institutes such as the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco were instrumental in the emergence of an indigenous literacy that was primarily, but not exclusively, tied to religious teaching. Literacy, taught in the missionary schools, spread and developed among a generation of indigenous writers in Náhuatl (and other Indian languages), Latin, and Spanish. Widespread use of Náhuatl survived in the area of legal documentation (titles, petitions, declarations, official letters, etc.) well into the 18th century, although it was largely pushed aside in the other domains. See Garibay (1983) on the pre-Conquest indigenous education system; Heath (1972), Lockhart (1992), Blanco (1989), and León-Portilla (1992) for an account of the early period of bilingual literacy; Gonzalbo (1988), Cifuentes & Ros (1993), and Lockhart (1991) for a discussion of the displacement of Náhuatl from the domains of literacy and formal instruction; and Pellicer (1993) for a review of exclusionary language policies that effectively drove the indigenous languages into isolation and fragmentation in local villages and towns.

The Present-Day Context of Literacy Teaching in Bilingual Communities

Successful experiments in vernacular literacy during the final years of Lázaro Cárdenas's populist regime (1934-1940) set the stage for a shift in official policy on the use of indigenous languages in school 30 years later. The most prominent of the pilot projects, the "Proyecto Tarasco," carried out in the Purépecha-speaking region

of Michoacán state, owed its success to the concentration of critical human resources: a stable and ethnolinguistically vital Purépecha-speaking community, bilingual teachers with normal school preparation, institutional support, and guidance by professional linguists (see reports by Barrera Vásquez, 1953, and del Castillo, 1945). The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) continues, to this day, to promote the development of literacy materials in Mexico's 56 native languages, based on programmatic proposals in favor of

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literacy development in both Spanish and students' mother tongues (Dirección General de Educación Indígena, 1990). We can probably point to a direct correlation, however, between the achievement gap that separates language minority children from their majority language peers, and the gap between official policy and practice (Coronado, 1992).

Clearly, the language of initial literacy instruction is one factor among several that account for academic disparities. For example, on average, only a minority of indigenous children entering 1st grade do not speak or understand the national language (NL) (see Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Información, 1990, for the latest census data). This fact, reflecting the current stage of an irreversible historical trend, has

prompted educators to consider a broader range of rationales for bilingual literacy. The following categories of language learners (among others) would correspond, hypothetically, to different biliteracy scenarios:

1) *Monolingual speakers of an IL, or IL speakers just beginning to learn Spanish.* This circumstance is associated with the traditional justification for mother tongue literacy, which still applies to a significant number of preschoolers.

2) *Children whose primary language is an IL and who possess adequate listening comprehension ability in Spanish.* While the latter condition suggests that learners will profit from early literacy instruction in the NL, a major IL component of the overall literacy program (in this case, corresponding to the student's dominant language) will maximize his or her comprehension of instruction materials.

3) *Bilingual students with complete command of Spanish, and with equivalent or diminished knowledge of the IL.* For these children, literacy learning in both languages sets the stage both for optimal development of higher-order academic language skills (Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 1996), and contributes to the maintenance of the IL (assuming this objective is perceived as possible and desirable by the actual speech community in question).

4) *Children who have very little knowledge of the indigenous language.* In the short term, bilingual literacy teaching holds out the same potential benefits as outlined for the third category of student, primarily those associated with the development of additive bilingualism and academic language proficiency (Francis, 1998, 1999).

Among the foremost challenges that bilingual literacy teaching faces is the minimal presence (nonexistent, in most cases) of the indigenous languages in the various forms of print media, and informal/interpersonal writing. Indeed, the argument can be made that in the case of languages for which written expression has always been, and continues to be, "unnatural" (e.g., introduced sporadically and artificially for the purpose of religious proselytization), and whose short- and medium-term prospects of survival are uncertain, vernacular literacy may, or should, serve a strictly transitional function toward literacy and language development in the national language. These considerations involve difficult and complex language policy decisions, ones that in all cases best correspond to the speech communities themselves. For example, such a transitional, bilingual literacy model could be appropriate in cases 1 and 2 above; variously, many communities may come to view all but Spanish-only approaches in cases 3 and 4 as impractical, pedagogically unjustified, utopian, etc.

Where biliteracy and IL development/revitalization are considered worthwhile and realizable objectives in Mexico, the virtual monopolization of written discourse by Spanish remains, perhaps, the most formidable obstacle. For example, although a vast literary archive exists for the Náhuatl language, it is as inaccessible, in practice, as it has been since it was salvaged and preserved in libraries and special collections around the world. Educators should not underestimate this extreme imbalance that affects writing in all its forms, including environmental print and everyday, informal use. It also would be a mistake to minimize the omnipresent weight of the national language, or to entertain the possibility that the importance for bilingual children of complete proficiency in Spanish can in some way be relativized.

Nevertheless, recent research on the relationship between literacy and general language development (sometimes referred to as "orality") offers teachers a framework for compensating for this imbalance. In fact, the historical lessons of the first bilingual academies of the New World are, again, very pertinent. The question that historians of literacy will continue to explore is the rapid and prodigious appropriation of the alphabetic writing system by the surviving Náhuatl-speakers. Clearly, one of the factors that accounts for this phenomenon is the high level of proficiency attained in formal oral discourse that formed part of the pre-Conquest core curriculum, a proficiency that represents the cognitive and linguistic foundation of higher-order literacy abilities.

Perhaps as a general result of social isolation and loss of control over cultural institutions that maintain these higher-order oral discourses, present-day IL speech communities also have experienced an erosion in IL use in its traditional oral domain. Nevertheless, the maintenance of an oral tradition at some level (most notably narrative) represents, without a doubt, the primary resource still available to speakers of indigenous languages who view literacy as a resource for language development.

Oral narrative requires the application of complex information processing abilities involving abstraction, such as cognitive strategies applied to the construction of discourse coherence, and certain categories of linguistic knowledge that are specific to structured texts and discourses. These proficiencies do not emerge spontaneously through the use of language in everyday conversation, but rather by means of sustained contact with more formal, structured, and less context-dependent discourses. The connection to literacy learning is evident, especially those aspects of reading and writing that are tied to the higher-order academic proficiencies. Narrative competence provides a necessary (although not sufficient) foundation for the less

predictable, more abstract, and cognitively demanding texts of the upper elementary grades.

Three Pilot Literacy Projects

Various experiments in IL literacy have sought to put into practice the SEP's official endorsement of bilingual education. We have chosen to focus attention on three that represent different combinations of objective and subjective factors that favor biliteracy. Each project corresponds to a different bilingual context and a different combination of the learning factors outlined in the four categories of language learners.

The Náhuatl Oral Narrative Project. Centered in the highlands of the Malintzin region, this project seeks to make available a series of traditional narratives to a broad cross-section of Náhuatl-speaking children, as well as to students of the language. *Tradición de narrativa oral náhuatl* (Francis & Navarrete Gomez, 1999) consists of 11 stories narrated on videotape in three versions, presented successively. First, the oral presentation is narrated. Second, the narrator is reduced to one corner of the videoscreen, and a verbatim transcription is displayed as the story is retold. Third, the second version is repeated, now in the form of a cloze activity and requiring listeners and readers to supply or identify the deleted words.

Presently in its distribution stage, this oral narrative project has the objective of exploiting a cultural and linguistic resource for both literacy and language revitalization. In fact, the oral tradition itself (i.e., the ability of the respective speech communities to transmit it) is in a stage of advanced decline in all but a handful of communities. The project (now in its second year) has identified seven communities in which the indigenous language is spoken by more than 40 percent of the population. Within this group, a significant number of younger children will be Náhuatl-dominant learners of Spanish as a second language. Distribution to the remaining 13 communities corresponds to the regions where Náhuatl has been reduced to minority status and where few elementary school-age children do not speak or understand Spanish.

Since virtually all literacy instruction, even in communities with large numbers of Náhuatl-speaking children, is in Spanish, the *Tradición de narrativa oral*

náhuatl materials offer a valuable supplement for classroom teachers. For younger, pre-literate children, versions 1 and 2 promote development of general narrative-based discourse competencies; the cloze version is designed for grades 1 and higher, where these same discourse competencies are applied to a reading comprehension task.

In most cases, teachers themselves are either mono-

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lingual Spanish speakers or bilinguals who retain only comprehension ability in Náhuatl, a limitation that excludes for all practical purposes the direct presentation of the stories in class. Most indigenous students are either balanced bilinguals or Spanish-dominant bilinguals with various degrees of diminished competence in Náhuatl. In this case, the *video narraciones* provide for an important biliteracy enrichment activity. Reflecting upon language patterns and meaning (e.g., in relation to cloze responses) in texts written in the other language they understand sharpens bilingual children's awareness of how language in general, and written language in particular, can be pressed into service as a tool for higher-order academic functions.

For those students who have lost IL proficiency and are now Spanish-dominant, the extra cognitive effort applied to literacy tasks in Náhuatl provides for potentially greater academic benefits. Aside from relearning IL vocabulary and grammar structures, which have

been lost in the process of language erosion, working on text comprehension tasks in one's weaker language requires higher degrees of conscious attention to relationships between meaning and form. When patterns cannot be processed automatically, for example, the reader must shift toward a more analytical and reflective mode.

For monolingual speakers of an IL and those who possess only adequate listening comprehension of Spanish, literacy learning materials in the primary language provide obvious benefits. Certainly, literacy instruction should not be restricted to the mother tongue, even in the initial stages (e.g., consider the benefits of "literacy problem solving" in one's weaker language, as mentioned above). It is apparent, however, that exclusive instruction in the language in which children possess only partial knowledge places this group at a significant disadvantage, an unfavorable situation that large numbers of 1st-grade IL speakers continue to face in many rural schools.

Narrative Development in Misión de Chichimecas. The Chichimeca-Jonaz language community, in many ways, finds itself in a situation radically different from that of the Náhuatl community. Rancho Misión de Chichimecas lies on the outskirts of San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato, where only about 50 percent of the total population of about 2,500 still speaks the indigenous language. While the total number of bilingual students participating in the project is small, numbering fewer than 200, the pedagogical approach, based on the identification of community language resources not available in the school, merits our attention.

In this community, the local teachers (none of whom themselves are speakers of the IL) viewed traditional narrative as an opportunity to shift some of the initiative in language learning to their students. The project included children from grades 2 through 9 who possessed at least some proficiency in the indigenous language. The project centered on a community research component in which students secured the agreement of adults who were known to be skilled narrators to record stories that form part of the Chichimeca-Jonaz oral tradition. Upon returning to the classroom, follow-up activities focused on developing key aspects of academic language proficiency and included:

- In-class commentary and discussion of the recordings
- Further investigation regarding vocabulary terms and expressions not part of current usage among the younger generation
- Transcription of the narratives, based on students' hypotheses regarding orthographic patterns (keeping in mind that teachers are not speakers of the IL and must defer to the linguistic judgment of their

bilingual students, plus the lack of a standardized writing system for Chichimeca)

- Reading the texts
- Revision and editing of the transcriptions in groups and by the class as a whole
- Rereading
- Illustration and preparation of final copy. (Nieto Andrade, 1995)

This unique application of the "writer's workshop" concept, and Danesi's (1991) "narrativity" model, prioritizes the development of conscious reflection on language structures—in this case, those associated with the story, which is the primary or most fundamental of all structured and planned discourses (Francis & Nieto Andrade, 1996; Nieto Andrade & Francis, 1998). Access to this text pattern (in its rudimentary form), in fact, is universal among all normally developing children, and represents a kind of bridge between everyday conversational language and the more structured and abstract discourses of the classroom (school textbooks being the most representative example). As the sequence of narrative construction activities implies, the key objectives revolve around different levels of reflection on how language works, not simply what the stories tell: developing children's conceptual schemas of how coherence is constructed (e.g., in oral performance, and how this might be modified when stories are written down), how language (e.g., sound patterns) is represented in written form, how writers contemplate the circumstances of the reader, and how texts can be analyzed and reconstructed to fulfill special communicative purposes.

A Developmental Biliteracy Program in Spanish and Purépecha. Certainly what distinguished the experiment in the Chichimeca narrative was the initiative of a group of teachers who, although not IL speakers themselves, recognized the potential of language and literacy development that is based on an *inclusive* perspective. In bilingual communities, all-Spanish literacy instruction *excludes* a significant subset of resources at teachers' disposal. A good portion of the high-quality literacy learning material that children need can be found only in the IL oral tradition. In Rancho Misión de Chichimecas, the teachers' proposal, by necessity, required passing the initiative to their bilingual students (from the pedagogical point of view, a very fortuitous necessity).

The highly promising and original pilot program in Purépecha literacy adds but another vital component: a *bilingual* staff whose consciously assumed programmatic objective is centered on language development in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) (Hamel & Ibañez Caselli, 1999). In contrast to our two previous cases, the primary school of San Bernardino

Buensuceso in the Sierra Central of Michoacán state serves children who are primarily monolingual speakers of Purépecha.

The project can be traced to the return to the community of a group of teachers who assumed the task of rebuilding and reorganizing a school that had fallen into disrepair and decay. Within a short time, student enrollment increased from 240 to 385. Nevertheless, application of the standard all-Spanish curriculum, now professionalized and systematized, resulted in the same disappointingly low achievement rates.

After coming in contact with alternative models of literacy and second language teaching at the regional campus of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, the teachers developed a bilingual literacy program in which the greater part of reading and writing instruction in the first three years is given in Purépecha. The shift to a bilingual literacy approach was facilitated by the Purépecha speakers' high degree of consciousness of the historical roots of their language, and by the consequent development of quality literacy materials produced and distributed by the Secretariat of Public Education. As it includes school texts through the 4th grade, the Purépecha language has advanced much further in this domain than most other ILs in Mexico.

However, as is the case in all Mexican indigenous language literacy situations, these optimal conditions are diminished by the scarcity of IL children's literature and school textbooks in the higher grades. Teacher-produced materials are only a temporary and partial solution.

The first steps taken by the San Bernardino teachers in this area appear to be generally consistent with Nieto Andrade's (1995) observation: Given the lack of language-wide standardization (tied inevitably to the emergence of a corpus of fixed texts *in print*), local initiatives must take a flexible approach to the complex question of orthographic representations of the IL. In all cases, competing orthographies circulate among IL authors, investigators, language teachers, and community language activists. The combination of dialect variation and the isolation of local speech communities continues to punctuate the presently unresolvable dilemma regarding the appropriate and advisable language planning objective of standardization. In the meanwhile, at the local level, priority should continue to be placed on compromises, children's (and teachers') own explorations of the relevant alphabetic principles, testing hypotheses and comparing individual solutions, and especially the precedence of "compos-

ing over spelling." Future findings from the Spanish/Purépecha project will surely merit the close attention of researchers and educators, especially regarding the hypothesis that early literacy instruction in the children's primary language will set the stage for more effective literacy development in Spanish.

Conclusion

The reader may have taken note that this article does not emphasize the need to promote the potential benefits of biliteracy development for the preservation of indigenous languages or for the abstract notion of maintaining "linguistic diversity." Without attempting to take up this question in all its complexity, two

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observations are in order: 1) in the last analysis, the fundamental planning decisions related to IL preservation rest with the speech communities themselves; and 2) while outsiders may lament or disapprove of the circumstances under which decisions must be made, the broad social forces tied to the increasing economic integration of communities and regions will continue to be the dominant factor that determines language use patterns. For example, the majority of speakers of a particular IL community may come to view the short- and medium-term prospects of language preservation as unworthy of serious consideration. In many cases, their assessment may indeed be quite reasonable and in accordance with objective conditions that are unlikely to change.

A more relevant justification, or rationale, for IL literacy corresponds to the domain of "linguistic human rights" (Hamel, 1997; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994), understood here in reference to children's right to have access to the linguistic means for cognitive and academic development. Returning one last time to our categories of language learners, the following principle would seem to override all other secondary considerations: Emergent readers and writers who speak a language

that is not the NL have the right to be engaged with literacy during their formative initial contact with writing in a language they understand. Thus, a significant component of the literacy curriculum should be in a language for which knowledge of the basic patterns of the sound system, of the core grammatical structures, and of word meanings is a given. These three aspects of language competence, in at least one language, are a given for all normally developing children by the time they enter 1st grade.

At the same time, it also would be a mistake to exclude literacy activities in the NL, postponing them for some hypothetically more propitious future stage. For the bilingual child with sufficient competence in Spanish (today, the majority of IL-speaking youngsters), he or she has the right to profit from early bilingual development. This implies continued development of language competence *per se* in L1 and L2, and the development of higher-order language proficiency and additive bilingualism. Again, the most effective alternative is literacy learning in both languages.

Thus, for all categories of language learners, biliteracy represents a necessary component of overall academic achievement. Restricting literacy to the NL for the Spanish-proficient bilingual student results in an unnecessarily missed opportunity. For the IL-dominant Spanish learner, a similar opportunity will be missed, while at the same time placing at risk the learning of even the most basic literacy skills. From this point of view, the fundamental premise of the 1953 UNESCO declaration on vernacular literacy remains valid today.

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